

What the Best of Us Lack
and other songs about america

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Gramps at the Plate

There was chatter from the parents surrounding him, mostly about sun block and the upcoming school year. Samuel looked up at the clouds on the horizon, slowly moving in to spoil a decent day. It was a mild day for summer. Samuel could feel the moisture in his joints and he dreaded the drive home in what would undoubtedly be pouring rain.

These were the days he would miss. That was what he thought in that moment. Samuel was old; he wasn't fooling himself. Sure, he didn't have any health problems, but they were coming. Samuel was going to die and he would miss these summer afternoons. He would miss the anxiety and anticipation of a humid day, sitting on a porch or, like today, sitting at his grandson's baseball game and waiting for the moisture to break.

"Stay awake out there," Samuel yelled to his grandson, Kyle, who was presently standing in the outfield and picking at the grass. It was the bottom of the sixth inning and

Kyle's little league team was nursing a one run lead with no outs and a runner on first. Kyle wasn't the only kid in the outfield who was losing concentration. The other two alternated between staring at their parents in the stands or looking up at the sky.

"I don't like this pitching machine rule," Samuel leaned over and said to his son, Isaac. Isaac rolled his eyes, clearly tired of his father's complaints during the game.

"They have to save the kids arms," he responded. "Don't want them getting hurt or anything."

"That thing shoots bullets. These kids have no shot catching one of those pitches. Takes away from the human element of the game," he said. After the third inning, the pitcher was replaced by a mechanical pitching machine. Samuel understood the reasoning behind it. It would be unfair, inhumane, even, to force these kids to throw for six straight innings with such young, vulnerable muscles. But, it took away from the human element of the game.

"Would you rather that Kyle gets Tommy-John surgery at age 10?"

"Ah, hell, they're young men. They should rotate pitchers or something."

Isaac ignored his father and clapped for his son. Kyle responded, smiling at his father before snapping back to attention. The first batter predictably struck out in three pitches, whiffing on all three of his swings.

"Look alive," Samuel yelled again. He looked around at the adults gathered near the chain link fence, rattling it and trying to psyche out the other batters. They were wild beasts, itching for any shred of competition they can devour.

Samuel continued scanning until he saw a face that he thought he recognized. He stared, rather rudely, for a few moments until his stomach dropped. He bit his bottom lip and gritted his teeth to keep from making any foul noises and cursed to himself. The

pudgy face and figure belonged to the same bastard who'd been in his living room earlier in the week. It was the figure of Raymond Masterson, an employee of Cecil County who'd sat in Samuel's living room and propositioned him for his land so that they could build a few goddamn soccer fields.

"I'm going to make this plain, Mr. O'Brien," Raymond had said. Samuel was sweating while they spoke, nervous and stammering when he had to answer. "We need portions of your land for construction. Quite frankly, the success of the project depends on your cooperation."

The land in question was Samuel's fifteen acre plot he had purchased nearly five years prior. Samuel hadn't needed a new house when he bought it, but he was thinking of his family. He looked at those five acres as though they were Isaac and Kyle's gift, a beautiful plot of land that they could inherit to soften the blow of Samuel's death. He imagined Kyle roaming the green fields with his friends, or he and Isaac hunting in the woods that surrounded the premises. He was even planning on building a small playground for Kyle.

What he didn't imagine were roving bands of construction vehicles tearing up the grass and building soccer fields with stadium seating. He didn't imagine the shrieks of parents and children and the smell of 500 automobiles all converging on his one-story rancher.

"I don't know about all this," Samuel had said. "This land is for my grandson."

He turned him away flatly from his home and told Raymond Masterson that he didn't want to see him sniffing around again. He'd been polite, or as polite as possible in his offended state. But now, here was Raymond, standing by the chain link fence during

his grandson's baseball game. Surely, he was there to make his presence felt, to make sure that Samuel kept him in the front of his brain.

Samuel kept tapping his closed fist against his thigh. He waited a minute to see if the pudgy county employee would look his way, plotting out what kind of nasty look he could shoot back. Raymond never turned back toward the bleachers.

Samuel wanted to shout, but he knew he should keep his composure. He felt cornered and helpless. He'd tried to articulate, in person and on the phone, that his land was not for sale, so why did the subject haunt him? So many questions. Kyle was his livelihood, and now he couldn't even watch a baseball game without being interrupted by this man, this *Raymond*.

"Excuse me," he said to his son, ducking off of the bleachers and walking toward where Raymond was standing. "What the hell is this about?" he said as he approached.

"Sh," Raymond said. "My son's about to come up to bat."

"I've never seen you around here before," Samuel said. "Just what the hell is this all about?"

"I just told you," he said. "Please, Mr. O'Brien. I'm here to watch the game. I take it your grandson is out there?"

"He's on second," Samuel said, forgetting his hostility for a moment and beaming with pride. "He had a hit in the second inning."

"I saw that," Raymond said. Raymond's son, a blonde boy wearing number 7, struck out, but Raymond clapped his hands, anyway. "It's all right," he yelled. "You'll get 'em next time."

"So, that's why you're here?" Samuel asked again.

"It's a small county, Mr. O'Brien. It's just a coincidence."

“As long as that’s the real reason.”

“Mr. O’Brien, did you really think I’d come to some little league game to try and strong arm you?”

Samuel said nothing. Maybe he was overreacting. He stared down at his shoes until he heard the crack of a bat.

“I do hope you got our letter though.”

Samuel watched as the ball squirted up the middle, past the pitching machine and toward the outfield. Kyle ran forward and got his glove down, but the ball took a bad hop off of the bump where the dirt met the grass, bouncing past him and into right field. The other outfielders reacted slowly while the boy rounded the bases, driving he and his teammate in for the win.

“Tough loss,” Raymond said, grunting before he saw that Samuel was not amused. “It’s that damn pitching machine. Takes the kids out of the game.”

Samuel kept quiet, shaking his head. His mind refused to clear, despite his best efforts. He was ashamed at the fact that he couldn’t focus his disappointment for Kyle. He was unable to sympathize. At the moment, the only image in his mind was Raymond and his fat little face. His appearance at the game was no coincidence. Samuel was sure of that. He’s never believed in coincidence, and he abhorred any variation of the phrase, “it’s a small world after all.”

Raymond walked away from the field toward a green Nissan in the parking lot. Samuel went to meet Isaac and Kyle at the dugout. He hugged his grandson.

“It’s okay,” he said. “You can’t win them all.”

They walked together to the parking lot, Kyle's cleats making loud clicks with each step on the gravel walkway. He stood at the car for a minute, watching the boys from both teams filtering through the parking lot with their parents.

"Are you coming to McDonald's?" Kyle asked.

Samuel was busy hunting for blonde number 7. He finally spotted the boy walking hand in hand with a tall, thin woman in cutoff jean shorts toward the green Nissan.

"No," he said. "Maybe I'll catch up with you guys a little later."

"Dad?" Isaac said.

"I'm a little tired," Samuel said. "I think I ought to head home, anyway. I'll see both of you tomorrow." He knelt down to Kyle's level in the back seat. "Good game today, buddy."

He kissed his cheek and walked over to his brown Ford. He started the engine and waited for the Nissan to pull out of the parking lot. He followed Raymond and his family, keeping a two-car separation whenever he could to avoid being spotted. When they pulled into their suburb, Samuel flicked his headlights off and drove past.

He circled the block and came back around to the entrance of the neighborhood. He drove slowly until he spotted the Nissan in the driveway of a two-story brick house in a cul-de-sac. The house was quintessentially American, complete with electric candles in each window that lit when the sun went down. The three were probably sitting down to dinner at that moment, fresh oven-roasted turkey and stuffing and green beans. Their collie was laying on the grass in the front yard next to a black and white doghouse. They might've even had a parakeet.

He probably thinks I should live like him, Samuel thought. He probably thinks we should all settle into the suburbs and watch the fields get developed over and over again.

He sat back in his truck and closed his eyes, picturing the endless green that was visible from his front porch. He got lost sometimes in the green. He thought about all of the possibilities, both while he was alive and when he was dead. He thought often about the future of the land and the laughs that Kyle would bellow when he and Isaac moved in permanently. He planned on building a swing set outside for Kyle to play on. He would put together a few slides, or maybe some monkey bars. A playground for his grandson, right on his front lawn.

The sight of Raymond's house nearly drove Samuel to tears. His eyes welled up and he clenched his hands against the steering wheel. He hated that Raymond was a family man, a man like himself. He wanted him to be a boozed up pimp, or a gambling addict, or some other hateful cliché.

He slid the truck into four-wheel drive and put it in gear. He blanked his mind, knowing that if he started to think, he'd think better of his actions. He let his threatened emotions and fears drive, and they steered the car onto the front lawn. The collie's muffled barks halted with a sickening thud, and the black and white doghouse collapsed underneath the wheels of the truck.

Samuel flicked his headlights back on and sped away from the house, punching his dashboard and whooping with excitement.

A loud knocking at Samuel's door startled him. He was standing in the kitchen, making a turkey bacon and tomato sandwich for breakfast. He froze, waiting to see if the

visitor would knock again. After a few seconds, the thudding continued, and Samuel went to answer the door.

Raymond stood in the doorway dressed in cargo shorts and a t-shirt, a far cry from the dignified professional who visited Samuel a few days prior.

“May I come in?” he asked. Samuel moved aside and let the man come through. Raymond assumed the same position he held earlier in the week, sitting in a reclining chair across from the television.

“Is something troubling you?” Samuel asked. He was careful to keep his voice in check, determined not to indict himself of any wrongdoing.

“Where were you after the game yesterday?” Raymond asked. He looked up at Samuel, who refused to sit during the meeting.

“I went to McDonald’s with my son and grandson,” Samuel said. He began to pace around the room, pretending to be looking after the various decorations in the living room.

“Are you sure?”

There were three framed pictures of Kyle and Isaac on top of the television, along with a fourth frame containing a portrait of Samuel’s late wife, Ethel. His living room was filled with family remnants: the three-times reupholstered couch from his first house, the pictures of his family, the NASCAR wall clock that revs every hour that Isaac got him for Christmas. They were all reminders of why he bought the land and the heirs he bought it for. They were reminders of why people like Raymond should be swept away before they were allowed to enter the front door.

“Mr. O’Brien?” Raymond said, a bit louder.

“Yes?”

“I asked you if you’re sure. I asked if you’re telling the truth.”

“I’m not so sure I like what you’re implying.”

Raymond sighed and slapped his hands against his thigh. He ran his left hand through his thick, dark hair. He was now the one sweating and stammering. Samuel felt like the victor, if only temporarily.

“Look,” Raymond said. “I don’t want to go into it in too much detail, but I think we both know why I’m here today.”

Samuel kept quiet, trying his best to put on what he considered a flabbergasted face. He focused on a painting hung on his wall. The painting was a gift from Isaac and Kyle, given to him two Christmases ago, a little while after Kyle first started playing baseball. It was a copy of a Rockwell print, with an old man in business clothes at bat, waiting for a pitch. Behind him, a young boy was crouched down playing catcher, calling for the curve ball. The boy wore a wry smile, while the old man looked dopey, choking up on the bat and too high in his stance.

“Are you even listening to me?” Raymond said.

“I am,” he said. “I am. I’m just not too sure what you’re trying to imply.”

“Listen, Mr. O’Brien,” Raymond cleared his throat and started to get up from his seat. “I’m not here to threaten you, but I’m going to stop back again in a couple of days. When I do, I hope you will have reconsidered your position on the county’s offer for portions of your land. It’s a fair price.”

“I’ve already told you my stance.”

“There’s tire tracks on my front lawn,” Raymond said, stern this time. “All over the damn lawn. Please don’t make me have to call the cops. I don’t want to go through all of that.”

“I’m not willing to admit anything,” Samuel said. He could feel his cool slipping away and he stuttered a bit on the first part of his sentence. “I don’t know what you’re even talking about.”

Raymond nodded his head and started for the door. The sound of the door opening and closing snapped something off in Samuel’s head. The threat at the baseball game was fabricated, the product of paranoia and, perhaps, too much sun. The dull sound of the door against the doorframe was his new reminder. The threat was real.

Samuel threw the baseball in a high arc to Kyle. His grandson caught the ball, a dull thud sounding for a moment before being absorbed by their empty surroundings. Samuel wiped a bit of sweat from his gray eyebrows and forehead. He took a deep breath and admired the grass waving gently with each passing breeze.

“That’s enough for me,” he said to Kyle, waving his hands toward the front porch of his home. “Let’s get something cold to drink.”

They walked together to the porch. Samuel took Kyle’s mitt for him and messed his thick brown hair. He walked the gloves inside and came back with two cold cans of Coke for he and his grandson. They sat in silence for a few moments and sipped from the cold aluminum.

Samuel couldn’t remember ever seeing so much green. Green fields for at least a mile. The winds blew often enough, creating a sweeping current among the grass and cooling Samuel down a bit. He felt old when he threw the ball with his grandson. He got winded after only a half hour or so and, much to Kyle’s dismay, needed to take a long break.

The green was what helped him relax. He stared hard and got a good image, then closed his eyes and let the wind do the rest of the talking. Kyle bounced around in his chair, sighing heavily to try and alert his grandfather to his boredom. Samuel heard him but he ignored him. It was best to force feed this kind of serenity to an eight year old child. This was the kind of serenity that, when Kyle reached his mid-thirties, he'd look back on and wish that he'd paid more attention.

He'll understand when he gets older, Samuel thought. This was the thought that continually ran through his head on Sunday afternoons spent with his grandson. That, and, *What I wouldn't give to be young again*.

Kyle's slight yelp brought him back to attention.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He looked over and saw Kyle frozen to his chair, shifting his eyes back and forth to try and communicate to his grandfather. "What is it?"

"Bee," Kyle whispered. Samuel saw the yellow jacket buzzing around the porch, landing occasionally to perch on the armrest of Kyle's chair.

"Just stay still," Samuel said. Neither moved a muscle for a few moments and the yellow jacket flew off.

"I hate bees," Kyle said, stamping his feet against the wood of the porch. He hopped out of his seat, unable to remain still from the excitement. "I just hate them."

"They're not so bad," Samuel said. "You just have to leave them alone."

"That's what my dad says. Usually."

"Usually? What does your dad say?"

Kyle took a deep breath, prepared to spill his guts in one lone, heaping outburst to his grandfather. Samuel put his hand on his grandson's thin arm, hoping the gesture would slow him down a bit.

“Well, he says that you have to watch out for the bees when summer starts changing to fall because they know its almost time for them to go to sleep and they’ll probably just sting you for the heck of it.”

Samuel brought his grandson closer and sat him up on his lap.

“Your dad told you that?”

“Yep,” he said. Samuel turned the both of them around to face the fields once again. He took another long look at the grass, shaking violently from another strong, cool breeze.

“Maybe he’s right,” Samuel said.

Samuel woke up in a cold sweat. He hopped out of bed and paced around his room, stopping at his dresser and staring into his dark shadow in the mirror.

He knew it was a dream that woke him up, but he couldn’t remember the details. He couldn’t remember much lately, and he hadn’t been able to focus on anything but his land. All he remembered was Kyle and Raymond and soccer balls, the rest were blurry shadows. Then he woke up.

On the dresser was the envelope he found earlier that day, tucked behind the windshield wipers on his pickup. In big letters, the envelope read FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION. Inside was the paperwork requiring Samuel’s signature to finalize the sale of portions of his land to the county. Tucked away behind the forms was a picture of Raymond’s yard and the large tire tracks leading up to the shattered doghouse.

Samuel didn’t go back to sleep. He sat up with a blanket on his couch watching religious programming on the television. A black reverend with a Jheri curl was telling a young girl that her mother had cancer because of her sins.

The sun beat down on Samuel as he kneeled next to Isaac in the field. Isaac's black hair was matted and there was dirt staining the underarms of his gray t-shirt. He still sported the gold watch that he'd worn all week, greeting customers and pitching life and death situations as an agent for State Farm. Brightness reflected off of the silver barrel of the rifle.

"It's just not right," Samuel muttered.

"Dad," Isaac said, before Samuel cut him off.

"It isn't, and you know it."

"I'm not defending him," he said. "I just want you to think about it. It might be a good offer to consider."

A small family of deer wandered out of the trees a few hundred yards in the distance. Samuel spotted them and readied the rifle, propping it up and pressing it against his shoulder. He braced himself on the grass.

"This guy's from the county," Isaac said. "They've got money over at the county."

The deer bounced for a few yards and stopped, glancing back at the woods as if they were waiting for more to join them. One dipped his head to nibble on the grass.

"People with money usually win, Dad," he said. "Maybe you should consider getting the money while they're still offering it."

"I'm not giving that land up," Samuel muttered. "I'm gonna do whatever I have to so that this jerk, and all the other jerks like him, stay away."

"Please, Dad," Isaac said.

Samuel put his hand down to shush his son. He put his eye to the scope and turned the safety off. He positioned the crosshairs above the front legs and behind the neck. Three deep breaths. Pull the trigger.

He and Isaac were standing above the deer's carcass. Its skull was peeled back and crimson stained the green grass surrounding the general area. Isaac covered his nose and mouth, despite the fact that it didn't smell, and voiced his displeasure.

"What the hell did you do that for?"

"We're hunting."

"No," he said. "Dad, I mean why'd you have to blow its head off?"

"I missed," he said. He kneeled next to the carcass, staring off into the field for the scattered deer. He saw nothing except for the sun, beginning to go down over a hill in the distance.

His son was still sighing, still trying to communicate his disgust. Samuel had hoped that the gunshot would change the subject. He had hoped that he could avoid talk of the county by impressing his son with his marksmanship. But, then he had to go ahead and miss, splattering this poor bastard's brains and leaving his son anxious about the situation.

"I can't do that," Samuel said.

"What?"

"I can't do what you want. I can't give in. That land's for you and Kyle, and your wife if you ever get off your ass and remarry."

"I have a house," Isaac said.

"Now you do, but mine's nicer."

"Why do we always have to have this morbid talk?"

“Dammit, Isaac,” he said.

“You quit smoking, you improved your diet. Why do you always think you’re about to die?”

“I just want to leave you something, is all,” Samuel said. His son kneeled next to him, next to the near-decapitated deer. He was silent, no longer sighing and instead breathing softly.

“You can’t let these wolves into your home,” Samuel said, putting his hand on his son’s shoulder. “They just keep pushing and pushing until they get their way, but I’m not going to back down. I’m not going to lose.”

They crouched in silence for a few moments. Isaac tapped his fingers against his knee.

“You shouldn’t get so stubborn,” Isaac said.

“I know,” he said, calming himself to ease his son’s anxiety. He stared up at the sun, situated in the middle of the sky. “Go grab your knife and help me clean this bastard.”

They drove in the dirty brown pickup with the deer carcass in the bed of the truck. The rifles were hung in the rear window. When they arrived at the rancher, they both noticed the green Nissan parked next to the house. On the porch, Raymond was leaning next to the front door, again dressed down and sporting sunglasses to fight the glare. Shadows from the roof of the porch cascaded across the stained wood.

“Is that him?” Isaac asked.

Samuel grunted. He parked the truck and they both hopped out. Raymond waved from the porch, but didn’t move a muscle, waiting to be led into his familiar living room territory.

“Do you want me to stick around, maybe take up for you?” Isaac asked.

“No,” Samuel said, slinging the rifles across his shoulder. “You need to go pick up Kyle. I’ll see you two this weekend.”

Samuel hugged his son and watched him as he started his Subaru wagon. Once he had driven out of sight, Samuel turned and started toward the house.

“Have you reconsidered?”

Raymond was sitting in the same spot, but he wasn’t as relaxed today. He leaned forward in the recliner with his elbows resting on his knees, his hands hanging limp between his legs. He dragged each syllable out as he talked.

“I have,” Samuel said. He sat on the couch after having placed the rifles in the study, leaning back and working his hands through what was left of his hair. “I have, Raymond, and I don’t feel real good about it.”

“Well, I do apologize. I never wanted this to be how we worked things out.”

“I just want you to reconsider,” Samuel said. He tried to appeal to his emotions, the final act of a desperate man. “I know you’ve got a job to do and everything, but, come on, you know? You have a family, you know what it’s like.”

Raymond’s face hardened at the mention of his family. Samuel had struck a chord and suddenly wished he hadn’t tried to sympathize with Raymond, sure that it had summoned the inevitable mental image of their dog bloodied and flattened in the yard.

“All I mean is that this land is all I’ve got left to leave for Kyle and my son. I don’t want them to have to live next to a bunch of screaming kids all goddamn day. You wouldn’t want that, would you?”

“Mr. O’Brien,” Raymond started.

“Call me Samuel.”

“I’d rather not,” he said. “Mr. O’Brien, as a member of this community, I can’t say that I wouldn’t want that. This sports complex is going to increase our county’s revenue flow exponentially.”

“Revenue flow,” Samuel muttered. “That’s all any of this is ever about. Goddamn revenue flows and money and how much of it we can get.”

“Spare me, Mr. O’Brien,” Raymond said. “With all due respect, you ruined your chance at sympathy when you drove through my front yard.”

Samuel stopped pleading for a minute and looked around the room. The painting on the wall caught his eye again, but his reaction this time was more visceral. He wanted to vomit, to heave all over the painting. He hated the predictability of the old man, the fact that he was so easily outwitted by his younger counterpart behind home plate. Samuel was filled with the sudden desire to throw a chair through the frame, or to spit at his mantle.

“Are you listening?”

“Raymond, I don’t know what you want from me. I don’t know why the hell you won’t just leave me alone. Just leave this property be. Build the damn fields somewhere else, or, hell, don’t build them at all. I don’t know what’s wrong with just leaving things how they are.”

“It’s the 21st century, Mr. O’Brien,” Raymond said.

Samuel rubbed his head violently. He twisted gray hair follicles until they pinched his head. His knuckles whitened and cracked from the tension in his hands.

“I think you should sign the paperwork I left for you. Spare the both of us any further aggravation.”

He was defeated and he let his head rest on the back of the couch for a minute. He stared up at the stucco ceiling and, for the first time in five years, he craved a cigarette, specifically a Marlboro. If he could just get his hands on a Marlboro, maybe he could stall his fate for a few more moments.

“This is all supposed to be for Kyle,” he said. Raymond ignored him, rolling his head around to ease the tension in his neck and waiting for the paperwork to get filled out.

Samuel didn't ask any more questions. In fact, he didn't say another word. He excused himself from the room to get the papers and lingered outside of his bedroom door for a moment. He glanced into the study and caught a glimpse of the sunlight beaming off of the silver barrel of the rifle. He stopped thinking, focusing instead on the disappointment he knew Kyle would feel if he let the soccer fields go up. He focused on the wolf in his living room.

When he returned, it felt as though all of the air had been sucked out of the home. Samuel was deaf to all noise. He took three deep breaths and pulled the trigger once, and then twice. Raymond's chest collapsed, spraying blood and bone fragment across the living room, splattering Samuel's NASCAR clock and the Rockwell on the wall. Samuel dropped the rifle and took a seat on the couch, still twitching and craving his Marlboro.

He closed his eyes and listened to his breath for a few minutes. He thought about catches with his grandson and the green fields outside, shimmering underneath of the setting sun. Mostly, though, he thought about the stupid look on the old man's face in the Rockwell painting. He pitied the poor jerk, unaware and unprepared for whatever that bastard pitcher was about to throw his way.

As American as Apple Pie

Nick sat on his porch and tried his best to feel comfortable. He leaned back in his patio chair and put his feet up on the edge of the terrace. His muscles would relax, but he couldn't shake the general feeling of discomfort. He wasn't alone, at least not in the most literal sense. All around him, in the lofts in his building and in the bars below and the restaurants that dotted the street corners, were men and women that seemed anxious to know his name. They were men and women who communicated the same way that he did and laughed the same way that he did. They were men and women who, with the volume turned off, could pass for Americans. Eccentric, maybe, but still genuinely American.

He glanced at his watch. 7 o'clock. It was early and he dreaded his bedtime. He knew he would toss and turn and stare at the alarm clock until dawn broke. He needed to get out of the apartment, at least for a few hours, and help himself sleep. A beer or two.

That ought to help him get comfortable.

He passed by the tapas bars and glanced in the front windows at his newly acquired countrymen. He could get to know them if he wanted to. That was how he reassured himself. He could walk right in and sit next to one of them and, despite the language barrier, communicate and have a good time. He just needed a little longer to study his Spanish-English dictionary. Just a few more weeks.

He passed by the anonymous Barcelona establishments, filled with dozens upon dozens of Catalan speakers, and decided he needed familiarity. He dropped into the bar he'd been going to for months, the only establishment he frequented since he'd been in the country. He glanced at the American faces, all expatriates, sitting around the room and immediately felt more at home. Plasma screens were blasting baseball games and college basketball games. He heard the beautiful sound of the English language and, on impulse, began to smile.

He took a seat in his usual bar stool at the corner of the bar and ordered a pint. The bartender communicated to him in broken English and Nick smiled at him, trying to understand what he was saying. He even giggled at his mispronunciations. Nick asked for a Heineken.

On the wall were advertisements for beers that Nick could barely pronounce the names of: Stella Artois, Duvel, Warsteiner. It was one of the few reminders in the bar that he was in a foreign land, other than the bartender's thick accent. He could listen to the sound of the English language and look at the familiar white American faces and feel at home, but when he looked at the signs he found himself longing for a hamburger or a hot dog or some macaroni and cheese. Anything American.

The Heineken sign provided him with an oddly large sense of comfort. It was

recognizable, a landmark, that he could relate to. The colors and the neon reminded him that he wasn't too far from home. It may have been an import, but Heineken was a beer he'd spent many nights drinking while in Akron, Ohio. It triggered memories, which, in that moment, were all that he could translate.

He left the bar after a few hours once the college basketball games had finished and walked back to his apartment. He took what he considered a scenic route, walking his way up cobblestone roadways and past row homes with classical architecture. He wished that he could distinguish the major differences between Spanish and American architecture, but he was no expert. He hadn't taken the time to read the history books his mother bought him for Christmas a few months prior to his leaving. They sat on top of his Rosetta Stone computer-based language tutor in his bedroom back in Akron, all of them still in their original plastic wrapping.

This was meant to be a broadening of sorts. That was what he told himself when he accepted the job. His superiors at Deutsche Bank had offered him a position in Barcelona, working in the IT department at a newly established office. Nick didn't stop to think about how he'd never mastered a foreign language, or that he'd be an expensive plane trip away from anyone he was familiar with. Instead, he'd hoped that he could learn on the fly and absorb the experience of being alone in a new culture. He could absorb the language and activities and appreciate the subtle differences between Spanish and American life.

Unfortunately, the experience was wearing on him. He was too busy to finish learning the language before he left, a comforting thought that he knew was altogether untrue. He'd spent his last few weeks in Akron drinking heavily and trying his best to sleep with a camp counselor he'd met at the same bar Jeffrey Dahmer once frequented.

Back at his apartment, Nick sat on the porch for another hour or so and stared across the way at his neighbors' window. He lived across from a Spanish family and, at night, he could look in their windows while the lights were on and relate to them. He could watch them get ready for bed, or watch late night television, or eat snacks. Nick communicated with the family in the only way that he felt comfortable: from a distance and muted. He felt a strong kinship with these people he'd never met. They were just like him.

When he started to feel choked up, he went to bed. Maybe he'd had a few too many beers to help himself sleep. He was having night terrors when he did finally get some rest. The stress may have been too much. He sat up in bed most nights and counted how many different ways he regretted his decision.

Nick sat at his desk. His eyes were heavy and he had trouble focusing. He hadn't slept the night before. He stayed up, surfing the internet and praying that one of his friends would be online to talk. He got in contact with an old classmate named Brad, but it didn't seem like he wanted to have a real conversation. Brad kept asking him if he was getting any Spanish pussy.

He didn't have much work to do, so instead he played solitaire on his computer. He took an odd comfort in his ability to beat the game. He was good at solitaire, a skill that was often mocked when he bragged about it. Who wasn't good at solitaire, anyway? It wasn't exactly a skill game. Still, in times like these, when he couldn't put together two sentences that could be understood by his peers, his ability to consistently win at a meaningless computer game meant more to him than it would if he were in Akron.

His boss, Jose, approached his cubicle. Jose was a tall man with a dark complexion and wavy brown hair. He spoke English with little trace of an accent and consistently encouraged Nick to take in Spain's countryside. They had a good relationship, Nick thought. It almost seemed as if he was taking Nick under his wing, for better or worse.

"Nicolas," Jose said as he approached the cubicle. He set his hands down on the desk and leaned over. "How are things going today?"

"Pretty good," Nick said. "Not a whole lot to do, really."

"You tell your boss this?" he said, smiling. "Your boss can always find something for you to do."

"Maybe. I could use something to do though."

"Have you been adjusting all right?"

"More or less."

Jose took his hands off of the desk and stood straight up. He straightened his hair with his right hand, flipping his bangs away from his forehead. He put his left hand in his pocket and took a glance back at the receptionist, Rosalita, a short woman about Nick's age, he assumed, with long black hair and an attractive build.

"Perhaps you should meet with Rosalita," Jose said. "That would help anyone of us adjust to any one thing."

Nick chuckled and gave his boss an approving smile. He dropped his head a bit, embarrassed by his thoughts. Jose didn't need to point Rosalita out to Nick. She was gorgeous, a fact that he noticed upon first entering the building at his new job. He came to the office and asked her where he could find Jose Torres, his boss, and she smiled timidly and told him, in rather broken English, which office he was in. When Nick

started in the wrong direction, she'd grabbed his hand softly and apologized, turning him the correct way. Her brown eyes shined under the fluorescent light. That was the moment that he thought Barcelona couldn't be all bad.

"So what is the problem with you adjusting?" Jose asked.

"No real problem," Nick said. "Maybe it's just the language barrier. I'm having a tough time getting past it."

"Yes, yes. You must learn our beautiful language to appreciate our beautiful culture."

"Right."

"Have you been making friends? Other than me, eh, Nicolas?"

"A few here and there," Nick lied. He hadn't actually met anyone outside of the office.

"Well, you should meet some people. That will help."

"Okay. Yeah, maybe."

"We are all gathering at the bar across the street in a couple nights. We will watch Barca play and drink. It should be a lot of fun. You should come."

Nick hesitated. In the office, he could bypass the language barrier, as the majority of communication was done through email. Jose was really the only person he communicated with verbally and he spoke English well enough that it was never a concern. At a bar, there wouldn't be any email or Java script or anything else to save his ass. Plus, it was soccer. What Nick wouldn't give to sit down and watch his hometown team, the Cleveland Cavaliers, play a basketball game. He'd been following them on the internet since he got to Spain and LeBron James was having an MVP season.

"Don't you guys ever watch basketball around here? Or football?"

“American football? Not really. We do have basketball, though.”

“Not the NBA,” Nick sighed.

“Well, no, Nick. We do not have a Kobe Bryant, this much is true. But, Spain still has very strong basketball players. I assume you know Pau Gasol?”

“Yeah, he’s okay, I guess,” Nick said. Gasol, a forward for the Lakers, was a decent player. Nick thought his game was a little too soft, coming from Europe.

“You can always go to one of our American sports bars to see the NBA.”

“Yeah,” Nick said. He already knew this, but he wanted a chance to complain.

“There are many that cater to those who love the American sports.”

“I’ll look into it, Jose. Thanks.”

“Football, or, excuse me, soccer, is our sport. I think you would enjoy it if you begin to understand it.”

“I understand it, for the most part.”

“Join us this week.”

“I don’t know.”

“Rosalita will be there,” Jose said.

“Okay,” Nick said. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

“Excellent. Now, about today. You have nothing to do?”

“Not really.”

“Then, as your boss, I will tell you what to do. You will take the day off and go see our beautiful city. You will go off and have a nice afternoon to yourself.”

Nick was tired of hearing the word beautiful from Jose’s lips. After all, this was about the worst news he could get. He’d just told Jose his problems with the language barrier, and his cure was to go out and see more of Barcelona? How could he appreciate

an afternoon off when nobody understood a word he was saying? In the office, Nick not only felt like he understood, he felt American. It was commerce, capitalism at its finest, and it was a language that he learned early in life at shopping malls and thrift stores around the country. Minimal investment, maximum profit. And now, Jose wanted him to ship out for the day and ignore the only language that he knew and adored.

Nick was starting to wonder if anyone could understand anything anymore.

Nick rode the subway to try and experience a bit more of the city. It was the only situation where he was thankful that he didn't know where he was going. He would catch a train and get off after a few stops, going above ground to wander and experience something new. People left him well enough alone and it provided him sanctuary.

He walked through markets, stopping to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables, consuming them on the street. He wandered in and out of tapas bars, half-drunk off of Spanish wine and stuffed with chorizo. He caught himself actually thanking Jose for the opportunity. Most of the time, the afternoons in the city frustrated him. But, today, the afternoon gave him a clear head and made him feel sane again. The violent urges were subdued after a bit of peace and quiet and some fresh air.

He finished a pack of Dunhills every day and wondered how he would be able to quit smoking once he was stateside again. America had become so anti-cigarette in the past few years that he didn't want to pick up a habit that would violate so many social mores back home. It was impossible to avoid smoking in Europe, though. Everywhere he went, he was surrounded by the thin, aromatic smoke of exotic cigarettes that he couldn't find back home. Young boys consumed clove cigarettes on street corners and the foxy middle-aged women were seldom seen without a long cigarette between their

fingers. Smoking was still sexy in Europe, unlike in America, where smokers were treated like lepers by the overly health conscious. It was one of the few aspects of living in Barcelona that Nick was completely comfortable with and one of the few times he questioned the way that America handled things. It was his right to smoke anywhere he wanted, second-hand smoke be damned. Did John Wayne or Gary Cooper ever worry about lung cancer? Doubtful.

He wandered into a tapas bar with a cigarette hanging from his lips. The bar was decorated with exotic floral arrangements hanging from the rafters and above each table. He was greeted with the thick perfume of roses, tulips, and tobacco. It made him shiver with excitement. He sat at a table by the window and turned his chair so he could look around the room.

He tried to communicate to his server the wine he wished for. His server was a young boy of no more than 15. He struggled to understand Nick. Nick resorted to pointing at the menu in front of him. He picked a wine and indicated that he wanted the whole bottle. The boy also brought him a potato dish that Nick had never eaten before.

He made a serious dent in the bottle of wine and asked for another helping of the potato dish, along with some chorizo. Across the bar, two young men spoke loudly and laughed with each other. They would look Nick's way and chuckle. Nick tried his best to make out whatever words he could, but all he recognized was the Catalan word for American, repeated over and over. He started to feel self-conscious and, instead of sipping at his wine, he took large gulps and tried to shift his focus to the sidewalk outside of the restaurant's window.

On the sidewalk, two homeless women huddled together, wearing raggy shorts and torn sweatshirts. They had no shoes on their feet. The scene made him quite sad.

With nowhere to shift his focus without feeling embarrassed, Nick instead focused on the label of his bottle of wine. As he was reading it to himself, one of the young men from the bar slid into the open seat at Nick's table.

Nick looked up and studied the man's dress. He wore a tight orange sweater with navy stripes across it. His jeans were tighter than American fashion would dictate as "normal," revealing an impressively large bulge in his crotch. His shoes were Puma, a model that Nick didn't recognize and assumed was a Euro-only release. He felt disgusted by the man's sense of style.

"You are American, yes?" the man asked in broken English.

"Of course," Nick said. He said it proudly, as though any other assumption would be not only foolish, but absolutely unacceptable.

"Yes, that is what my friend and me we thought," the man said. He looked back at his friend and raised his wine glass, confirming that they were correct. Nick tried to assess their relationship. He assumed they were gay, based on their fashion and their body language, but it was tough to tell. Everyone in Barcelona spoke with a lisp.

"Yeah, I'm American."

"You have elected Obama. That Obama, he is some kind of man, is he not?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, he's our president."

"This is such great news from America. A forward thinking president. Global. And a black one, at that!"

"Yeah." Nick wasn't eager to jump on the Obama bandwagon. He voted for McCain in the election, but he wasn't one of the avid supporters for either side. They were both full of shit, to an extent, but McCain's values coincided more with what Nick believed in. Family. The American Dream. An uncompromising view of foreign

affairs. Obama wasn't much of a family man. There weren't many blacks who were. But, still, he was the President of the United States of America. He earned Nick's respect based on that distinction alone, even if he didn't always agree with his policy decisions.

"You will be out of Iraq very soon then, I hope at least," the man continued. "It is enough of Mr. Bush's war, that is what America is saying, yes?"

"Well, maybe," Nick said. He tried his best not to be confrontational. "I think we're closer to victory than most people would like to admit, but that's what sells newspapers so I'm not going to argue."

The man gave Nick a confused look. He either disagreed or didn't fully understand what Nick was saying. It didn't matter, though. Nick knew that he was in the minority with his beliefs on the war.

"No matter," the man said after a long pause. "America is moving forward! Please, you will come have a drink with my friend and me. We will drink to Obama's success."

"I don't know about all that," Nick said, eyeing up the man's friend. "You two seem to be having a fine time on your own." He was happy not to be harassed by the Spanish men on behalf of his being American, but he wasn't about to partake in any kind of kinship with a random gay couple in Barcelona. Look at how they were dressed. There was no doubt these men shared a bed, and that was something that Nick wasn't eager to hop on board with.

"I insist," the man said again, confused at why Nick refused his hospitality.

"No, no. I think I'll just be on my way."

Nick got up abruptly and left the bar, uncomfortable from the man's advances.

He'd encountered gays in America, but the majority of them weren't as forward as the Spanish men in the tapas bar. They knew to mingle with their own kind. Back in Akron, they hung around their designated bar, The Blue Moon, and left well enough alone.

Before bed that night, Nick watched the family of five across the alleyway. They were sitting down to a late dinner. The family laughed together as they talked about their days at work and school and their afternoons to themselves. One of the children was wearing a basketball uniform. He was a tall kid for his age, probably pushing six feet at age 12. He reminded Nick of himself at that age, a bit too big for his own age and playing basketball simply because he was taller than everybody else.

The father disciplined his children when they tried to reach across the table, slapping their hands with his fork when they went for the potatoes or the meat. They always smiled and giggled and goaded their father on as he did it.

They drank red wine. They ate heaping piles of home-cooked food. The kids poked and prodded at each other. The mother walked around the table and refilled everyone's glasses. It was the typical family meal. A happy family.

Nick caught himself tearing up. He left the porch and tried his best to sleep.

Nick ran through the woods. He wore no clothing. His bare chest gleamed in the moonlight and he stepped outside of himself to examine his body. He was covered in hair, more than usual. His whole body was a great ball of wiry brown hair. He scratched at himself and rolled through the leaves and branches.

He was hunting something. He couldn't quite tell what. He wanted to say that it

was a rabbit or a squirrel or maybe even a rat. It was small, whatever it was. He would gain on it, then lose it, then start to gain on it again. Each time he reached out to tackle the animal, it slipped through his grasp.

He found himself tired and frustrated, but he kept pursuing the beast. He broke into a sprint and felt cold sweat run down his back. He was bounding over fallen logs and dead leaves and patches of mud. The sun was up. Then down again. Heat and cold seemed to seesaw off of his body.

He finally caught the animal and looked down at it, realizing it was a squirrel. He put his hands on the animal and stroked it for a moment. He was consumed by rage and lust and he tore into the animal. He bit into its flesh and spit the blood onto a pile of leaves next to him. He smashed the animal's skull with a nearby rock. He continued to beat it into a pulp, watching himself as he performed such rudimentary barbarism. His knuckled became stained with crimson and small bits of bone and muscle were caught in his wiry body hair. When he was finished, he hoisted the carcass above his head and watched it drip blood in the sunlight.

When he woke from this dream, he had an erection.

Nick returned the American sports bar, full of expatriates, to watch the Cavaliers play before meeting up with his coworkers. He had taken Jose up on his offer, but told him that he needed to witness a LeBron James performance before sitting down to watch soccer. He hadn't seen a Cavs game since he'd been there. It was about time he got down to business and rooted his team on.

He sat down next to two American men wearing LeBron jerseys and started a conversation with them.

“You guys from Ohio?” he said.

“Michigan,” they said. The bartender came and asked what Nick was drinking.

He ordered a Heineken. “We’re from up around East Lansing.”

“No shit,” Nick said. “Just LeBron fans?”

“Definitely.”

“MVP.”

“I think this is their year,” Nick said.

They watched the game, just three men enjoying a monumental performance from a monumental athlete. They cheered when LeBron dunked in traffic or hit a fall-away three pointer. They complained about the refereeing. Nick didn’t stop smiling for the entirety of the game.

“Are you sticking around for the rest of the night?” one of the men asked.

“I can’t,” Nick said. “I’d love to but I gotta meet up with some of my coworkers down a couple blocks.”

“Party?”

“Not really. They’re watching the Barca game.”

“Oh, nice. I love the soccer culture around here.”

“Really?” Nick said. He hadn’t heard any of the Americans in the bar openly embrace any of the Barcelona culture.

“Definitely. It’s pretty great around here. They just have so much pride in the culture. It’s kind of nice to admire.”

“Yeah,” his friend agreed.

“It’s not America, though,” Nick sighed. He took a long pull on his beer.

“Nothing is.”

“Greatest country in the world.”

The words made Nick feel at ease and, in that moment, he regretted telling Jose that he would meet up with them. He would've loved to sit and speak with his new acquaintances about what they missed most about their home country or why they decided to come out to Barcelona in the first place. They didn't look like tourists.

“I'd give anything for a cheeseburger,” Nick said, hoping one of them would spring at the idea.

“You can get those around here.”

“Not like in America,” Nick said.

“No, you definitely can. There aren't too many places, but some of them have cheeseburgers. Just about as good as you'll get them back home.”

“No shit.”

“Yeah, man,” one of the men said. “This place ain't so bad.”

Nick couldn't stop thinking about his favorite restaurant back in Akron, a small drive-in called Swenson's. They had the greatest cheeseburgers he'd ever eaten.

“I didn't know you could find them here,” Nick said. The men told him where he could find a decent one, at a small pub a few blocks from the bar they were at. The bar was closed, but Nick vowed to grab one the next day.

So, there he was, sitting with familiar faces and talking about cheeseburgers and drinking an import that reminded him of his days in Akron. For those few hours, Nick was American again, and it made him feel more open to the idea of living in Barcelona. The men were right. This place wasn't so bad.

He had to fulfill his obligation to his coworkers and so he informed the men that he was leaving. They exchanged numbers and were going to commit to watching the

Cavs play on a weekly basis. For the first time in months, Nick felt comfortable. He would ride his high all the way down to the next bar.

“To LeBron,” he said, raising his glass to the men before downing the rest of his pint.

Barca was tied with Atletico Madrid in the 70th minute of the soccer match. Jose was drinking heavily and shouted chants at the bar. His tie was wrapped around his head and his shirt was completely unbuttoned. The other members of the office followed suit, taking their shirts halfway off and pouring beer all over themselves at every scoring opportunity or big save.

Nick saw this as a major opportunity to overcome the language barrier. After all, sports represented the universal language. Thousands upon thousands of people on the edges of their collective seats, losing their grips and riding the peaks and valleys of their favorite team’s game. It wasn’t like watching basketball or football, which he considered as real men’s games, but soccer wasn’t so bad. There was the occasional hard foul or collision, and when one of the teams did manage to score a goal, the excitement was almost too much to bear.

Nick hopped up with his coworkers and screamed every time Lionel Messi crossed midfield with the ball, praying for a scoring opportunity, praying for any chance to grab his mug of beer and hoist it high in the air and scream “Barca ” at the top of his lungs. He would grab Jose by the shoulder and spin him around, screaming when they scored and downing the rest of his beer.

Rosalita stayed seated at the bar, in her beautifully timid fashion, sipping at white wine and laughing at the rest of the men in the office. Nick constantly glanced over at

her, hoping to catch her eye and give her a smile. When she did look his way, he raised his glass and pointed toward the television, nodding his head and laughing at his boss. He got excited when she laughed along with him and raised her glass of wine.

Messi broke loose around the 82nd minute and unleashed a cross toward goal. Thierry Henry leaped over two defenders to head it home and the bar erupted. Nick danced around in a circle while Jose and his coworkers grabbed each other and poured beer over their faces and chests. They pumped fists. They screamed obscenities. Jose told the bartender to bring them all shots. He hugged Nick into their drunken huddle and gave him two shots of whiskey, toasting the new employee.

Nick finally began to feel at ease. He breathed heavy sighs of relief and, all the while, kept glancing at Rosalita, smiling in her barstool.

When the game concluded, Nick worked up his nerve and approached the receptionist. He sat down at the seat next to her and offered to buy her a drink. She smiled and accepted as the bartender came to refill her glass of wine.

“Are you having a good time?” Nick asked her. She didn’t seem to fully understand, but she nodded anyway. Nick pointed to the television, where the announcer was interviewing Lionel Messi about his performance. “Crazy game, huh?”

“Yes. Very crazy,” she said. Her thick accent was charming to Nick, not like the thick accent of the men earlier that week at the tapas bar. On a beautiful woman, the Barcelona lisp was enticing and exotic.

“Where is your boyfriend?” Nick asked her. He smiled and tried to flirt a bit, flexing whiskey muscles.

“Excuse?”

“Your boyfriend?”

“No boyfriend,” she said. Nick couldn’t tell if that meant she didn’t have one, or if that was the best she could do to communicate that he wasn’t there. He didn’t care. If she did have a boyfriend, he wasn’t at the bar, and that was enough for Nick.

He struggled to find the right words to say. He felt like he was condescending to her by searching for the simplest sentences to communicate his attraction. He was relying heavily on body language, smiling and positioning himself close to her seat. It seemed to work, as she touched his leg a few times and every now and then put her hand on his cheek.

“You are very cute,” she said.

“I am?”

“Yes.”

She smiled and her eyes reflected in the same way as when he first arrived at the office. He could’ve kissed her right then. Still, he wasn’t quite sure how to take her compliment. He had no experience with European girls. Was she flirting with him, or did she just want to give him a compliment?

Before Nick had a chance to properly respond, a song came on in the bar that Rosalita seemed to enjoy. She stood up and walked over to where their coworkers were standing and began to dance with the other men. One of the men, Jorge, grabbed a hold of her and spun her around, drawing her near and pressing his body against hers. She flipped her hair around and laughed loudly, letting him kiss her neck. Nick’s stomach dropped.

When she returned to her seat, Nick was trying his best not to be standoffish. She continued to put her hand on his leg, but she also made eyes with Jorge across the bar. Nick even caught her licking her lips and winking at the man. He couldn’t bite his

tongue any longer.

“What are you doing?”

“What?”

“You said I was cute.”

“You are very cute.”

“I don’t understand.”

She gave him a look that said she didn’t understand either. In America, women didn’t tell guys that they were cute and then run off to make out with one of their coworkers. That was worth a fight in Akron, Ohio. Nick would’ve smashed his bottle against the bar and threatened Jorge with it. Beautiful women in America believed in something. They believed in purity and faithfulness and honesty. There were unspoken rules of chivalry. Men staked their claim on women at bars and that was that. There was no running off and switching sides in the middle of a race.

But, here, Rosalita didn’t seem to bat an eyelid. Nick couldn’t understand. He didn’t understand anything.

“I just don’t understand it.”

“Nick,” Rosalita said, but she said it like Neek, which made him laugh despite his misery. She seemed hurt by his laughter.

“Neek, Neek,” he said. “Fuck. I gotta go home. I’m so sorry.”

He grabbed his jacket and left the bar without saying goodbye to Jose. He imagined that Jorge and Rosalita went home together that night, moaning and sighing and panting together without so much as one thought to the cute American whose thigh she’d run her hand along.

Nick sat on the porch. It was his one and only safe zone. His mother had called three times that day, but he refused to pick up the call. He distanced himself from anything familiar.

He wrote about his dream in his journal that day, trying to dissect it and figure out what it “meant,” if anything. He walked away from the dream with one conclusion: he needed to get out of this country. He’d had bad dreams before, but never anything like that. Never something so violent and heinous. The dream didn’t bother him as much as the reaction. Erections were common for men when they woke up. He could set his watch to a solid morning erection. But, this was different. This was because of the dream. It left him rattled. But, what did it mean? What did any of it mean? These were the questions he thought about as he sat on the porch and smoked his third pack of cigarettes that day.

He tried avoiding these thoughts. Instead, he focused on his purpose in this country. Why had he thought it would be a good idea to come to Barcelona in the first place? What could he possibly broaden himself with here that wasn’t in America? He hadn’t even seen all of the so-called cultural epicenters of his own native country. So, why did he find it necessary to travel to Europe for culture? He wished he’d just gone to Chicago or Los Angeles.

He was just wandering. He had no purpose. But, now he was wandering and alone and homesick and unable to understand a goddamn word that anyone said.

Across the street, the family of five was settling in for dinner again. The mother poured wine for her husband and her three boys, all of which appeared under the age of 17. They clinked glasses and drank slowly, smiling and laughing at what each other had to say. The mother kissed her husband’s forehead and stroked his hair. She listened to

her boys talk about school or sports or whatever they found interesting and gave thoughtful responses.

He was struck with the same thought he'd been having since he started watching the family eat dinner. This was the only moment in Barcelona he could understand. They felt and acted the same way that Nick's family in Akron acted. They quibbled over silly opinions and laughed at the same bad jokes and watched the same programming on television. They were a family and there was nothing more American than family.

Nick got up from the porch. He walked down the fire escape on the side of the apartment building and crossed the street. He stood outside of their door for a few moments before working up the courage to knock. The mother answered the door and stared down at Nick, standing alone on their front step.

"Hello," Nick said. The mother stared at him with a puzzled look on her face. "I was wondering if I could have a drink with you guys," he continued.

She stared at him for a few more seconds before calling to her husband. He came and stood in the doorway, leaning his stocky frame forward, perhaps to intimidate in case Nick was some kind of intruder.

"I was wondering if I could have a drink with you," he said again. The man looked at him as if he didn't understand. They began shaking their heads, frustrated by the language barrier and the sudden intrusion on their relaxing dinner. Nick refused to give up so easily.

He began miming a drinking motion with his hand, stamping his feet and jumping up and down. He cooed like an infant, trying to communicate to adults who didn't speak his language. He was six months old again and asking for his bottle. Frustrated, he stopped speaking, staring at the couple as they disappeared back inside the house. Nick

collapsed on the steps and put his head in his hands.

The mother returned a minute later with a glass of water. She cautiously set the glass down and walked back inside, slamming and bolting the door. Nick picked up the glass.

He began to laugh, giggling at first and then erupting into uncontrollable laughter. Everything made sense to him. He laughed so hard that he spilled the damn water all over the steps. He laughed so hard because he'd figured everything out, but he couldn't put that everything into words. He was suddenly at ease.

He walked away from the house, still laughing, and threw the empty drinking glass at a restaurant across the street. The sound of the glass shattering was louder than he expected and it excited him. The owner of the restaurant emerged, shouting at him and wielding a butcher's knife. He sprinted back to the youth hostel and jumped in bed, his heart still pounding.

An Altogether Tangible Success

Willie didn't regret much as he and his daughter sat down to dinner. He watched his beautiful angel of a daughter take slow bites of kielbasa and sauerkraut felt better about the glass of water he took sips from. These were the moments that made him happier, that made him pleased to have kicked the habit. These were the moments that he talked about at the meetings: watching his daughter grow up, how he yearned to see her graduate from college and start a new life, how he knew that, if he hadn't quit, he might not live to see her 20th birthday. The nightly, "family" dinner that he and Chelsea shared together was the image that forced him to shake off the regret.

Other images from his past didn't even compare: his mother getting hit by a car, his best friend smoking methamphetamine in his tool shed, his wife driving off with another man. These were images that made take to drinking more. These were the kinds of experiences that drove a man to his favorite bar to polish off the red vinyl of his stool and order a shot glass with a whole bottle of whiskey. No name brands. Something

cheap from the well. Something he could afford to have two or three or four or five of.

Willie had to catch himself at the table, as he was constantly staring at his daughter, wondering how she'd gotten this far. His sudden nostalgia trips made her uncomfortable and she squirmed in her seat as he stared her over. Chelsea would stare down at her plate, pretending not to notice that her father was admiring her, but Willie knew that she saw him. He could tell by her sudden silence. Willie put his hand on her arm and asked her how the meal was.

"It's great," she said. "Thanks, Dad."

"I'm glad."

They did the dishes together after dinner. Willie put the leftovers into containers and stored them in the refrigerator. The fridge was stocked with beverages. Diet sodas, iced teas, bottles of water, orange juice. No beer. No wine. Nothing that could tempt him. Nothing that he could crack open after a hard day's work, vowing to just have one, before finishing a dozen and passing out on the living room floor while his daughter wept in the corner of the room. Nothing that could make his daughter cry again.

Willie often wondered how Chelsea would react to her newfound age. She was 16, about to get her driver's license, and high school parties were right around the corner. Willie'd had his first beer right around the age of 15 at a party his older brother took him along to. He wondered what Chelsea would do at that first party, when someone poured her a typically adolescent drink of vodka mixed with something fruity, Kool-Aid perhaps. He didn't think she'd take a sip of it. Not his little girl. Not after what they'd been through.

"You got any homework to do tonight?"

"A little bit," Chelsea said, putting the last of the dishes in the dishwasher. "It

shouldn't take me too long."

"Should we watch a movie or something?"

"I don't know, Dad. I have to be up early tomorrow for school."

"I know," Willie said. "You can stay up with your old man for a little bit."

"Maybe," she said. "I'll finish my homework and see."

"You'll probably hop right on the phone when you're done," Willie said. He smiled at Chelsea, hoping she wouldn't take it personally. But, really, Willie wasn't too pleased about the whole ordeal. She often spent hours on that phone, talking to boys or her girlfriends or whoever, and slowly working her way toward a social life. He told her to limit her time for the sake of his phone bill, but that wasn't what really bothered him. Her increased time on the phone meant a decreased responsibility for Willie. His little girl was moving on.

"I'm not talking on the phone much tonight," she said.

"No?"

"Maybe a little."

"That's what I figured."

"We can watch a movie tomorrow night, Dad," she said.

"Fair enough," he said. "Fair enough. I'm not gonna stop you."

She hugged her father and they said good night. Willie listened to his daughter walk up the stairs and shut the door to her bedroom.

He sat on the couch for the rest of the night, watching Seinfeld reruns and laughing at the same jokes he'd always found funny. He lit a few cigarettes and stared anxiously at the television, wondering how much longer he could keep everything together. He wondered how much longer anything would seem funny.

Willie stood at the entryway to his neighbor's living room, admiring the newly finished tile flooring. The floor was a beautiful landscape of beige, charcoal, and black granite tiling. He stood next to his partner, Scott, who was more focused on the impending smoke break that they stood to take in a minute.

"Looks good enough, right?" Scott mumbled to Willie.

"Yeah, buddy," he said. "We done good."

Willie and Scott started laying tile work and doing carpentry as contractors about a decade ago, shortly after Chelsea turned six. Willie needed the extra money to support his daughter as she grew up and Scott, a longtime friend, had some experience as a carpenter. Aside from their contracting, they also umpired high school and college baseball games on the same crew, with Willie at home plate and Scott on the third base line. As great of a job as officiating was, the contracting business provided the money that both of them needed during the off-season.

Willie's neighbor, Mrs. Wilson, walked across their handiwork. She stopped every few steps, knelt, and ran her finger across the surface of the floor. Then she would stand, walk a few more steps, and spin around slowly with her arms out, as if she was absorbing the rays from her lovely new floor. Willie could see from her smile that she was satisfied.

"It's wonderful," she said. "You two are just absolute godsend."

"Oh, no," Willie said. "We're just doing the job you're paying us to do." He tried to practice modesty as often as possible, even though word-of-mouth had he and Scott pegged as the best contractors in the county. Business had picked up over the past few years, ever since they completed some excellent kitchen and foyer work at the

Gardner's place, a large white mansion that sat on a hill overlooking the Boardman area. Their work was even featured in the local trade publications, complete with Willie and Scott's smiling faces in the lower right hand corner of the article.

"Speaking of payment," Mrs. Wilson said.

"You don't need to rush," Scott said.

"No, no," she said. "I can cut you a check right now. I was just wondering if there were any overages. Anything that I need to pay extra for or that sort of thing. I know how it can get with you contractors." She said the last few words with a hint of disdain, but Willie just kept smiling.

"Of course not," he said. He prided himself on he and Scott's reputation to give fair prices, no matter what kind of labor went into a job. "We gave you a price and that's what you pay."

She cut them a check for \$11,000 and showed them out the front door. The men stood by their white pickup and lit cigarettes in Mrs. Wilson's driveway.

"We ought to charge overages," Scott said. "Everyone else does. In the end, the quality of the work is all any of these assholes care about."

"We don't work like everyone else," Willie said. "That's why more people call us than the other guys. And our customers aren't assholes. They cut us 11,000 dollar checks in a timely fashion."

"That one did."

Willie took a long drag, inhaled, and let the smoke sit in his lungs for a moment. He opened his mouth and watched it filter out, exhaling slowly and letting the nicotine and carcinogens work their way into his bloodstream. He had a headache and he leaned against the bed of the pickup.

“Where you headed now?” Scott asked.

“Dunno. Home I guess.”

“Should we go knock a few back?”

Willie’s mouth began to water. His knuckles whitened as he gripped the edge of the truck. He gritted his teeth and worked the idea around in his head. Scott continually asked him to go drinking, even though he hadn’t been to the bar with him in nearly three years. It was a constant trial, seeing him at ballgames they umpired together and finishing homes with him, all the while Scott only thought about one thing: the refreshments they would get after work.

“What’s the time?”

“It’s like 4:30. We can catch happy hour.”

“I’m gonna have to skip it,” Willie said, feeling as though his jaw would snap he was gritting his teeth so hard. The words even came out a bit jumbled from the tension in his mouth. “Chelsea’s at home and all.”

“Oh, come on,” Scott pleaded. It always made it so much harder when his friends pleaded with him. He had a tough time saying no to anyone, particularly one of his friends. Scott didn’t know about Willie’s problem. Most people didn’t know their friends had problems. Scott just thought Willie was an Irishman who liked to drink. So what if he vomited at the ends of multiple nights and had a couple of DUIs on his record? To Scott, Willie was just a guy who knew how to have a good time.

“Can’t,” he repeated. He said goodbye and started to walk down the driveway. When Scott offered him a ride, he turned it down, knowing that if he got in the truck he would end up at the bar. It was only a mile or so to his house. He lent Scott the company pickup for the night.

When he got home, Chelsea was sitting on the couch, talking on the phone with somebody. "I'd better go," she said and hung up as her father entered the living room.

"Who was that?" he said. She said nothing. "Was that a boy?" He smiled, hoping that she was in a playful mood. She wasn't and she turned the television on instead of greeting him. He sat on the couch next to her and turned so that he was facing his daughter. "Anything good on?"

"Nope," she said. Willie slid a little closer to his daughter.

"Really? Nothing at all?" He pushed the words out of his mouth, hoping that his daughter would catch a hint of his breath: stale mints, McDonald's, and a bit of coffee. But, most importantly, no vodka or gin or whiskey. His daughter smiled, and he figured that his plan must've worked. There was always a level of mistrust that they had to overcome, no matter how often he reiterated that he was sober. Willie supposed it was just a habit. Any time he arrived home, Chelsea couldn't have helped but to assume the worst.

"What're you doing home so early?" she asked him.

"I wanted to spend some time with my daughter. Is that so wrong?"

"No. It's not so wrong, but how did you know I wouldn't be busy?"

"It's Thursday."

"Well, maybe I've got a date."

"Was that a boy on the phone?"

"No," she said, laughing now, finally. Her laugh put Willie at ease. It sounded like wind chimes on his grandmother's porch when he was a child. "No, it wasn't a boy."

"So, you don't have a date? I knew it. It's Thursday, anyway. You never liked to go out during the week."

“How would you know?”

It was one bitter moment in an otherwise lighthearted conversation. If Willie had any regrets from his old habit, it was that it permanently altered the nature of his conversations with anyone that he loved or cared for. No matter how funny or interesting or compelling or intellectual a conversation might've been while he was sober, there was always one moment where Chelsea was able to pepper in a hurtful chunk of guilt. He was constantly on the defense, watching his words carefully to prevent any sharp retorts from his daughter.

“I guess I deserved that,” he said, dropping his head and staring at his paint speckled jeans.

His daughter turned the television off and got up from the couch.

“Are you gonna make me dinner tonight?” she asked him. He looked at her and she was smiling and, again, he felt at ease. He went to the kitchen to examine what he had in the cabinets.

“How hungry are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, can you wait a few hours?”

“Maybe. Depends.”

“I can make you my special lasagna, but it's gonna take some time.”

“I love your lasagna.”

He cooked for his daughter and they sat at the table, eating lasagna and passing the parmesan cheese and crushed red pepper back and forth. He made sure that he laughed at all of her jokes, thinking that it would help him feel more a part of her life if he understood her sense of humor. After dinner, they did dishes together, with Willie

scrubbing at the sink and Chelsea drying with a tan towel before returning the dinnerware to the cabinets.

“You know, I’ve been thinking about going to meetings again,” Willie said.

“Are you having a tough time again?”

“I don’t know. Not really. But I figure it’d be good to head over to one again, just to remind myself.”

“Do you mean it?”

“You don’t believe that I’ll do it. You don’t think I can.”

“I do think that you can. And, I support you.”

“Good.”

“Yes?”

“Because I’d like you to come with me. To a meeting. I want you to see me try.”

“Okay.”

They sat together on the couch and each picked away with their own spoons at a quart of vanilla ice cream. Chelsea fell asleep with her head on her father’s shoulder.

The meeting was held in the assembly room at the local Presbyterian Church. The room was heavily lit, with rows of folding chairs placed in a neat arrangement. At the front, a podium for sharing was set up, complete with a microphone that, at the moment, was turned off. Attendance was sparse, so there was no need to amplify any sound. The fifteen or so odd people gathered in the first few rows of chairs and listened intently to the speaker.

“When I saw my son on the floor,” the speaker was saying. “That’s when I knew it was time for a change.”

He wore a leather jacket and jeans that were torn at the knees. His hair was short and brown, with streaks of gray on the sides. His goatee was completely grayed and, when he spoke, Willie noticed that he was missing one of his canines.

Chelsea leaned forward in her seat. She bobbed and weaved with every word out of the man's mouth, as if she was ducking punches in a boxing ring. Her face contorted when the details got gruesome and, every now and again, Willie could detect a hint of moisture in her eyes. It made him sad to see his daughter hurt but, at the same time, he felt a slight sense of satisfaction. She had lived with her father's problems for years, but maybe now she was realizing that things could've been much worse.

"I'd tied him to a radiator," the speaker continued. "I couldn't find a sitter for the night and I didn't want him running around the house because, you know, I have guns in the house. I didn't want him to hurt himself. I told myself that I'd just go out for a drink or two and come back so that he didn't have to suffer. I rationalized it to myself, like all of us do, so that I could feel enabled.

"A few drinks turned into a bottle of whiskey. I got home after closing time and my son was huddled next to the radiator, crying and bleeding at the wrist. He'd tried to wriggle his way free to go to the bathroom, but he couldn't do it." The man started to get choked up. Chelsea also let out soft whimpers as he continued his story. Willie was trying to maintain a poker face, as if he'd weathered similar situations, but even he was having a tough time keeping it together.

"He'd just gone on the floor," the man said. "He was bleeding and crying and covered in piss and shit. I carried him upstairs and washed him in the bathtub. Afterward, he wouldn't let me near him. He was like a dog that'd been hit one too many times. He cowered away from me any time I was in the same room."

The crowd clapped for the man and thanked him as he stepped away from the podium. Willie had a sudden sick feeling in his stomach. These were the images that made him want to drink more. He wanted to step outside of himself and forget about what he'd heard, always remembering that at least he'd never done anything like that to his family. He'd never abused his daughter. Not physically, anyway, but what father hadn't broken a promise or two? You didn't need to be an alcoholic to disappoint somebody.

"Would anyone else like to share?" said the organizer, a blonde man in his late thirties.

Chelsea grabbed her father's hand and looked him in the face. She smiled and beckoned with her free hand for him to approach the podium. He obliged, anxious to get it over with.

"Hello," he said, staring out into the shallow sea of blank faces. "I'm Willie."

"Hi, Willie "

"Hi," he said again. "I'm an alcoholic, like the rest of you folks. I've been an alcoholic for about five or six years now. This is my first meeting in a hell of a long time, though." The faces changed from blank to sympathetic. Each person in the audience tried to convey helpfulness instead of apathy, lowering their eyebrows and giving empty, quivering smiles. Each one urged him to step forward and to shout his problems out.

"I don't know where to begin, really. I started drinking with some of my buddies and it just gradually got out of hand. I guess it's always been there, really, I just hadn't noticed it before I was all alone. See, my wife left about eight or nine years ago and it made my problems a little bit more obvious," he froze. He felt like nobody wanted to

hear his damn problems. And, most importantly, he didn't think it was anyone's business. He had a drinking problem and he was raising his daughter all alone, but he felt that these two things were mutually exclusive. He didn't drink because he was stressed. He stalled for a few more moments.

"I think she was disappointed with me and that's why she left. Maybe. I don't know. Maybe she just felt like leaving, anyway, and it had nothing to do with me. I think she's down in Columbus with some plumbing specialist or something. She was always urging me to live up to my potential. I kept telling her that I was happy with what I was doing and I didn't know what kind of potential she was talking about.

"I don't know what to say, really. Mainly I'm just here for my daughter."

He stepped away from the podium to sporadic, confused clapping from the crowd. The organizer approached the front of the room cautiously and told everyone that it was the end of the meeting. He informed the room that there was coffee in the back, along with a few boxes of Krispy Kremes.

Outside, Willie lit a cigarette as he and Chelsea walked to the car. His daughter hadn't said much since his confessional.

"What'd you think?" he finally asked.

"I'm glad you're trying."

"But?"

"Isn't the confessional thing supposed to be a bit more about yourself?"

"What do you mean?"

"You just talked about mom the whole time. I mean, the guy before you talked about when he decided it was time to quit."

"I didn't have as much to say as him," Willie said. "I never tied you to any damn

radiator.”

“I’m not saying you did, Dad,” Chelsea said. She put her hand on his shoulder.

“I’m just saying that it seemed like you didn’t know where to start.”

“I didn’t,” he said. “There isn’t always a good reason.”

“I know.”

“I’m trying.”

“I know.”

They got in the car together and drove to Dairy Queen. Chelsea treated her father to a Blizzard and told him how proud she was.

Chelsea was upstairs when Willie got home from working on a new hardwood floor for the McIntyres. He called her name a few times but didn’t hear any response. He walked up the steps and peered into the hallway. Her door was shut. Willie knocked quietly.

“Is that you, Dad?” she called from inside. Willie heard some commotion in the room. Chelsea was rustling around. No. More than just Chelsea. It was almost certainly somebody else in the room.

“You all right in there?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Are we still eating dinner together tonight?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll meet you down there.”

Willie thought about saying something sly, like Bring your friend, but he hushed himself before the words escaped his lips. Had Chelsea grown up that quickly? She was going on 17, a junior in high school, but it didn’t seem like she was old enough to be upstairs in her room, with a boy, and with the door closed. Then again, he wasn’t sure if

she'd ever be old enough for that. Time moved fast for any parent, whether they were an alcoholic or not.

Willie felt burdened with a sudden burst of what he considered hypocritical self-righteousness. He wanted to burst into her room, scold his daughter, and throw whatever boy hid there out on the street in his underwear. Maybe he'd throw a slap in for good measure. But, at the same time, who was he to suddenly tell his daughter how to live her life? He'd pretty much been an absentee. This probably wasn't the first time she'd had a boy over after school. It was just the first time in awhile that Willie had decided to come straight home from work without stopping by the bar for a few beers with Scott. He felt like he was somehow imposing on a routine that he'd never been a part of.

He sat on the couch and waited for his daughter to come down. The boy, a tall blonde with a scruffy beard, trotted down quickly behind her and headed straight for the front door. Willie stared his way as he left and then focused back on Chelsea.

"He could at least say goodbye," Willie said, smiling at his daughter.

"Dad," she started.

"Is that a boyfriend?"

"Just a friend."

He didn't like to hear those words. If she was closing doors with boys behind them, they'd better goddamn well be more than "just a friend."

"I'm sorry, Dad. I thought you'd have been working a little later."

"Chelsea, you're old enough to make your own decisions. I'm not going to judge you."

The room was silent for a minute. His daughter stood awkwardly by the couch, pretending to care what was on television. It happened to be a news channel, stuck with

the volume down.

“I was just going to ask what you wanted for dinner.”

“Can you make the lasagna again?”

“I can, I guess. It’ll take awhile.”

“I know. I want it, though. I’m not going to get it this weekend.”

“What’s this weekend?”

“Sherry’s cabin. She’s invited a few friends up there. I told you about this a couple weeks ago.”

Willie didn’t remember hearing about this, but he assumed she’d told her. He was never very good with remembering little things like that. He pretended, anyway.

“Yeah, yeah. Of course. That ought to be fun.”

Willie’s stomach sank the more he thought about it. He’d gotten used to Saturday and Sunday night dinners with his daughter. He hesitated to call them his crutch, the very moments that prevented him from drinking. They weren’t that at all. But, they were subtle reminders of what he’d grown to love. They gave him the chance to relax his aching joints and hear his daughter tell him about school or books or some new movie she’d seen on Friday night. He was having a tough time imagining the weekend without his daughter around. He couldn’t remember the last time he had to stay sober in an empty house.

“Is our buddy heading up there with you?” Willie asked, nodding toward the front door.

“Dad,” she sighed. “No. It’s a girl’s weekend.”

Willie wasn’t stupid. The wiry blonde would be there, as would whatever boy Sherry planned on spending the weekend with. He toyed with the idea of fighting his

daughter on it, telling her that he forbid her to go, but it wasn't worth the effort. He'd just put their relationship back together. He wasn't about to throw that progress away over two fucking days.

“So, lasagna?”

Chelsea giggled and clapped her hands. Willie walked into the kitchen and grabbed a pot. He stared at the water, waiting for it to boil instead of mixing up the Ricotta and egg.

Willie breathed deeply and enjoyed the fresh spring air. It was the first truly nice day he'd seen in awhile, especially in a city like Youngstown. Most of the time, the overcast skies left over from rundown factories blocked out any sunshine that might be in the forecast. But, not today. Today, the sun was shining brightly down on the baseball diamond as Youngstown State took on Loyola Chicago. It was early in the game, around the fifth inning, when Willie really started to feel great.

This wasn't an unfamiliar feeling for him during a baseball game. If there was any time that he could swear he was always at ease, it was during a game. He knew that he was in complete control of his surroundings and it put his mind to rest. He was sharp and focused on the surroundings of the game and the pitches that whizzed over home plate. His mind blocked out everything outside of the stadium.

Today, though, the at-ease feeling was a bit different. It was a funny kind of reassurance, almost as if he was certain that everything would be all right. Not just in the game, of course, but overall. He had a home to go to and a daughter that he was getting along with. He had a friend and partner in Scott, a bond that went a bit deeper than being his third base line umpire and carpentry expert. Today was the kind of day that made

Willie happy to be alive, unlike most days the past few years when he questioned whether he'd be better off dead.

Youngstown State's pitcher, a young brown haired kid named Stevie McDonald, threw a fast ball low and away. The batter for Loyola gave a check swing that looked a bit suspect. Willie pointed to Scott, who pumped his fist out in front of him.

"Strike Out" Willie grunted loudly. He loved growling those words out behind home plate. It was his favorite part of the job. Being an umpire meant being able to reach deep inside of your vocal chords and pull out the most primal of growls to make the call. Most of the time, what Willie said was completely indecipherable. But, the fans and the players knew that if it was being shouted, it meant that somebody had struck out.

The batter made his way back to the dugout for the end of the inning. Loyola's manager, a real hard-assed Bobby Cox wannabe marched out of the dugout and made a beeline for Scott.

"Goddammit," he was shouting. "Goddammit, Scott, you know goddamn well that that wasn't no goddamn strike. That wasn't no goddamn full rotation."

"I had the call and I made it," Scott said. "I call them like I see them."

"Yeah, well, that don't do me no good when you're a goddamn blind ass son of a bitch"

"You better take it easy."

"Don't you tell me to take it easy. You're blowing this game for us. What kind of homer umpiring crew is this, anyway?"

"Now, hold on a minute there, skip," Willie said, stepping away from home plate. "I don't really like what you're implying."

The manager turned his back on Scott and marched down the third base line

toward where Willie was standing. He took the hat off of his head and threw it toward the dugout.

“Who asked you a goddamn thing?” the manager said.

“Watch yourself. This is your last warning.”

“You homering son of a bitch, you do whatever you want. You think I give a damn if you throw me out of here? You’d be doing me a favor.”

“All right, skip, you got it,” Willie said, thrusting his index finger into the air toward the outfield. “You’re outta here ”

The manager shot Willie a puzzled glare, a move that confused Willie to no end. After all, this was a man who just dared the umpire (the head umpire on the crew, no less) to throw him out of the game. Now that he’d done it, the manager was too damned confused to make a move.

“What’d you say?” the manager said.

“I said get outta here. You asked for it.”

The manager kicked dust up at Willie, cursing loudly and pointing his finger in his face. Willie didn’t blink. He stood there and took it, glaring back at the man through his black metal face mask. When he’d finished, Willie said, “Well, now I know how you feel, skip. Thanks for opening up.” A few fans behind home plate found the joke funny and laughed loudly, heckling the manager as he walked back toward the dugout.

Satisfied, Willie situated himself back into his familiar post behind home plate. He watched Loyola’s infield warm up for a minute or so and pointed to the pitcher, asking if he was ready. The pitcher nodded and Willie pointed to the batter as he warmed up. Another nod and Willie lowered his face mask and got in the ready position behind the catcher.

“Play Ball ”

After the game, Willie and Scott smoked a few cigarettes in the parking lot.

Willie leaned on the back of the pickup and admired the blue sky.

“Hell of a day,” he said. “Just one hell of a day.”

“Yeah,” Scott shrugged. “Hope it keeps up for tomorrow’s game.”

“Yeah.”

They stood in silence for awhile, ashing next to their shoes and breathing in fresh air between puffs of carbon monoxide laced smoke.

“So, where you been lately?” Scott asked, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?”

“You know, lately. It seems like you haven’t been going out.”

“Yeah.”

“Matter of fact, you definitely haven’t gone out once. Now that I’m thinking of it, you keep turning me down. What’s the deal?”

“I dunno,” Willie said, afraid to admit he’d been going to meetings. “Just been spending more time with Chelsea, I guess.”

“She’s a good girl.”

“The best.”

“How’s she doing in school?”

“Real good, Scott,” he said. “She’s doing real good, thanks for asking.”

“Well, why don’t we get a move on?” Scott asked, glancing at his watch. “We can catch happy hour if you want.”

“I dunno about all that,” Willie said.

“Ah, hell, why not? It’s early.”

“We got another game tomorrow. I can’t get out tonight. Besides, Chelsea’s not at the house and, you know, I don’t want to let her down.”

“Let her down?”

“Forget it,” Willie said. “Forget it. I just can’t, all right? We gotta work tomorrow.”

“I know and that’s all good and everything, but it’s early. You can get a drink or two and still make it back.”

“Let’s just get out of here,” Willie said. “I’m tired.”

The piled into the pickup and Willie drove. He fiddled with the radio and tried his best to clear his head. He had a tough time focusing on the road.

“Drop me off here,” Scott said as they approached a bar in Boardman. “I’m gonna get a drink, anyway.”

He pulled into a parking spot to let Scott out of the truck. His friend opened the door and gathered his things. He hung around in the doorway and looked Willie over.

“You’ll pick me up for tomorrow’s game, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Come on. A drink or two.”

Willie put his cigarette in the ash tray and leaned his head out of his window. He let the sunlight hit his face and felt the warmth run from his forehead to his fingertips. He gripped the steering wheel and his knuckles turned white. Why not today? He’d been good. Plus, he and Scott both had to work the next day. They would police themselves. Neither of them wanted to stand around in the sun with hangovers.

“One beer,” he said.

“Yes,” Scott did a little victory dance and slapped his buddy on the shoulder.

“One beer and I gotta get home. I gotta call my little girl tonight.”

Willie woke up in the alleyway outside of the bar sometime after closing. His pants were soaked in vomit and he thought he may have been sitting on a pile of rotten food.

The good weather kept up for the next game. Willie stood crouched behind home plate, dusting the dirt away from the base before the first batter stepped up. He watched the infield warm up. The ball whizzed around the horn, from short to third to second to first, then start it all over again with another grounder. The outfielders stretched lazily, waving to some of the fans as they entered the stadium. Probably a few of their roommates or fraternity friends there to cheer them on. Maybe some of them had girlfriends, too.

The batters were no better. Each one stepped into the box and threw a heavy disc onto the end of their Easton aluminums and swung it around aimlessly, somehow warming their shoulders and arms in the process. The big hitters would grab three or four bats at once and swing them around while they warmed up, trying to intimidate the pitcher, or show their teammates that they had the biggest dicks on the team, or, perhaps, both.

Willie let this tiresome charade continue for five to ten minutes before calling out to his crew of umpires to check if they were ready. They all responded positively, so he pointed to the pitcher (nod) and then the batter (nod) and then he shouted the same two words that he'd been shouting for nearly two decades. But, this time, when he said them, he lacked a certain emphasis on either word.

There wasn't any feeling in his primal grunt. No happiness or exuberance like he

usually felt at the start of a game or when he called the third strike. For the first time in as long as he could remember, the whole sport seemed stupid, which meant that his job was equally stupid. After all, he was the one attempting to control a pastime that was so cyclical it made him gag.

Batters would line up, literally, to take a shot at guessing which pitch was coming next so that maybe, just maybe, they could swing a bat hard and fast enough to drive the ball back into the field. Then, what did they do? They ran around in a goddamn circle, trying to get back home so that they could step right up a few innings later and do it again. And the worst part, to Willie, was how seldom it happened. These batters were so anxious to get their crack at a pitch, so anxious to try and accomplish such an empty goal, and less than a third of the time (and that was for the good hitters) did they succeed. Most of them just struck out.

That's What Men Do

Tyler and Percy shuffled into the exhibition area and took a seat on the wooden bleachers. Hundreds of people were gathered in the stands, murmuring about the display they were about to witness. Some speculated as to how the boy would look.

“I figure he’ll be huge,” a man said. “Overdeveloped, you know?”

“I just hope he can handle it,” another spectator said.

When the boy entered the exhibition area, with his father and instructor at his side, the crowd hushed. He was just a normal, young boy. His arms were spaghetti thin and he had a close-crop of matted black hair on his head. He wore cutoff jeans and a plain white t-shirt to go with his low-top Converse sneakers. He looked so average to Tyler. The rest of the crowd fell silent, also, which Tyler took to be agreement.

“This is gonna be great,” Percy whispered to his brother.

The first few shots went as planned. The boy fired off a snub-nosed pistol, knocking over tin cans to display his accuracy. The crowd cheered with each shot,

holding their breath as he pulled the trigger and then releasing when they heard the loud ping of lead on tin.

Tyler had stopped paying attention. His mind wandered to the back about fifteen minutes, to the firearm display stand where he'd had the confrontation. The man in charge of the display, standing in front of his many racks of assault weapons and rare, antique pistols, had made a fool of Tyler. Tyler could've stood up for himself. He wasn't a tough guy, or anything, but he certainly was no pussy. But that was what he'd looked like at that display stand. He'd looked like a complete and utter pussy.

Tyler knew that he was the only one to blame for his shortcomings. He scolded himself for not coming up with the right words, for not making that complete ape look foolish for questioning his love for his wife. After a few moments of that, and a few more shots by the young boy, he started to pin the blame on the real culprit: his brother, Percy. The confrontational, always hotheaded Percy, ready to step in and make his brother look like a babbling idiot. After all, Percy hadn't given Tyler the chance to stand up for himself. He pounced at the first sign of weakness and attacked the man at the display, emasculating Tyler in the process. He felt weak.

"You know, I could've handled that back there," Tyler said to his brother, but Percy didn't hear him. His comment was drowned out by the cheers of the crowd as the boy switched to a handheld automatic weapon. It somehow left Tyler feeling weaker.

And then, almost as if on cue, the crowd's worst fears were realized. The boy pulled the trigger, aiming for a target rigged from a burlap sack filled with hay, and his spaghetti thin arms couldn't handle the power of the weapon. The gun erupted with two loud pops. The first bullet struck the target, a bit outside from a bulls-eye. The force of the blast pushed back on his shoulder, curving his elbow upward and back. The second

pop pushed the second bullet through the chamber, which struck the boy directly in the face. He fell limp the ground, blood pouring out over the grass that surrounded him.

The crowd let out a collective gasp before falling silent. The only sounds in the arena were the limp, defeated sobs from the boy's father. Percy's mouth was agape. Tyler felt sick.

"So it goes," he heard one of the spectators say.

Tyler held his wife's feet in his hands, massaging them gently. Law and Order was on television, but they weren't watching it too closely. Tyler thought it might have been about some kind of killer, an art dealer or something, who killed his lover when she didn't like his paintings. It didn't make much sense to him.

Tanya was sighing heavily as he massaged her feet. Tyler knew the sighs and he refused to acknowledge them. They'd been married long enough that he could tell the difference between a sigh of relief and a sigh of frustration. He didn't want to ask what was bothering her. He already knew. They'd talked about it on the phone that day. They'd talked about it at dinner. He wasn't about to talk about it during Law and Order.

"My feet feel better now," Tanya finally said, pulling them back. Tyler smiled at his wife, admiring her brown eyes and her shoulder length, curly hair. She was getting bigger, about to burst at this point. Her pregnant belly protruded from her dress and she rested her forearms on top of it as though it were an ottoman. She was gaining extra skin around the cheeks and neck. She complained often about her figure but Tyler tried to counteract that by being as nice as possible. She was carrying his child. He didn't care if she gained a little weight in the process.

"Do you want anything? A snack or something?" he asked.

“No thanks. I’ll be all right.”

“Just curious. It’s been awhile since dinner.”

“No, I think we’ve had our fill,” she said. She patted her belly and Tyler forced a chuckle.

“Well, maybe I ought to make you something for tomorrow. Some lunch, like a sandwich or something.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Just so you don’t have to exert yourself at all.”

“Don’t bother.”

“Please, don’t be like that.”

“I don’t see why you have to go to that damn thing,” Tanya said. She spit when she pronounced “thing.” She pushed the words out, trying to knock her husband off of the couch with the force of her vocal cords.

“It’s Percy’s birthday. I’m only doing what he wants to do.”

“It’s disgusting. He wants to go look at those fucking things all day on his birthday. Some day.”

“He’s my brother. He doesn’t tell me what to do on my birthday.”

“Well,” she said. “Well, you don’t ask him to go look at grenades and bullets and killers all goddamn day.”

“I know.”

The room got quiet again. The art dealer was being interrogated and, of course, he was denying the whole thing. He asked for his lawyer. Tyler envied the man. He wished he could just stop talking at will, let someone else sort everything out.

“It’s not like I’m psyched about it,” he said. “You know I hate guns just as much

as you do. I think they're disgusting, too."

Tanya sighed loudly and crossed her arms. Tyler let the room fall silent this time. He didn't want to bring it up again. They would go to bed angry and then they would make up in the morning, shortly before he left. He knew how it worked, especially now with the pregnancy. His wife had a tough time with rationality. That's what he told himself.

Tomorrow was just one day. He didn't want to leave her alone all day, but what could he say? It was his brother's birthday.

The sun beat down on Tyler and he felt his underarms beginning to sweat. It was hot, especially for October. The sun made the dull steel of the guns glimmer, like small clusters of stars on cheap plastic folding tables. There were shouts and cheers all around him at Ohio's annual Guns and Ammunition fair and he half-expected to see a merry-go-round or some teacups. The fair had all the makings of a carnival, so much so that Tyler kept referring to it in his mind as The Carnival of Death. He knew it wasn't overly clever, but it amused him anyway.

"I can't believe I let you drag me to this," he said to his brother, Percy, who was standing in line to buy some popcorn.

"Don't start complaining," Percy said.

It was Percy's birthday, so Tyler felt obligated to do whatever his brother wanted, even if it meant walking around fairgrounds all day looking at pistols and automatic weapons. Tyler hated guns, almost as much as he hated his brother's tendency to ram his beliefs down his throat. He hated the culture and all the glory, glory hallelujah second amendment bullshit that came with it. Mostly, he hated the fact that he left his wife

behind for an afternoon with Percy.

In front of them, in line, two shirtless men were talking too loudly about one of the exhibits they had just seen.

“It was pretty, wasn’t it?” the one asked.

“Hell yes, it was,” his friend replied. “Soviet, I think. I believe they started getting popular right around the Cold War.”

“Oh, Christ,” the other replied. “It’s German, not Russian. They started manufacturing those sons of bitches in the 60s and they came to America about a decade later.”

“Don’t you tell me about guns.”

“Get your goddamn facts straight, you moron.”

They playfully punched each other in the arms, all the while shouting about Russians, Germans, and how many soldiers they figure they could’ve killed in either country. Tyler cringed, but Percy seemed unaffected. He never took his eyes off of the girl behind the cash register, clad in a bikini and a Smith & Wesson visor.

“You gonna want any popcorn?” Percy asked Tyler.

Tyler groaned. He’d had enough junk food over the last six months to hold him over for another ten years. Tanya got sympathy cravings nearly every night. Rarely did she request anything healthy, or ordinary, for that matter. Peanut butter filled pretzels, cheddar flavored popcorn, or ravioli stuffed with crab meat. Her hunger was so specific and Tyler, being the good husband that he was, had to roll with whatever fancied her on a given evening.

The two brothers strolled through the fair grounds. Percy munched loudly on popcorn and danced excitedly when he saw a table they should stop at. He was

particularly fond of one man's booth that featured antique war weaponry. There were live hand grenades scattered across the table and a large caliber machine gun, perfectly polished, resting on a stand behind the man.

"Just polished it last night," the man grunted.

"Let me get back there and take a closer look?" Percy asked.

"Just don't get your fingers on it."

Percy ducked behind the table and crouched next to the mammoth gun. He put his hands close to the machine, without actually touching it, and let his fingers glide along the outline of the barrel.

"You gotta come look at this," he said to Tyler. Tyler ignored his brother and stayed in front of the booth, making small talk.

"How long have you been collecting this stuff?" he asked the man.

"Thirty years or so," he grunted. His skin was wrinkled around the eyes and mouth and loose, bumpy skin hung off of his elbows.

"You must be very proud of this collection," Tyler said. The man nodded. Tyler figured he was in his sixties. This booth, representative of over half of his lifespan, was the culmination of his being. It contained everything he was passionate about and, as much as he couldn't improve his own appearance, he could use the polish to keep his babies alive and well.

Percy came from behind the exhibit and thanked the man. They shook hands and the two brothers were off again.

As Tyler and Percy stood waiting for cotton candy, the two were silent. They were waiting for the exhibition to begin, but Percy swore that he needed a snack. He said

it couldn't wait and they wouldn't miss much. The boy wasn't scheduled to go on quite yet.

To their left, a family of four gathered and marveled at one of the gun displays. The patriarch, a man wearing a tank top and an NRA baseball cap, was lifting his son up on his shoulders so he could handle the pistols. The wife thought this was both acceptable and amusing, smiling and tickling her son's feet while he fingered a silver magnum. Their daughter, a toddler, hung back, grabbing at her mother's legs and pointing toward the cotton candy stand.

Tyler recognized this immediately as the reason he was hesitant to come to the show. He recognized the man as his own father: a father who took pride in the wrong kinds of parenting and exposed his children to what he loved, even if it was wholly inappropriate to do so. Tyler's father had hung rifles along the walls in the living room and placed antique pistols in glass holding cases on their bookshelves. He made Percy and Tyler polish them as part of their weekly chores and told them to take pride in their work. His mother never approved, not like the woman standing at the table now, but she never went against the man who kept her home together.

Tyler was rattled. He was thinking things that he didn't want to think. He was remembering bad evenings after their mother had gone to bed, spent in the living room with his father and Percy and a half-empty bottle of Wild Turkey.

They stopped at another table, featuring large magnum revolvers and a few machine guns.

"You've got to love this atmosphere," Percy said.

"Don't start."

“No, really,” he continued. “You just have to enjoy the fact there are so many people, together, enjoying something they love.”

“I don’t know that I have to enjoy any of that,” Tyler said, but he would have been lying if he said he wasn’t taking some pleasure in the day. The guns turned him off. He hated guns, and found it ironic that so many people could love something that brought so much misery to the world. But, at the same time, he couldn’t help but look around and chuckle at the atmosphere.

The gun show was a roving freak show. There were shirtless fat men munching on corn dogs, comparing their knowledge of the development of the AK-47 assault rifle. Sexy women in bikinis roved the land carrying semi-automatic weapons for horny men to stroke and ogle at. The sound of gunfire from exhibitions went off every few minutes and the crowd would freeze, perking their ears up to try and identify which weapon was firing rounds.

“You know how much I hate these things,” Tyler said to his brother, tricking himself back into his hatred for the event.

“I know. Just keep it to yourself around here.”

Percy wandered off to ask the man behind the display a few questions. Satisfied, he walked around to the back of the exhibit and started to handle the guns, holding them up to his eye and checking the sights. Tyler was tempted to join him, but his cell phone rang and snapped him to attention. It was his wife.

“Hey, darling,” he said into the receiver.

“I miss you,” she said. Her voice was warm and soft. Tyler’s focus shifted from his brother for a few moments, even though he never took his eyes off of him.

“How are you feeling?” he said. “Do you need me to bring you anything when

we get out of here?”

“Chicken,” she said. “I need fried chicken.”

“Wow,” Tyler laughed into the receiver. “Chicken it is. How’s the baby?”

“It’s fine. We’re watching some television together.” Tyler pictured his wife on the couch, her hands on her pregnant belly, watching daytime drama or cheesy talk shows. He didn’t notice that the man running the exhibit was staring him down and chuckling at every word he said.

“Well, I can’t wait to get back and take care of you,” he said to his wife. They exchanged pleasantries, I love yous and so forth, and Tyler hung up the phone. He was still staring at his brother, who now was handling the semi-automatic, handheld machine guns.

“Man, I ain’t never heard somebody as pussy whipped as you are,” the man behind the table said. Tyler turned to him, trying to focus on his eyes, but instead focusing on bits of food by the corner of his mouth.

“Excuse me?”

“What the hell was all that on the phone there, my man?”

“That’s my wife,” Tyler said. “She’s pregnant.” He expected that to end all conversation. He knew he had been doing some baby talk on the phone, but pregnancy was the end-all, be-all of excuses. There was nothing wrong with baby talk to a pregnant woman, even in public.

“You sounded like one hell of a pussy,” the man said. “Who fucks who when you get home?”

“That’s really not necessary,” Tyler said. He glanced around in a panicked frenzy. A family of six was looking at him. Percy was listening, too, but pretending to

stay focused on the guns on the table. He was waiting for Tyler to make a move, surely, before he decided whether it was necessary for him to step in. Tyler wasn't sure which avenue to take. He could insult the man, or throw a punch, or walk away. Or he could grab one of the pistols, hope there were bullets in there, and blow his fucking head off because that's what men do.

That's what his father always told him. Late nights, when their mother had gone to bed, he'd place a silver pistol from the bookshelf in Tyler's hand and make him point it at the television and say those words in his ear. That's what men do. Then, sometimes when he got real bad, he'd load the gun and make Tyler (never Percy; Percy was his golden boy) point it at his father's face and always saying do it goddammit do it but Tyler wouldn't do it so he'd call him a pussy and snatch the gun from his hands. Those were his memories. Those were what he called upon to remind himself of what men were supposed to do.

At the first gun show he'd ever been to, Tyler put a kid in a coma. He was thirteen at the time and he blamed his brother for most of it. He was being taunted about a pair of bright blue shorts he'd decided to wear. His mother had bought them for him and told him that they looked great, even though Percy and his father both poked fun at the shorts when he got them for his birthday.

But there he was, wearing the shorts out, even though his brother advised him not to and said he looked like a "fag." His father agreed in the car. Tyler wanted to just turn around and go home, and asked his father to do as much, but he ignored his requests. He told him to live with his own choices and that it wasn't he and Percy's fault that he'd decided to wear such gay shorts.

Tyler's father gave the boys twenty dollars and told them to wander off and have a good time. He told them he would meet them later. As soon as he got out of sight, Percy told Tyler that he wouldn't hang out with him in those shorts. He left his little brother behind to go off and admire the guns on his own. Tyler didn't have much use for that, though, so he camped out by the popcorn stand and ordered up a large soda. He sat by himself and ate for awhile, hoping that he could just ride out the couple hours until he went to meet back up with his father and brother.

Occasionally, he saw Percy walk past and yelled to his brother, but he ignored him. Percy was walking with another set of boys and Tyler could overhear them laughing as they walked by. He didn't understand what was so funny about a pair of shorts. So he liked the color blue. How did that make him gay? Tyler found himself growing frustrated, standing by himself and shoving fistfuls of popcorn in his mouth.

The next time Percy walked by, one of the boys stopped to point and laugh. Percy didn't stop him, either. He let his friend laugh loudly and mock Tyler. He remembered exactly what the boy looked like. He was a gangly blonde haired boy, wearing a dirt biking sleeveless t-shirt and long cargo shorts. He started to shout at Tyler and insult him.

Tyler tried to brush past the group of boys. He felt tears form in his eyes and his face went red. He stamped his feet as he walked by, which drew more jeers. Now he was a baby, as well as a fag. The gangly blonde started to poke and shove Tyler, all the while Percy kept laughing along with the group of kids.

Tyler saw the gleam of the long revolver on the table before he decided what to do with it. He didn't even remember picking it up. The next thing he remembered was being on top of the boy, covered in blood, bashing his face with the butt of the gun.

Percy and his friends didn't intervene. They were too shocked. A man with a red-billed trucker hat and a tank top on rushed toward Tyler and pulled him off of the boy.

Everyone was yelling for an ambulance.

On the way home, Tyler saw his father proud for the first time. He congratulated his son for refusing to take anyone's shit. His father scolded Percy the whole time, telling him that family doesn't let that kind of shit happen to one another. It was the last time Percy ever let his brother get picked on.

Tyler vomited all night that night. Every time he closed his eyes while he was in bed, he began to feel seasick. He spent a few years in therapy, up until he graduated from high school.

Tyler felt his neck get hot under his collar. His cheeks were red, no doubt, and he felt his hands trembling. He tried to speak, but nothing was coming out of his mouth. He hadn't been so flustered in as long as he could remember. The audacity of this man left him completely speechless and frozen. What could he respond with?

He prided himself as an intellectual, a man who didn't snap, save for that one incident when he was thirteen. He certainly wasn't going back to those days. He was different now. He was grown up. Yet, he couldn't shake the feeling that the only comeback was to step forward and put his fist in the man's mouth. After another moment of wide-mouthed shock, he heard his brother's voice.

"Why don't you watch your fucking mouth," Percy finally said, stepping in front of the table.

"What?"

"You heard me. You little faggot, I should smack you upside your fucking head

for talking to him like that.”

The man stammered and tried to come up with an answer. Percy leaned over the table, allowing his wide shoulders to talk for him.

“His wife is pregnant and at home by herself. The man can talk to her any way he wants. You say another word to him and I’ll break your fucking neck.”

Percy grabbed his brother by the shoulder and they walked off together. Tyler tried to find the words to thank him, but was too embarrassed. He couldn’t focus on anything. When he tried to speak, his brother cut him off.

“We’re gonna miss the exhibition,” he said. He smiled at his brother. “You’re not gonna believe it.”

“What?”

“Some eight year old kid. He’s been travelling around the country to different gun shows, showing off his skills. He’s a fucking marksman at age eight.”

“Isn’t that a little young?” Tyler said. “How can he control the gun?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know,” Percy said. “I just want to see what the kid’s got.”

When Tyler walked into his home, he didn’t say much. He sat down on the couch and listened to the breeze, a rare thing for October. Most October nights were spent in sweats with the windows shut tight, cuddled next to Tanya and trying to stay warm. She was there tonight, of course, but she stayed glued to her recliner. It was the chair she’d spent so much of the previous eight months in, distant but altogether closer to her husband. That was how Tyler looked at it. The cuddling was gone, for now, but they had grown closer from their baby, whatever sex it may be.

“You forgot the chicken,” his wife said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. He got up from the couch and kissed her forehead. “I’m real sorry, I just figured maybe we could order something in. Pizza?”

“Let me ask the baby,” she said. She put her hands on her belly and started whispering. Most nights it annoyed him, but tonight Tyler wouldn’t have preferred hearing any other noises. He tried hard to make out the syllables from his wife’s full, beautiful lips.

“The baby thinks it’s ok,” she finally said.

He ordered the pizza. They sat together and ate. He had a few slices of pepperoni and Tanya finished the rest of the pizza. Her half had mushrooms and she dipped into his half for a slice or two of pepperoni.

“How was your day?” she asked. “You seem a bit distant.”

“Did you watch the news?” he asked. She hadn’t. “There was a death at the show.”

“Oh my goodness,” she gasped, a mouth full of pizza.

“Yeah,” he said. “Yeah, I know.”

“What happened?”

“He was just a boy,” Tyler said. “No way he should’ve been firing those guns. He was just so young.”

He sat and stared. His wife finished what was in her mouth and moved next to him on the couch. He put his hand on her thigh.

“Did you see it?”

“Me and Percy,” he nodded. “It was an exhibition. We saw it all.”

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He nodded again and put his head on her shoulder. She stroked his hair and he wept gently, allowing his eyes to water but keeping himself from making any noises. He placed his hand under Tanya's bathrobe and palmed her belly. He thought he felt a kick.

"You know how we feel about guns," she said. "Must be a reminder of why they're so awful."

But that's now what Tyler was thinking about, nor was it what he was reminded of. He was thinking about toothless rednecks insulting his wife's honor and the shrieking of a father who had lost his son to what he loved. He was thinking about Percy and the way his fingers stroked the large, greased barrel of an antique machine gun. He was remembering the shouts about Russian engineering versus German engineering and the insulted egos resulting from a lack of gun knowledge. He was thinking of how it felt to have his testicles removed, publicly, by his brother at a gun display stand.

He began to tremble as he felt the baby kick, letting his hand stroke his wife's now exposed belly. He was holding the pistol again and his father was staring down at the barrel, shouting for him to do it goddammit do it. His gentle weeping turned to loud, convulsing sobs as he gripped the belly and dreaded the day when a doctor would smile at him, with his perfect teeth and curled lip, and shout *It's a Boy!*

What the Best of us Lack

A few dozen of the women in the town are packed into the assembly hall at the Presbyterian Church on Tanner Avenue, and the only things Linda can focus on are the mouths. Red lipsticks, pink lipsticks, shimmering lip glosses, Blistex moisturizing lip creams all move in unison as they shout over each other. The words are like the women, wrapped in scarves and coats and hats, trying their best to repel red plastic cheeks and peeling noses from Anahim Lake's stubborn winter.

"What do we tell our children?" one shouts. "How do we keep them safe?"

"I can't tell who's who anymore," another screams, fighting back tears. "I can't tell what to believe, or who to trust, or when to cross the damn street!"

"This is *Canada!*" one of the older women shouts. "This is what you'd expect in America, but not our country! Not Canada! We're a different kind of people. We're not *violent* people!"

Linda is frozen to her chair. Or, at least, she likes to pretend she is. That way, she has an excuse. She won't stand and shout like the other women in the room. She is allowed to be confused and keep it bottled inside as long as her pants are secured to the

porcelain seat by a couple thick sheets of ice. When the elderly woman asks her if she agrees, she can simply nod her head and shrug her shoulders.

“Can we please calm ourselves?” shouts Father, standing behind a podium at the front of the room. “You all have a right to speak, but, please, let’s not do so at once.”

The room gets temporarily quiet. The women stay standing, but let their lips rest for a few moments.

“We can not deny this tragedy,” Father says. “We can not deny it any more than we can deny our own existence. But we mustn’t become irrational.”

Linda can’t stop picturing the news. The talking heads with flashing lights behind them and yellow rope surrounding a vacated mass transit vehicle. The lone shadow moving around inside, holding what looks like a large rugby ball, only with a tuft of hair on the top of it.

“May I say something?” says one of the women in the crowd. Linda recognizes Margie, standing tall in her puffy red jacket and pink wool hat. Their daughters played on the same soccer team for three years.

“Please do,” says Father.

“My Peggy is going off to college next fall, and I don’t know how to send her away. God knows I can’t trust the bus system anymore, and what about airplanes? We’re only seven years removed from 9/11, you know.”

“That was in America!” someone shouts.

“Please,” Father says, but to no avail. Margie is shouting toward the direction of the comment.

“What difference does it make?” she says. “America, Canada, it’s all the same now! Americans don’t do things as horrible and heinous as what we just saw in Manitoba!”

Linda puts her head against the desk in front of her, trying to tune out the groans and whistles and high pitched squeals around her. She pictures her farm. She closes her eyes and sees endless green fields and loud mooing from brown and white cows. She hears the wind rustling the grass and her daughter, Hannah, banging pans against the stove in the kitchen.

On the night the news reported the beheading, Hannah was cooking upside down breakfast for her and Linda. Bacon sizzled in the kitchen and Hannah struggled to retrieve a pan from the drawer underneath the stove. Metal clanged throughout the house and Linda kept turning the volume up on the television.

“I’m trying to hear this,” she said to her daughter.

“Do you want dinner or not?” Hannah snapped.

Linda ignored her, focusing her attention on the news anchor’s perfect white teeth and somber facial expression. Most of the news in Anahim Lake was good news, or, at least, news that could be delivered without a smile. It was rare to see a gravely serious face staring back at her from the television set.

“You might want to hear this, too,” Linda yelled into the kitchen. Hannah kept cooking. “It looks pretty serious, sweetie. Come in here. Dinner can wait a few minutes.”

Hannah turned the stove off and walked to the living room where her mother was seated, sighing and slapping her hands against her thighs as she entered. The breeze was

blowing the reporter's hair up in small pieces toward the back of his head. Linda focused on the strands of hair while she listened to the words.

"Initial reports are sketchy, at best," said the man. "But, to warn viewers at home, they are quite gruesome. According to police, the suspect in question lashed out at a passenger with a knife, repeatedly stabbing the man to death."

Linda gasped. She kept her eyes on the strands of hair and tried to process the information.

"Police say that once the bus had cleared, the suspect continued to attack the man, eventually removing the victim's head and carrying it with him."

Linda couldn't take her eyes off of the screen, no matter how badly she wanted to look away. She wasn't even listening anymore. She couldn't find the words to react. Hannah disappeared back into the kitchen to finish dinner. The clanging of pans snapped Linda to attention and she turned off the television, settling back into her seat.

They spent the first few minutes of dinner in silence. Linda cut at her eggs and poked her bacon with a fork. Hannah chewed silently, staring straight ahead at the mostly empty ketchup bottle turned upside down on the table to gather what was left toward the top.

"Have you talked to Pierre?" Hannah asked. Linda didn't look up from her plate.

"Yeah, the other day on the phone," Linda said. "He should be in next week. We have to brand the new cattle."

"You're going out there to help him?"

"Well, no," she said. "Maybe. I don't know."

Linda didn't care for cattle branding. It was one of the necessary evils in her life, tormenting helpless animals for the sake of identification and business. She hired Pierre

and his crew of cowboys a few months ago to handle the iron work so that she could focus solely on the sales portion of her livestock business.

“I just know you don’t like that kind of thing,” Hannah said.

“I could use the distraction,” Linda said. “Either way, it’s not important. I’ll decide when Pierre comes out to work.”

Hannah got quiet again, focusing on the ketchup bottle. Linda didn’t like talking about Pierre, or even talking to him, and her daughter knew this. She didn’t need Pierre when Monty, her ex-husband and Hannah’s father, was still around. Pierre was a good cowboy and a good man, but, more than anything, he was a reminder of what Linda would rather forget.

It had been nearly a year since Monty left the farm and Linda was only now starting to adjust. Most of the everyday things were easy to handle: sleeping alone, eating alone, raising Hannah alone. For the most part, Monty was absent for all of those things while he was still at the house. However, Linda had a tough time adjusting to the lack of distraction. When Monty was around, there was something for her to think about, even if it was usually something negative. Now, she spent her days with empty thoughts and the mundane details of her livestock business.

“Have you talked to Dad at all?” Hannah asked.

“Why?”

“Curious.”

“No,” Linda said. “I mean, why would you think that I’ve talked to your father? If we were still speaking, he’d have probably stuck around some more.”

“I just worry,” Hannah said. “I wonder how he’s doing.”

Linda stayed quiet.

“Is he still staying with his friend? Joe, or whatever his name is?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Linda said, but in truth she did know. She’d heard from the church and others she dealt with that Monty was spending time in soup kitchen lines. He was sleeping God knows where and panhandling whatever money he could.

Linda kept these things from Hannah, afraid that she wouldn’t be able to let her father go. As painful as it was, the only way to deal with addicts was to shut them off completely. Hannah was at an age where anything was possible and ideals were her reality. Linda didn’t expect her to understand, so she lied. It made her uneasy when the topic came up, and she wished there was some way she could explain the situation to her daughter. Desperate to change the subject, Linda turned the conversation to current events.

“Incredible, what was on the news, huh?” Linda said. Hannah just shrugged. “It’s so frightening to think about. In Canada, no less.”

“Hm,” Hannah said.

“I don’t know what to think. In America, this kind of stuff is just blinked off, right?” Linda took Hannah’s silence for agreement and continued. “It kind of makes you think that maybe you can’t go anywhere with anyone. Canada might want to start thinking about shutting down the mass transit system.”

“That seems a bit much,” Hannah said, breaking the silence.

“Well, I know, but I’ve really been thinking about this,” Linda said.

“It’s only been, like, an hour since you heard the news.”

“Yeah, I know how long it’s been, missy,” she said. Hannah chuckled at her mother. “I’m serious, sweetie. What’s so crazy about it?”

“Gas prices, for one,” Hannah said.

“Those can go down.”

“Convenience. Not everyone can own a car, or, I mean-” she paused. “Mom, are you serious?”

“I’m very serious. Why would you ask me something like that?”

“You don’t mean airplanes, or, like, trains and...I mean, Mom, it’s just not logical.”

Hannah smiled in a way that made Linda uncomfortable. It was a smile that condescended to Linda, as if she wasn’t bright enough to process the information.

“Maybe it’s the only way to be safe,” she said. “Ever think about that?”

“It’s fucking crazy, Mom.”

“Watch that mouth, now,” she said. “I’ve told you about that.”

“It’s not a big deal.”

“Language like that?”

“No,” Hannah said, wiping at her mouth with a napkin. “The murder. It’s not a big deal.”

Linda froze, her eyebrows to the ceiling and her mouth agape. She tried to read her daughter’s eyes. She was angry, but it was a welcomed distraction from the topic of Hannah’s father.

“Things like this happen,” Hannah said.

“If this is a joke, it’s not very funny.”

“I’m not joking.”

“But, the families,” Linda said. “The victims here. How can you possibly say that?”

“Forget it,” Hannah said.

“No, I want to know,” Linda said. Her disappointment swelled in her throat. She couldn’t understand why her daughter’s words hurt so badly. It felt like a rude awakening to something she never wanted to face. It felt like pessimistic apathy, something that Linda hoped her daughter would never buy into.

“It’s just-” she said, pausing for a moment. “You know, things like this happen, I guess. There isn’t anything you can do about it.”

Linda was hurt. Her face dropped and her eyes began to well up. She excused herself from the table, leaving the dishes to be done by her daughter. Hannah tried to protest, but she ignored her, rushing out of the kitchen and up into her room. She slammed the door shut and fastened the lock.

Linda jumped into her bed. She stared straight ahead, hoping she wouldn’t catch a glimpse of the dresser in the corner of the room where he used to dress himself every morning. She kept her eyes away from his side of the bed. She blocked out thoughts of his underwear drawer, and the half-drunk bottles of whiskey that started to turn up in it after Hannah had turned seven. She tried to ignore the reminders, the memories contained in decades-old furniture.

She tried her hardest not to focus on anything but the pain she felt right then, from the dinner table.

The women of the town have calmed a bit. Linda stays seated, anxiously peeking around the room to get a feel for the temperament. A few of the women left the meeting during the shouting, but the ones that remain tap their feet and wait for Father to say anything. He sweats a bit at the brow and fiddles with the collar of his shirt.

“I’m glad we’ve quieted,” Father says. “We must retain order for the rest of the evening and discuss things civilly.”

A woman in front, Janis Brown, raises her hand.

“Yes, Janis?”

“I think we should propose some kind of plan,” she says. There are hushed murmurs. “I’m not the one with the answers, but if we all try to think, maybe we can come up with something. We need some way to prevent these kind of atrocities.”

“That’s good, Janis,” Father says. “That’s the right attitude. We must work together.”

Hannah’s words are still eating at Linda. They haven’t spoken since the argument at the dinner table. Linda has been ducking out to the stables when Hannah returns from school, hiding among the horses and feigning work until Hannah goes to meet with her friends. She worries, though, and doesn’t fall asleep until she hears her daughter come home at night and tuck herself into her room across the hall.

Linda unfreezes herself from her chair and raises her hand.

“Yes, Linda?”

“I’d like to say something, if that’s all right, Father.”

“Please, do. Would you like to come to the front?”

Linda walks forward to the podium and stares out at the crowd of townswomen before her. Most sit on the ready, anxious to hear what Linda has to say. Linda feels confident that she has the women’s respect, as a successful rancher and prominent businesswoman in the town. She remembers the welcoming attitude from the women at the Presbyterian Church when she joined their Parrish after Monty left. They didn’t ask

questions and they didn't pry. They opened their arms, and now Linda had her chance to thank them.

"What I'm going to suggest may seem irrational," she says.

"Please," Father assures her, and some of the women murmur the same. "You don't need to qualify, Linda. Any idea is welcome in this Parrish."

"Well," she starts, hesitating and clearing her throat. "I think that there is only one answer, even if my daughter and I don't quite see eye to eye on it. We can't predict these heinous acts, and until we can, it's impossible to prevent them. But-"

"But what?" Margie shouts from the middle of the crowd. "If we can't prevent them, then what are we talking about?"

"My friends," Father says. "Let Linda finish. There's much more to be said."

Linda clears her throat again. There is a knot forming in her stomach, and she feels unable to swallow.

"Excuse me," Linda says. "Anyhow, what I mean is that we can't prevent what we can't predict, unless we eliminate the unpredictable, which, in this case, is the bus system."

Hushed whispers become hurried, audible murmurs. The women in the assembly hall start to nod in agreement. Even Margie stands up to voice her approval.

"I think you're onto something, there, Linda," she says, and the women start to applaud.

"Now," Father starts. "Let's relax. We need to think logically."

"Wait," Janis says. "I think this is perfectly logical. If we eliminate the bus system, we eliminate the possibility of this ever happening again."

"Exactly," Linda says.

“We can’t make that decision for the town,” Father says.

“Well, not yet,” Margie shouts. “We need to raise awareness. There’s a Greyhound station over on Boot Avenue. We can picket it later this week, start to get the media’s attention.”

The assembly hall roars with approval. Linda steps down from the podium to the outstretched arms of her Parrish members. They congratulate each other and breathe sighs of relief before buckling down and making plans for the picket line. Linda congratulates herself, happy to finally have a different reason to be angry.

The first time Linda slapped her child was about two months after Monty left. Hannah sat with her legs across her mother’s lap on the couch while they watched a Brad Pitt film.

“I saw Dad today,” Hannah said.

Linda grunted.

“He was short on cash so I gave him like forty bucks.”

“What did you say?” Linda said, quickly becoming alert and sitting up on the couch.

“I said-”

“Tell me you’re not serious,” Linda shrieked.

“Relax, Mom,” she said.

“Don’t tell me to relax,” she said. “You don’t understand. You do not, under any circumstance, ever give him money.”

“But-”

“Never,” she said. “If you give him money, you’re killing him faster. He’s not spending it on food, or shelter. He’s going to go out and get fucking drunk!”

She didn’t remember shouting at her daughter, or why she lost control. She hated talking about her husband like he was an untrustworthy hobo, but it was true. He wasn’t going to eat, or sleep. He was a drinker, and he was going to drink.

“I don’t want you to be mad at me,” Hannah had said.

“I am fucking mad at you,” Linda said. “How can you be so stupid?”

“Don’t call me stupid.”

Linda stood up from the couch and Hannah bounced up in front of her, trying to brush past and avoid the argument. Linda halted her with a hand to her shoulder.

“You have to think about how your actions affect everyone else.”

“Please,” Hannah said.

“You don’t fucking think!”

“I don’t deserve this,” she said, her voice getting louder. “You mope around like you’re the only one who’s hurting.”

Linda slapped her daughter across the cheek, the dull thud of her hand against Hannah’s face ringing louder than Brad Pitt’s gunfire. Her daughter ran past her and she slumped back down onto the couch. She didn’t cry. She stared at the television for the rest of the night, long after it went blank when the film ended.

Linda meets Pierre and his crew at the outskirts of her land the next morning. His hair is neatly combed, but his beard is scruffy and unkempt. There is mud on the legs of his jeans and dirt caked to his long sleeved shirt. His demeanor is that of dirt, except for the shiny, silver watch on a leather band on his left wrist. The timepiece is immaculately

polished, reflecting in the early morning sun. They drive in Linda's pickup truck across the open meadows, still frosty despite being the middle of March. The other cowboys pile into the back of the pickup, huddled together to keep warm from the frigid wind around them.

"Spring ain't gettin' here any sooner," Pierre says.

Linda smiles and rolls down her window, inhaling deep breaths of chilly air amid Pierre's huffing protests. She stays silent, shielding her eyes from the bright, rising sun and cursing herself for forgetting her sunglasses in the house. They don't speak another word until they get to the large pen where her new cattle are being kept for branding. They step out of the truck and walk to the edge of the pen, leaning on the fence and being absorbed by the loud groaning and mooing of the cows.

"You staying to watch?" Pierre asks.

Linda glances toward the house and nods her head.

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah, I might as well."

The boys set off to work almost immediately after exchanging pleasantries. One by one, they lead the cows out of the pen and into a smaller fenced in square of grass. Two of the men rope the cow as it runs through the entrance, tripping it to the ground with a heavy thud. They pounce on the cow, with its legs still roped, and pin it to the ground.

Linda leans against the fence and has a tough time keeping her composure as she watches. The cows moan deafeningly, confused and frightened by the sudden violence thrown upon them. Their eyes flail wildly as the hot iron is placed on their side, loudly sizzling their identity into their hides. They fix their stares on Linda, begging her with alarmed eyes to stop the pain.

Finally, their eyes narrow and the moans cease. They roll what are now empty, expressionless pupils up to the sky above them, a delicate look of resignation on their faces.

Hannah is sitting at the table eating pretzels and drinking coffee. Linda sits down across the table from her and smiles, fetching a few pretzels out of the brown box in the middle of the table.

“Long night of homework?” Linda says, motioning toward the coffee.

“Not really,” Hannah says. “Just trying to warm up a little bit.”

Linda nods absently, staring up at the motionless ceiling fan. She can hear the hum of the refrigerator in the background. The ice maker crunches and thuds a few times as fresh ice cubes drop into the hub inside of the freezer.

“So, what’ve you been up to?”

“Just school,” Hannah says. She munches a few bites of pretzels. “I’m afraid to ask what you’ve been doing.”

“Very funny,” Linda says. “I branded the cows today with Pierre.”

“You actually did it?”

“I supervised.”

“Mom,” Hannah says. “I think we should talk seriously about what you’re doing tomorrow.”

“Don’t try to talk me out of it.”

“I’m not,” Hannah says. “I’m not talking you out of it. I just want to know why you’re doing it. I mean, what do you think you’re going to accomplish?”

“I haven’t thought much about it,” Linda says. In fact, Linda hasn’t done much but think about it for a few days. It is the reason she stayed to watch the cattle branding. She’s been struggling to think of anything else. She’s nervous. She’s nervous about its success, Hannah’s reaction, and she’s afraid of Monty. She’s afraid he’ll show up in that area. Maybe he’s sleeping at the bus station.

“I know you’re upset,” Hannah says. “I mean, it’s scary and everything. But, maybe this isn’t the best way to go about it.”

“Maybe,” Linda says.

“What are you scared of?”

Everything, Linda thinks. She’s afraid that Hannah will go to college, try her first beer, and Monty’s genes will kick in and make her little girl an addict. She’s afraid the brakes will fail on her daughter’s car and she’ll have to take the bus to work, or school, or anywhere. She’s afraid her daughter will get her head cut off on some public transportation vessel. She’s afraid of just about everything since Monty started drinking.

“You wouldn’t understand,” Linda says.

“Try me.”

“It’s just not important,” Linda says. “It’s not something I can explain.”

Hannah gets up from the table and puts her hands on her mother’s shoulder. Linda leans her head against her hand, breathing heavy sighs as her daughter rubs her back.

“I know you worry about me.”

Linda rubs her face with her hand and tries to voice a protest, but her daughter cuts her off.

“We’re going to be fine.”

Linda's Parrish members march outside of the Greyhound station, shouting and holding picketed signs. Linda and Margie sit at a table against the station's outer wall with a petition attached to two separate clipboards in front of them for concerned citizens to sign. After three hours of protesting, they have only collected 23 signatures, and 19 of them are from the Presbyterian Church.

"This isn't going as we planned," Linda says.

They are interrupted by a young man in a denim jacket and black jeans. He stands in front of the table, looming over the women and reading the heading on the petition. His Marlboro breath stinks across the table and a fading blue snake tattoo slithers out from the neck of his white t-shirt up to his earlobe.

"What's all this?" he asks, curious.

"It's a petition," Margie says, pointing to the heading with her black pen. "We're collecting signatures to shut down this bus station."

"What for?"

"Haven't you seen the news?" Margie says, snide and accusatory.

Linda slumps in her chair. She can't focus on Margie, or the man she argues with. She has kept quiet most of the morning, thinking about Monty and whether he is roaming the streets. Linda keeps picturing her half-dead, fully drunk ex stumbling upon the petition table, vomiting on himself and embarrassing her in front of her friends.

"Well," the man says. "I'm not trying to interrupt you all, but I have to go visit my parents."

"Excuse me?"

“I said I have to catch a bus in a couple hours. Can you wait a few days to shut it down?” The man laughs at Margie and tries to brush past the table. Hurt, Margie reaches out and snatches his forearm, pulling him back to confront him.

“I don’t think you understand how serious we are,” she hisses. “Right, Linda?”

“I don’t know, Margie,” she stutters.

“What?”

“Well, no,” Linda says. She searches for words. “I mean, it’s for your safety, sir. It’s for all of our safety, you know, collectively.”

“Sign that petition,” Margie shouts. Linda can see Margie’s knuckles turn white, gripping the man’s forearm and digging into his skin with her fingernails. She thrashes her arm, pulling at him until he is out in front of the table again.

“I’m not signing anything,” he shouts, yanking his arm away from the woman.

Margie pounds her fists on the table. Linda stands up, trying to tell the man to calm down and let her and her church members resolve the situation. He reacts violently to her sudden movement, shoving Linda backwards so that she bumps her head against the side of the station. There is a collective gasp among the women. They stop chanting and marching, circling the man and waiting for Linda to act.

Linda shakes her head, trying to gain her composure. She rubs her hand against the back of her head, expecting to feel the moisture of fresh blood. There’s nothing, but it doesn’t stop her from checking again and again. She stares into the man’s face. Her vision is hazy from the bump and she doesn’t see anything but Monty. She sees whiskey induced guilt trips and irresponsible parenting. She sees a month’s budget binged away in one night on the town, while she is stuck at home caring for their only daughter while she has the flu.

Linda raises her hand and backhands the man across the mouth, an action she finds disgusting as soon as she performs it. She wants to reach out and stop herself with the other hand. Her thoughts immediately race to reactionary *what have I done?* sentiments. Before she can shout an apology, or tell the women to stop and act rationally, the feeding frenzy has begun. The Parrish members are on the man with the snake tattoo, stomping his face and torso while he curls into the fetal position on the sidewalk.

Linda backs away from the snarling and whooping, absorbed by the static engulfment of their excited voices. She turns and runs to her pickup truck, an action that goes unnoticed by her fellow churchgoers.

Linda slams the front door to her house and wanders into the kitchen. She opens the refrigerator and grabs the first beverage she can wrap her hands around, which happens to be whole milk. She chugs the milk for a few seconds, trying to startle herself out of her daze.

She stumbles upstairs to Hannah's room. The door is slightly ajar and she can hear her daughter inside. She hears soft weeping and Hannah's beautiful, gentle voice reassuring herself. She pushes the door open with her left hand, milk still in her right, and stands in the doorway while it creaks open.

"Hannah, baby?" she says.

She locks eyes with her daughter's wet pupils, crying as she sits on the edge of her bed.

"Hi, Mom," she says.

"Can I come in?"

Linda walks into her daughter's bedroom and slides onto the next to her.

“Is everything okay, honey?”

“No,” Hannah says. She moves closer to her mother, placing her head on Linda’s shoulder. “No, everything isn’t okay.”

“You can tell me about it,” Linda says. She puts her arm around her daughter and rubs her hand over the small of her back.

“I know,” Hannah says, clearing her throat.

They sit in silence for a few moments. Linda stares out the window at the setting sun. She sees her cattle grazing in the open meadows. She squints to try and see the brandings on their backsides.

“I saw Dad today,” Hannah finally says, choking on the words as they come out.

“I’m sorry,” Linda says. She apologizes for what Hannah can’t understand. She absolves herself of her lies and deceit, confident that Hannah has discovered the truth.

“He’s homeless.”

Linda stays quiet, innocent in her feigned ignorance.

“I saw him at a gas station. He was sleeping on the side of the building this morning.”

Linda rocks her daughter back and forth, shushing her and stroking her matted brown hair. She thinks about the shadow in the bus, stalking around with his trophy tucked under his arm. She tries to picture the shadow’s face, but she keeps picturing Monty, a lit Marlboro hanging out of his mouth and a thermos of vodka under his arm.

“I just feel so helpless,” Hannah says.

Linda leans back on the bed, clutching her daughter close to her. She squeezes Hannah’s head to her shoulder, letting her sob for a few minutes and soaking the grey wool of her sweater. Linda’s eyes flail wildly as she tries to fight back tears, searching

for the right words to tell her daughter. Her mind wanders to the branding pen, and then back to the bus station, and then back to the anonymous shadow on the bus.

“Everyone does,” she whispers.

She sighs and her empty eyes roll up towards the ceiling as mother and daughter clutch each other, resigned to their feeble flesh and bones.

A 21st Century Romance

Paul and Mary made a decent couple. They lived together in a small apartment in Minneapolis. Paul was in advertising. Mary was studying for a masters degree in healthcare. She was often tired.

They slept together on a thin Ikea mattress. Paul kept rolling around. He poked Mary on the shoulder and told her that he had an erection. She groaned and rolled away from him. He rolled on his back and counted the rotations of the ceiling fan. He lost track somewhere around 500 and he started over.

Paul spent most afternoons at a sports bar beneath his office. He drank martinis and watched hockey highlights. He would often get too drunk to return to work. Mary smelled the vodka during their evenings. She pretended not to notice and studied by herself in the bedroom.

A new woman started work at Paul's advertising agency. Her name was Sara. She had long legs and red hair. Paul took her to get a drink. He couldn't stop staring at her legs. She wore brown cashmere tights that clashed with the colors in her outfit. "Why do you wear those things?" he asked her and she giggled. It turned him on. He

went home later and told Mary she should get a pair of sweater tights. She asked him why.

“It’s good to have something warm in this cold city,” he told her and she agreed. She bought a pair that was the same color as Sara’s. Paul helped her pick them out. She modeled them for Paul at their apartment and told him how warm they kept her legs. She was really quite excited. They made love twice a day for the next two weeks.

Paul would tell Sara about Mary at work. He complained about her hoping to get Sara’s sympathy. He wanted Sara to know he could handle a relationship and that he might be looking for something else. It didn’t work.

“Maybe we should double date,” Sara said.

“You have a boyfriend?”

“Fiancee,” she said.

“Oh,” Paul said. He told her he would think about it. He went home from work and Mary still had her sweater tights on.

“I wish you wouldn’t wear those damn things all the time,” Paul told Mary at the apartment. She hadn’t taken off her sweater tights in days. She told him that they kept her legs warm. He grunted in response. They went to sleep together. Paul lay on his side. He felt Mary reach her arm around to grab at his erection. He told her that he was tired. He could hear Mary sigh as she rolled over onto her back.

Meet Me Tonight in Atlantic City
(Excerpt from the novel Marriage Mail)

I learned the beauty of no value after a few weeks on the job. Jimmy, of all people, showed me one day after I'd finished delivering my route. I set a stack of letters down on the ledge of my mail case and wiped sweat from my brow with the brim of my cap.

"The fuck are all those?" Jimmy said. Before I could answer, he elbowed me in the gut and picked up the bundle of letters. He leafed through all of them. "Shit, more shit, stupidity."

"What are you talking about?" I said.

"You don't have to bring these fucking things back. This is a bunch of bullshit, and if you keep your case cluttered, Stevens is gonna kill you."

"What do I do?"

"No value," Jimmy said, kicking at a yellow bin underneath the ledge of my case. I'd noticed the bin before, but I never knew what to do with it. It just looked like another bin where they could stack magazines for me to throw up in the morning time.

"What can I no value?"

“No value’s for the worthless shit. You throw third class mail in there, or anything really that has ‘resident’ in the address bar. I throw most of the promotional shit in there when I don’t feel like carrying it,” he said. “Janitors come by at the end of the night and just throw the no value out. They don’t ask questions or nothing.”

“Huh,” I said.

Jimmy’s lesson couldn’t have come at a better time. I’d grown tired of all the marriage mail at the post office. Five out of six days, I was content with my position. I enjoyed the weather, I enjoyed the people, and I enjoyed the sizable paychecks I was getting every two weeks. But, when Thursday rolled around, I felt like I was going to lose my mind.

“Fuck marriage,” I’d say to the other carriers in line at the time clock.

“Hell yeah,” one would say.

“This is fucked, anyway. Nobody on my route even uses the shit.”

We would grumble for a few more minutes about the uselessness of marriage mail and the pointless charade of throwing our backs out over the stuff. My father’s knees were buckling on Thursday nights. My right shoulder, a shoulder I’d injured in a basketball game during my junior year of high school, felt like it would fall off every time I finished my route.

I was ready to rid myself of marriage mail. I couldn’t make a point of throwing it out, and I couldn’t get rid of it for good. I could no value it. I could push it off to the side for awhile to make things easier on myself as I got into a rhythm carrying the mail.

Jimmy showed me the cardboard box they put off to the side every Thursday specifically for marriage mail. Some of the carriers had more to no value than others, so they reserved a special box for the leftovers. After I got done with my route on

Thursday, I parked the truck right next to the cardboard box and emptied out all of my marriage mail, undoing the bundles and spreading out each individual piece so it was difficult to trace what route they came from.

My father warned me about the no value. We sat on the couch one night while Monica showered, drinking cold Budweiser and talking about the job.

“Be careful,” my father told me.

“I’ve got it,” I said. “I found a way so the supervisors can’t know. They can’t prove anything.”

“I’m just saying,” my father warned. “Be careful. You don’t want them catching you.”

“Would I get fired?”

“I don’t know about fired,” he said. “But they’d be pretty pissed.”

I had everything under control. I just needed to get through the next 90 days without incident, and no valuing the marriage mail would help me get through with ease. At the beginning of August, when my probationary period ended, I’d make regular and none of the other bullshit mattered. None of the problems with Lou and overtime mattered. None of my father’s childish antics or feuds with Monica mattered.

I was on my way to being a union protected employee of the United States Postal Service. At that point, I could beat anything short of homicide to retain my position as a carrier.

My father was happy I was home, but he wasn’t happy Monica was around. Monica didn’t seem thrilled that she had to flee Harvard, but I was happy to have someone to share a bed with. The summer wasn’t about to get any less complicated. The last thing I needed was marriage mail to bog my mind down any further.

The cardboard box on the side of the post office and the yellow bin under my case were sighs of relief for me. They were my closest aides, helping me to get through the summer with no problem. I'd found the secret to making regular.

I could no value all of my nuisances.

My last delivery on the 200 block of East Miner Street was a small apartment building with three single bedrooms inside. There were two young couples and a single old man who lived in the building. When I arrived, the old man was sitting on the front porch with denim overalls and no undershirt. A cigar hung from his lips with the thick smoke trickling down both of his nostrils. His white beard and white hair were both messed. His cheeks were red from the heat.

At his feet was a bucket full of iced Coors cans. In his hands he held a large white sign with *No Amnesty for Illegals!* in red, white, and blue block lettering.

"Hot out here," I said.

He ignored me, staring straight ahead at the empty sidewalks. He exercised his first amendment rights in silence with no audience. I respected his determination, albeit determination to slander another ethnic group. I handed him a JC Penney catalog and two bills from his utilities company.

"Keep fighting the good fight," I said.

He nodded and I stepped off the porch.

I got back to my truck and opened my cooler. The cold pack had melted earlier that morning and my sandwich was nearing the temperature of the weather outside. I took a bite, spit it out, and decided I should call Jimmy to meet up for lunch. I needed air conditioning and a cold beverage.

We met at The Salad Stop on Gay Street about a half hour later. Jimmy was nearly done with his route.

“Salad Stop?” he asked. His goatee was patchy, as if he slipped while trimming it earlier that morning and tried to cover up for it by taking out random chunks.

“Yeah?”

“Kinda faggish, don’t you think?”

“Whatever,” I said. “They’re delicious.”

I ordered a large chicken caesar. The place used processed grilled chicken, but it was cheap and fast and cold. The chicken had the texture of a sponge and had fake black lines colored into it to make it look grilled. Instead, the chicken strips looked like children’s toys.

We escaped the grind like this just about every day. I’d usually call Jimmy and he’d act like it was out of his way to come meet me for lunch, but then I’d find out he was already finished with his work for the day. He was a much faster carrier than I was, but he’d been at the post office since around the time he graduated high school seven years earlier.

“You’re just like me,” he’d said on more than one occasion.

“How so?”

“One semester of college, ex-athlete. You know. I mean, I got here right after I dropped out, but other than that, we’re basically the same fucking person.”

“Maybe,” I said. “I never really thought of it like that.”

Jimmy dropped out of Scranton after his first semester. Unlike me, he never tried to play sports in college. He dropped out because he needed money and his parents couldn’t fit the bill for his education.

“Only difference is I got a bigger dick,” Jimmy said with a laugh.

“Cuntish,” I said.

I didn't mind being compared to Jimmy as much as I minded being compared to my father. Jimmy might've been like me. He might have been able to break away from the post office and pursue his true passions. He was a talented guitarist and often talked about trying to start a band.

My father was a plant. He was a mail carrier for life. Jimmy and me still had some time left.

Jimmy picked the bacon out of his Cobb salad.

“Why do you bother getting the Cobb if you don't want the bacon?”

“I like everything else,” he said. “I'm not a big bacon guy after breakfast. I only want it in the morning next to some scrambled eggs and scrapple. Not a big pork guy.”

“So, you're really just not a big bacon guy?”

“No, also chops, or pork ribs. Any of that shit. Pork shouldn't be eaten after breakfast time.”

“Just get a chicken salad with egg on it,” I said. I pulled out my cigarettes and put one behind my ear.

“Just go fuck yourself,” Jimmy said. “And take that thing out of your ear. You look like a faggot.”

“Fair enough,” I said. I put the cigarette down on the table and started working on the iceberg lettuce in my caesar. Traffic was slow inside of the Salad Stop. West Chester was a college town, so a place like Salad Stop probably wasn't the most popular hangout for hung-over coeds.

“So, what's the deal with this girl?” Jimmy asked.

“Who?”

“Monique or some shit. Your dad was telling me about her. Said she just showed up on your doorstep.”

“What else did he say?” I asked.

“Nothing really.”

“Yeah, he’s not the biggest fan of her arrival,” I said. “I think he sees her as a distraction or something. Not like I need too much concentration at this fucking place.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Jimmy said. “Why didn’t we go to a place where we could get a beer?”

“We’re working, dickhead.”

“Yeah, well, back to this girl. What’s the deal with her?” Jimmy stared off at the blonde counter girl while he asked the question. She was bending over the cash register trying to straighten out the cup filled with straws and plastic forks.

“No deal,” I said. “She’s just staying with me for a little while. She wanted to get away from Boston.”

“Yeah, Harvard, right?”

“Yeah. And her name’s Monica, not Monique. She’s not the multicultural type, you know?”

“I always wanted to fuck a black chick,” Jimmy said.

“Christ,” I laughed. “Don’t even worry about it. She’s just spending some time around me. Maybe a few more nights, I don’t really know.”

I played down my attraction to Monica around Jimmy and my father. It didn’t seem like the right kind of conversation for our type. Jimmy had an on-again, off-again girlfriend that he barely mentioned, even though my father told me he was mad about her.

Men like us didn't sit around and admit how deeply we'd fallen for the opposite sex. We were supposed to talk about tits, beers, and the occasional fart during sex.

The truth was that I'd fallen pretty hard for Monica. She was unlike any girl I'd ever slept with. She was smart and funny and sexy and I was pretty sure she really liked me. We had passionate sex, which was a far cry from the drunken humping in the Holiday Inn in Rutland, Vermont.

"Pop's doesn't like it too much?" Jimmy asked. Before I could answer, he added, "That must not make life at home too comfortable."

"It's not," I said, and then retracted. "Well, it's not that bad, I don't know. It can be a bit silent when we're all in the same room."

"You need to get away from that shit."

"Tell me about it."

"No," he said, a new, more serious tone in his voice. "I'm getting you away from that, at least for a night."

"Where to?" I asked. I was still smiling, figuring that he was full of shit. It seemed like an empty ploy to keep the conversation going.

"AC."

"What?"

"Atlantic City, cock. We're going out tonight. We're gonna gamble, and we're gonna drink, and you're gonna let your father and Monica work through their own shit."

I hesitated for a moment.

"Come on," he continued. "Burn a few hundred dollars, get dressed up a little bit like we're worth a damn. We'll go over to the Borgata. That place is fucking high class, man."

I could've kissed the man for his idea. It seemed like the perfect escape. I could play some cards and watch the clientele crawl away from the tables and away from their American Dream. Jimmy and I could knock back a few beers and talk about sports, or the mail, or anything other than women or our fathers.

"I'm in," I said.

"Fuck yes," Jimmy said. He raised his iced tea and gulped until it was gone.

"We're gonna have fun tonight, my man."

The ride to Atlantic City was long and humid. The day's heat had broke, and it was starting to cool down, but the excess precipitation hung in the air so thick that it felt like a rainforest on the expressway. I squirmed around in my seat every few minutes, trying to shift my weight to an area of my body that wasn't covered in sweat. We took Jimmy's car, so I covered the tolls and provided the music. We got stuck in traffic about 25 miles outside of the city, so I leaned back in my chair with Pet Sounds on the stereo and fell asleep for a little while. Jimmy kept groaning loudly to try and wake me up.

We trudged along in the long line of brake lights in front of us. I spotted the purple neon of the Borgata and felt excited. I'd gone to Atlantic City to gamble before, but it was on a Whitesaw paycheck, which was nothing more than a fraction of the money I was making now. I barely played any hands and spent most of my time at the bar while Dylan threw his parents money away on the craps tables.

This night would be different. Jimmy and I were blue collar workers. Folks like us were supposed to take the occasional pilgrimage to the casinos with a week's paycheck, a half pack of cigarettes, and cheap, discount store bought button down shirts.

“Fuck,” Jimmy said, switching the music to Nirvana.

“What?”

“Just antsy is all,” he said. “Nothing to worry about.”

“Maybe we should get a couple beers,” I said as we stepped inside of the Borgata. The air conditioning hit me as soon as we walked in. It felt like the sweat on my back would freeze if I stood still for too long. “You know, ease into it.”

“Yeah, I’m down for that,” Jimmy said.

We wandered toward a bar, but realized it was a nonsmoking area. Jimmy lead the way toward the slot machines, where old women and Mexicans with dirty jeans sat and unloaded buckets full of quarters. We lit cigarettes and I observed the clientele on a busy Saturday night.

The tourists wandered around in nice slacks and reasonably priced silk or cotton button down shirts. The women were walking clichés, with fanny packs on to deter theft or to keep their chips in a convenient place. They drifted around to different low stakes tables, betting on a few hands of black jack or riding someone else’s craps streak. They never stayed in one place for more than a half hour at a time, understanding that they had one crack at gambling in Atlantic City and they wouldn’t want to blow their experience on one game.

The high rollers were more difficult to spot. It was tough to distinguish between a high roller and a really well-dressed tourist. The differences were only apparent when the stakes were raised. The well-dressed tourists hung around the bar area and hit on women, occasionally wandering down to drop some cash on a hand or two of black jack.

The high rollers worked in the opposite way. They made a few hundred at the tables and took breaks to buy drinks for the good looking women or the high class prostitutes.

There were hotshots in their mid- to late-twenties. They carted their dates around on their arms and visited the theater section of the Borgata, hoping to catch the Bruce Springsteen cover band or the latest comic to come through Atlantic City. They weren't there to gamble, but they were there to give off the image of success. Saturdays were an event for them, and they'd be damned if they stayed across the river in New York City to schmooze in some drab city club.

There were the people there for rent money, wandering around in velour sweat suits and wife beaters at five and ten dollar blinds poker tables. They carried plastic holders for their chips, cashing out as soon as each slot on the holder was filled up. It was their grocery money. It was their livelihood.

Then there were the Jimmy's and the Brandon's. The people that didn't fit into either category. The people there to drink and forget about what they did for a living between Monday and Saturday.

Jimmy and I finished our cigarettes and walked back toward the nonsmoking bar to grab a few Yuenglings and ease our nerves.

"This is a fucking circus," I said.

"It's always like this. Haven't you been down here?" Jimmy asked.

"Yeah, but never on the weekends."

"Well, welcome, then. If I'd have known, I would've bought the first beer for you."

"What a gentleman," I said.

The lights in the bar were dim. The atmosphere was surprisingly gloomy, considering the amount of people there and the high-class atmosphere of the gambling floor at the Borgata. The bar area looked more like a cave. I felt dirty rubbing up against the cave-dwellers who hung around the bar area and played video poker.

Sitting at the booth, I couldn't figure out why they would want to dim the lights so low. The decorations were elegant. The bench we sat was upholstered in crushed velvet and the table where our beers rested appeared to be finished oak. Most of the people in the bar shouted and talked about their experiences at the latest tables.

"Fucking guy next to me is taking hits on 17. 17, goddammit!" they yell.

"I went out with pocket fucking kings. You believe that? Guy rivers a fucking nine high flush, and I'm out on my ass because of his poor play. That's poker, though," another explains calmly, with three veins protruding from his neck.

These people are the reason that the casino kept the lights down. They didn't want the losers to get comfortable with their surroundings. They didn't want people admiring the décor and deciding to stay at the bar so that they could avoid throwing their money away at the gambling tables. They wanted to hide us. We were among the cowards: the group that waved wads of bills around like they had money to burn, but stuck close to their familiar territory at the bar. If they were going to spend money, it was on something tangible like drinks and an inflated sense of self-worth.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Let's finish these and head down to the tables. Time to make some money," Jimmy said.

The poker room was full and it was going to be about a ten minute wait until our names were called.

“We have to get on different tables anyway,” Jimmy said.

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, for sure.”

When traveling with a friend to gamble, it’s best to land on different tables to avoid any awkwardness. If we caught good hands at the same poker table, one of us might end up putting the other one on his ass. When money was on the table, it was hard to remember that my friend was staring across the felt at me, hoping that I didn’t top whatever he was holding.

“I’m not trying to take your money or anything,” Jimmy said.

I cashed in two hundred dollars for chips so I could sit down at a table. To Jimmy’s and my collective dismay, they opened a new table to cut the wait time down and called the next ten names on the waiting list. We sat down across from one another and tried to avoid eye contact, so that none of the other players were tipped off to our relationship. I figured I would fold any hands where he threw in big money. I hoped that he had the same notion.

I was up about fifty dollars after an hour or so, and the waitress had yet to come around to offer us a drink. My father told me to take advantage of the free drinks earlier that day.

“Bet small,” he said. “If you’re just going to unwind, then sit at the poker table all night.”

“Why?”

“It’s free, dummie. They want you to keep drinking so that you get tipsy and start throwing too much money at them. Don’t go all in, no matter what, so you can just keep

drinking. Tip your waitress a few bucks on the first one and she'll take care of you all night."

Unfortunately, the waitresses didn't spend too much time at the \$1 and \$2 blinds tables. I could see them across the room at the higher stakes tables dressed in skimpy black dresses with shiny silver sequins up the sides of them. I assumed they brought them single malt scotches and imported lagers.

The man sitting across from me, a man in his mid-thirties with more hair on his arms than his head, was getting annoyed.

"Goddamn, Chuck," he said to our dealer. "Where's the waitress at? I can't keep playing without something to sip on."

"They should be coming around."

"Oh yeah? Well why doesn't someone tell their asses to come around? I need me a fucking drink!"

One of the stocky men in suits a few tables away heard the commotion and shot a glance at our dealer, Chuck. Chuck looked back in his direction and shook his head to signal that everything was under control. He put his hand to his lips in a drinking motion and the suited man disappeared to find a waitress. Money was money in a casino, and they weren't looking to throw anyone out over some shouted profanity. It was best to avoid that ugliness and keep everyone satisfied, liquored up, and loose.

Jimmy raised twenty dollars before the flop came out and I folded, despite having two face cards showing. I wasn't in any mood to risk what I had already won.

The waitress came around while Jimmy and a thin black man played out their hand. I thought about ordering another Yuengling, but remembered what my father told

me about the free drinks. It was as good a time as any to give something else a try. I remembered the microbrewery beer that Dylan's father always had in his fridge.

"Brooklyn Lager," I said to the waitress.

She was a brunette with blonde highlights and fake tits. Her breasts barely stayed confined in her dress, spilling out over the thin straps. The dress' straps operate more as nipple coverings than anything else.

"What?"

"Brooklyn Lager," I said again, louder this time.

"A Brooklyn lottery?"

The people at the table began laughing lowly, looking at me with crossed eyes and furrowed brows.

"No," I said. I could feel my cheeks start to flush. Everyone at the table was staring at me, waiting for my next move. I swallowed the spit in my mouth and tried to speak up again so that she could hear me more clearly. "Brooklyn Lager."

I nearly shouted the words and she stared hard at me, confused. I looked over to Jimmy to see if he would back me up. I started thinking that I'd misread the labels in Dylan's refrigerator. Perhaps it wasn't Brooklyn. Maybe it was the Bronx, or another part of the city.

"I've never heard of it."

I glanced over at the high rollers section of the poker room. Imported cigars hung from their lips and decade-old scotch filled their glasses. And these were only the people that were visible to the average gambler. I was sure that somewhere in The Borgata, in a backroom somewhere, film and television stars had private games where cellars full of rare liquors and drugs were on the ready for their every request. They could have asked

for a rare Brazilian moonshine and the casino managers would send someone on a private jet to retrieve it for them. Luxury suites with harpoon shaped hot tubs. Bedrooms with tiger skin sheets and robotic butlers with fake English accents. They could have it all for the right price.

Me, I couldn't even get a lager from New York City, two hours away from The Borgata. I was a civil servant on the government's dime at the lowest stakes poker table they had. I didn't get the name of the brewery wrong. I was a domestic beer man. I was Coors or Budweiser, but never an import or a microbrewery. I was nothing.

"Just bring me a lager, then," I said. "Any. I don't care."

She nodded and I put a one dollar chip onto her tray. As far as I was concerned, she didn't deserve more than that. She didn't think I was good for more than that anyway.

We were playing for about three hours and I was still up, hovering around the seventy-five dollar range. I didn't bet much, heeding my father's advice and enjoying free lagers all night. As a result, I was getting tipsy and I had to use all of my energy to keep my attention on the game and the cards in my hand. I had to fold a few times because I forgot what I was holding and was too busy checking out the sights around the room to understand how the hand was progressing.

I got dealt pocket aces and I snapped right back to attention. I was starting to get anxious, anyway, and hoped that it would soon be time to retire to the bar and finish the night out with a few more drinks before we hit the road. I raised the pot to thirty dollars, hoping to bait some people into a hand. To my astonishment, everyone folded except for a balding white guy and Jimmy.

I glared at him after he called. He ignored me and instead focused on the flop. The three cards showing were a king, a jack, and a seven. I was in position, so I got to bet last.

Again, Jimmy threw money into the middle. He bet fifty dollars. I tried not to let the alcohol confuse me, but it looked like Jimmy was trying to muscle me around at the poker table. The odds were almost certainly with me. This was a situation I couldn't back away from. Jimmy's stack of chips enticed me, hovering on the green felt and beckoning to me to call. I looked at it as a challenge from Jimmy. It was his way of feeling out the kind of man I was.

The bald guy called him, and I followed suit. The turn card was another ace. Jimmy bet another fifty and the bald man folded. I raised him another hundred. He called.

The river card came down as a two of spades. The card was inconsequential. Jimmy pushed all of his chips into the middle of the pot.

I stared hard at the green felt and the red and black of the cards. I wanted them to whisper answers to me. There was the off-handed chance that he landed a straight, but I couldn't believe he would call a pre-flop raise holding a queen and a ten. It just wouldn't make any sense.

He'd been drinking mud slides and vodka cranberries all night, which had a tendency to reduce anyone's capabilities for logic. I looked over at Jimmy and he refused to make eye contact with me. He stared straight ahead at his chips and tapped his fingers against the leather rest on the edge of the table. I took this for a nervous tick: I had him. I threw the rest of my chips in the middle.

I was wrong about the nervous tick. Jimmy turned over a queen and a ten and my stomach turned as well. His straight versus my three aces. The dealer pushed the chips in Jimmy's direction and I stared at the ground. A young Puerto Rican woman with long, purple fingernails put her hand on my shoulder and nodded her head.

"You made the right play," she said.

"I don't know," I said. "Hard to say that now."

I looked over at Jimmy as he gathered up his chips. He looked back at me and gave a grimace that said, *Sorry, but not really*. It was a "fuck it" situation, so I got up to return to the dark, cave-dweller bar.

I got a call Dylan while two Italian men, presumably roommates, debated whose shit stank the worst and which one of them got more sex that year.

"The chick with the fat ass, you're leaving her out," the one said. I could smell the styling gel in his hair from five feet away. "I'm saying, dude, you're trying to sell me short."

"I brought more of them home," the other said.

"Yeah, but you can't seal the fucking deal. You can't get shit done with them. So, what's the fucking point?"

The vibration from my phone snapped me out of my trance.

"Yo, man," Dylan said. "Where you been?"

"What?" I nearly shouted. I couldn't hear him over the bar chatter.

"I said where've you been at?" he repeated, louder this time.

“Working,” I said. “I’ve been busy as all hell.” I took a large sip from the whiskey in front of me and felt the sting in the back of my throat. It reminded me of our night at the West Bradford and the toast to bobbleheads.

“Where you at now? It’s loud as hell there.”

“I’m in Atlantic City,” I said. “I came out here with Jimmy for the night.”

“No shit,” he said, a little deflated. “Why didn’t you tell me about it? I would’ve loved to have gone over there.”

“Eh,” I said. “You know, we kinda went straight over here from work, or whatever. Didn’t really think you’d be up for it.”

I couldn’t tell Dylan the real reason he didn’t get an invite. Dylan didn’t match up with my current lifestyle. His intellectualism and his artistic views wouldn’t mesh with Jimmy’s misogynistic rants about blowjobs and life with his girlfriend. I foresaw the tension between my two friends and did everything I could to avoid it. Mixing crowds that way was asking for trouble. It was like dropping a Mentos into a Diet Coke.

“No big deal,” Dylan said. “Did you take Monica down there?”

“Nah, man,” I said. “I needed a night away from all that.”

“All what?”

“I just needed a night off, man. What the fuck, anyway?”

“What are you, fucking drunk?” he snapped.

“No,” I said. “I mean, I am, but that’s got nothing to do with it. What does it matter to you where I’m at or whether Monica’s with me?”

The two Italian roommates were looking at me now, rolling their eyes and elbowing each other in the side. I felt embarrassed by these two men, discussing their

multiple sexual encounters while I shouted to my friend about my pathetic love life. I lowered my voice.

“Listen, I don’t have to spend every night with her,” I said. “It’s not like a big deal.”

“I was just curious,” he said. “I wasn’t trying to imply anything. I was wondering what she was up to, you know? How she was doing and everything.”

He sounded hurt, as if my taking his words out of context was the worst thing I could’ve possibly done. Dylan thrived on clarity. Any misunderstanding was enough to send him over the edge.

“Well, she’s fine,” I said. “We’re doing fine.” The term “we’re” sounded weird coming from my lips. Weeks before this, I would’ve never considered lumping myself with anyone. I was committing to Monica without her knowing about it.

“How’s your dad taking it?”

“He’s taking it,” I said. “You know him. He’s always been the warm type.”

“I bet they had some good conversations tonight.”

It was the first time I felt guilty about my night out with Jimmy. I had no problem leaving town for a night to have a good time with my friend. I did, however, feel bad about leaving Monica at home with my father. I was sure that it was a night full of uncomfortable silences. My father probably watched the NBA playoffs while Monica pretended to be interested. Irritated grunts would no doubt ensue.

The bar kept getting louder. Dylan was saying something, but I wasn’t paying any attention.

“I gotta run, man,” I said. “We’ll catch up later. I’ll call you.”

It was an empty promise that I knew I wouldn't follow through with. I was in bed by 11 most nights. Dylan's lifestyle of coffee and cigarettes from midnight to three in the morning wasn't suited for me anymore.

He grumbled something about being careful and I hung up. I finished the rest of my whiskey and ordered two more.

Jimmy found his way to the bar about a half hour later. I was watching two couples argue with each other a few feet away from the table I sat at. They were yelling something about a mix-up with their rooms for the night and an arrogant bellhop. I was having trouble staying straight up against the booth.

"Sorry about that, man," Jimmy said as he sat down next to me.

"What?"

"The shit at the card table. I don't know what got into me."

I burped a little and had to swallow a few times to get the vomit out of my throat. I wanted some Pepto Bismol.

"I wouldn't worry about it," I said. "It happens."

"At least let me buy you a beer for it," he said.

"I don't know."

"Come on," Jimmy said. He put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed slightly. He smiled at me with soft eyes. It wasn't anything I had seen before in our afternoons at La Tolteca or The Salad Stop, eating sandwiches and cursing about our supervisors.

He returned to the table with a couple lagers.

"Have you talked to her tonight yet?"

"Who?"

He glared at me and took a large gulp from his beer. He was much more alert than I was. He probably ordered a couple coffees while he finished out his card playing.

“No,” I said. “No, I haven’t.”

There was a brief tension in the air. I was unsure of how to proceed. It was clear that Jimmy wanted to provide some sympathy for me, but he wanted to avoid sappiness and most physical contact if possible. He patted my back or grabbed my shoulder, the masculine form of reassurance, and lit cigarettes.

“You’re in a tough situation, man. I know,” he said. “I know what all that’s like, believe me.”

It was probably the whiskey, but I ignored the manly image I had of Jimmy. I started talking to him like he was Dylan. I started to open up before my brain could slow my slurring tongue down.

“I’m having a tough time figuring it all out,” I said. “Like, Monica, and my father, and this goddamn job. All of it, really. None of it is making any sense to me. I don’t know what to do about it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, look at Monica and everything. She’s down here for God knows what reason and, you know, she seems like she’s *happy*. And I’m happy when I hang out with her. But, how long can she stay happy like this?”

“Yeah,” Jimmy said. He stared at his lager while I talked, tracing his fingers around the perspiration on the edges.

“I mean, I’m a fucking *mailman*. You know? We’re fucking *mailmen*. What does she want with someone like me? And, of course, my pop doesn’t make it any

goddamn easier. He just shits on her every chance he gets and makes things even more complicated for me.”

“Huh,” he said. “Yeah, I mean, I understand what you’re saying. It’s a tough call, you know?”

“I do know,” I said. “Obviously, I mean, I fucking know.”

We sat for a moment and I slapped my hand on the table a few times until it stung. I felt like I was drowning in the noise and commotion. My attempt at forgetting had been lost in that moment. I hadn’t been thinking about Monica or my father until Jimmy showed up. I couldn’t drink myself out of it.

“I’m just fucking tired,” I said. “I’m tired and it’s not fair. I just want to go to sleep.”

“I wouldn’t worry about all that,” Jimmy said, breaking his silence. “I wouldn’t worry about any of that shit. You got time with your dad and this job and everything.”

“I don’t know-”

“Nah, just listen,” he said. I was glad to let Jimmy take control of the conversation. I knew I wasn’t making that much sense. I felt like I was just slurring complaints to deaf ears. “You shouldn’t worry about any of it. You shouldn’t worry about Monica’s happiness, either. She’s a smart girl, right? She probably knows what she’s getting herself into.

“Take me and my girl, Deb. We met in high school and, shit, the way we met I never would’ve figured we’d still be hanging around each other. I hooked up with her at a party, but I got too fucking drunk and felt sick. So, Christine, she feels bad and tries to take care of me. She’s got me on the couch and she tries to roll me on my side before I

pass out. Problem is, when she pulls at my shoulder, I start puking and it just hits her right in the fucking face.”

I started laughing. I couldn't help it. Jimmy was genuinely pouring his heart out to me, but all I heard was vomit on the face.

“It doesn't end there, either. Later in the night, she's sleeping on the floor next to the couch, and I wake up and it's so fucking dark that I can't find the bathroom. I wander around and finally just start pissing. It hits her on the shoulder and she wakes up and starts hitting me and yelling at me. It was about as bad as first impressions go.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I think that's about the only way you can put it.”

Jimmy laughed and slapped me on the back again.

“Know what she does now?”

“Nope,” I said. “No, you never told me that much about her.”

“She works for Lockheed Martin,” he said. “She makes double what I make in a year, and she does it in about half the hours. She's a smart girl, too, like your thing with Monica.”

“I guess,” I said. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“She's still around me, too,” he said. “She's around to roll me on my side when I need it and I'm there for her to take care of. I don't know. We've had our problems over the years, but we both know that what we have in front of us is all right.”

“I can dig that,” I slurred. His story made sense to me. It didn't necessarily apply to Monica and me, but it was enough to reassure me that I shouldn't fret about our relationship. If it was meant to go anywhere, it would. If Monica was happy with a mailman, or, if things worked out, with a caddy master like Bill Whitney, then I had no control over it.

I went to Atlantic City with the hopes of putting my problems aside for awhile. Jimmy and a few rounds of whiskey worked that out for me. Jimmy was content with being taken care of by his girlfriend and sweating out his paychecks. For the night, his content personality rubbed off on me, and I let things go. The majority of my problems weren't mine to solve.

"It's not great," Jimmy said. "But it's all right, you know? And I'm good with things being all right."

We clinked glasses and finished our lagers.

Something Temporary and Thrilling

Sally closed her eyes and listened to the screams and bangs from the couple on the floor above her. The shouts grew louder and angrier. A lamp broke and then a few plates followed. Swears and insults. Every now and again there was a pause and Sally imagined that one of them was going for a kitchen knife or, better, the shotgun they kept unloaded in the bedroom closet.

She hid her smile as she leaned against the headboard of the bed. Her husband, Richard, kept pacing back and forth. He wiped the back of his hand across his forehead and adjusted his thick black glasses.

“We ought to do something,” he said. “We should’ve never rented it out to them.”

Richard always talked like that. Every night it seemed the couple on the second floor shouted and broke things and every night Richard mentioned how much he regretted letting them stay there. Sally didn’t mind. She liked seeing Richard sweat a

bit. It was a comfortable removal from their everyday conversations where Richard acted cool and logical in the most trivial of subjects.

She kept trying to focus on the screams. She wished it was her upstairs, having plates thrown at her and stomping her feet. She would grab a butcher's knife and hold it high above her head and let out a primal scream. It was fun and thrilling and dangerous and lively.

"Maybe I should put a record on," Richard said. He walked over to the record player and fumbled with his immense vinyl collection on the shelves of the bedroom. He removed The Velvet Underground & Nico and started the player. The first few notes snapped Sally out of her fantasy and back to her grim reality: her husband, loving and hip and handsome, listening to his favorite record in their bedroom.

In a few minutes, he would slide into bed next to her and place his hand on her thigh. He would stroke his fingertips along her skin, checking for goosebumps from his touch. He would kiss her neck and ask her if she was in the mood and she would say no. He would smile and run his hand through her hair and he would say, "I understand." They would turn the light out and spoon for awhile and Richard would tell her how much he loved her as they fell asleep.

Sally kept trying to return to her violent fantasy. Shattered plates and cunt-words. Her focus was broken by the inevitable charade of their bedroom routines.

"I can't sleep with that record on," she said and rolled over away from her husband's side of the bed.

Sally and Richard bought the house on Maryland Avenue in the Shadyside area of Pittsburgh exactly one year after they were married. Richard surprised his wife with the

house as an anniversary gift.

“Can we afford it?” she asked as they stood together in the foyer. Richard placed his hands on his shoulders as they admired the golden beams that filtered in through the skylight.

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll make it work.”

Sally sat patiently while he told her the plan: they would rent out the second floor to help make payments and Richard would pick up an extra job on the weekend. He was eyeing a promotion to manager at his coffee shop, which would give him a major boost in salary and benefits.

“What will you do on weekends?” Sally asked him.

“I’m going to work in Jamie’s record shop,” he said.

“This can work.”

“The rental is temporary,” her husband told her.

“Yes?”

“Until we have children.”

“Yes, until we have children.”

Richard placed his hand on her stomach and cupped his fingers around it. She smiled at him and let him kiss her lips. She quivered as he ran his fingers from her stomach to her chest. They made love on the living room floor. Sally sprawled out on the carpet when they were finished, naked and unashamed. She ran her fingers through the green shag.

On the wall, a painting was left behind by the realtor. Richard told her that it was a housewarming gift. The work was an oil painting by a local artist whose name she didn’t recognize. The colors were vibrant, mainly yellow and red, and it depicted a

young woman sitting in a small clearing on a quilt with her baby. She was surrounded by lilies and daisies and tulips. Sally thought the woman looked so lonely, with no one to care for her or her baby. There could be animals in the flowers. It was a silly thought, and she acknowledged that, but she didn't find the image altogether peaceful.

"I don't like this one much," she said.

"The realtor gave us that."

"I know."

"I think it's quite pretty. It reminded me of you."

"You think?"

"It could be. We ought to find a field like that for our baby."

"When we have children."

"Yes."

"I suppose the colors are pretty."

She let her head rest on the carpet and stopped staring at the painting. She got chilly and covered her breasts with her hands while Richard cooked dinner.

Sally sat outside on the porch admiring the still weather around her. She breathed deeply and sipped on her coffee, hoping to feel refreshed by the morning air around her. After a few moments of silence, the front door opened and Laura, from upstairs, emerged.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't want to interrupt you."

Laura turned to walk back inside, holding her pack of Newports and a lighter in her left hand. Sally stopped her.

"No, please," Sally said. "You're not interrupting."

Laura came back and took a seat in the chair next to Sally's. She lit her cigarette

and sat quietly, inhaling and exhaling deep puffs of menthol. Sally was irritated by the smell but wanted to speak with her housemate.

“How have you been?” Sally asked her.

“All right.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. No real complaints.”

They were silent for another couple of minutes. Sally finished off her last bit of coffee and dumped what was left over the edge of the porch.

“I should really apologize,” Laura said. “About the fighting.”

“No, it’s all right.”

“We really get into it sometimes. I just don’t want it to bother you two.”

“Really, it’s okay.”

Laura curled up while she talked about the fighting, as though she was defending herself from any oncoming judgement that Sally might have had. She looked distant when she talked about her relationship with Tom. They were a young couple, not unlike Sally and Richard, but there was a much higher level of uneasiness between them. It might’ve stemmed from long work days. Laura worked as a receptionist and Sally was fairly sure that Richard was a plumber.

“How are things going with you and your husband?” Laura asked. “That’s not too forward, is it?”

“Of course not,” Sally said. “Things are fine, I guess.”

“You don’t sound too convinced.”

“I am. Well, I’m not. Things are fine. I think I’m just a little bored, that’s all.”

“We all get bored.”

“It doesn’t sound like you and Tom get too bored up there.”

Sally smiled and laughed, but Laura stayed still and quiet. She didn’t find it very funny. To Sally, Laura and Tom’s fighting was a source of escape and entertainment. She heard the shouts and crashes and threats and thought that it was the kind of life that she needed to keep her head together. It was the kind of disaster that could snap her back into shape.

To Laura, the fights were much more. Her empty stares and distant tone of voice indicated that there was no entertainment in the noise from upstairs. The fights were frightening to Laura.

“No,” Laura said. “We’re not bored. You ought to be happy that you can get bored.”

Sally sat at a table with her husband and his friends outside of City Grille in the Southside. She fingered the rim of her glass of chardonnay. Richard put his hand on her thigh and kept asking her if she was tired. She would yawn and tell him that it was all right.

Most of the people at the table worked at or were frequenters of Jamie’s record shop. Their dress reflected Jaime and Richard’s general style and outlook on life: complete pretentious irony. Jamie wore skin tight jeans and a vintage sweater. His hair was stylishly flipped up into a mullet-like version of a mohawk. Richard sported the same thick black glasses and his sweatshirt featured Iggy Pop’s bust across the front.

The air was stale for the Fall. It was light jacket weather. Like any Sunday in Pittsburgh, their conversation was often interrupted by the screams and shouts of a city on the edge of its seat. Big Ben was orchestrating yet another Steelers victory at Heinz

Field and if he wasn't, the shouts would be even louder.

"We owe all of it to Lou Reed," Jamie said.

"Of course."

"Without him, where is music today?"

"Completely irrelevant."

"Reed?"

"No, music in general. It would be irrelevant without Lou Reed."

"Ahead of his time."

"Of course."

Sally dazed out a bit and stared inside of the restaurant. Two men were sitting together at the bar watching the Steelers game. She wondered what the score was, but was afraid to ask the table. The request would surely be met with ironic laughter and scoffing.

As she watched them pound Iron City and yell about each play, she couldn't help but wonder what a conversation with the men would be like. It had been years since she'd had a conversation where every bit of dialogue wasn't a calculated, weighty statement. She wanted to order a draft with her compatriots inside. She wanted to react and scream at Big Ben or at the vile Ravens. 'Fuck you' and 'sack his ass' shrieking from her lips.

"New Scorsese picture coming in a few months," Richard was saying.

"Excellent. Absolutely excellent."

"It's all I've read about."

"DiCaprio is his new muse. The new Deniro."

"Their names are so similar."

“There is nobody making more important films. Never has been, either.”

“Well, besides Welles maybe.”

“Let’s not forget Welles.”

Again, Richard leaned to Sally and asked her if she was okay. He told her that she wasn’t participating too much. She smiled and said she was fine. Her eyes wandered back to the men in the bar. Their pile of empties was growing. They were talking in a more civil manner. It must have been halftime.

She strolled past them on the way to the bathroom. They muttered loudly about the game.

“Fuck the Ravens.”

“Yeah, fuck ‘em.”

“And Ray Lewis, too.”

“And Ray Lewis. Guy’s a murderer.”

“Don’t stab them, Ray ”

She hung around for a few more minutes. She laughed at their jokes and watched a few plays.

When she returned, Richard said they should be going home.

“You’re sure?” the table was saying. “Stay,” they insisted.

“Sally, you look a little worse for wear.”

“Yeah old gal, you weren’t too involved tonight. Everything okay?”

She nodded her head and put her gloves on. Richard placed his hand in the small of her back. She thanked the table for hanging around and apologized for being quiet. The table had moved past the subject, instead focusing on the passing faces on the sidewalk around them.

“What a great city we have here. So alive. Look at the people around us.”

“Their faces tell a story.”

“The last of the Rust Belt Cities.”

They pretended they were no longer among the people on the sidewalk. The table outside of City Grille, filled with Richard’s record shop mates, were hovering somewhere outside of the Southside’s reality. The people on the sidewalk were their entertainment, fortunate to catch snippets of their opinions as they passed by.

When they got home, Richard sat next to Sally on the bed. He removed his shoes and looked into her eyes.

“You seem annoyed,” Sally said.

“I’m not annoyed.”

“Well, peeved, then? I said I was sorry.”

“It’s not about that.”

“What is it?”

“You ought to be more confident in your opinions.”

“Why should anyone be confident in opinions? What is the need for confidence?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I should speak up?”

“Your tastes are intelligent and respectable. Voice them.”

Sally didn’t care much to talk about her tastes. There wasn’t any need.

Confidence was reserved for skills or other areas where it was necessary to impress others. She didn’t need to feel confident in what gave her pleasure. She’d begun to isolate the reason for her disconnect. She caught herself praying that the shouts and thuds would begin to rain down from the ceiling above them.

“Maybe I ought to just go to bed,” she said.

“You seem tired.”

“I think that must be it.”

“Please rest, darling.”

She turned her lamp off and got under the covers. Richard watched a film in the living room and passed out on the couch.

Sally wandered out to the porch for some air. She held a fresh cup of coffee in her hand. Her eyes were still heavy and sleepy from a long night's rest. She hated when she overslept on the weekends.

Laura was on the front porch with a lit cigarette. She ashed over the railing and stared out at the passing traffic on Maryland Avenue. Sally's presence startled her.

“I'm sorry,” Sally said. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

Laura assured her that it was all right and that she shouldn't have been so startled. She had nearly dropped her cigarette over the railing. The two laughed uneasily. Sally sat down in the armchair across from where Laura was standing. She breathed deeply through the nostrils, inhaling as much fresh air as possible. Her coffee was too hot to drink at the moment.

“How are you?” Sally asked her. Laura took a minute to respond. Her hands were trembling a bit.

“I'm okay.”

“That's good. You've been sleeping better?”

“Not really.”

Laura paused and lit another cigarette before continuing.

“I’m real sorry about the noise,” she said suddenly. Sally was surprised by how casually she brought the subject up.

“What do you mean?”

“The fighting. You know. I know you hear it.”

“Yes.”

“I just wanted to say sorry about it. We should be more considerate.”

“It’s fine. Really.”

Sally stood up and went to lean on the railing next to where Laura stood. She asked for a cigarette and Laura handed her one. Sally took a long drag and thanked her.

“It’s going to stop now.”

“What?”

“The fighting. It’s going to stop.”

“How?”

“We split up. Tom is gone. I told him he had to leave the house and he did early this morning.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“I know. I know.”

Laura was trembling still and Sally wasn’t sure how to handle it. The two women were far from close. They may have shared a house, but the majority of their interactions were hellos or goodbyes as they passed one another. She wanted to reach out and put her hand on Laura’s shoulder, but feared that it was a sign of affection too advanced for their relationship. She compromised, patting Laura’s shoulder and offering her to sit. Laura sat in the armchair and Sally asked if she’d like to talk about it.

“Not really,” Laura said. “Not much to talk about.”

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and Sally noticed why she had been hiding her face. A fresh bruise was growing on her cheek on the right side under her hazel green eye. She seemed suddenly conscious of the mark, touching her fingertips to it and covering it while she smoked.

“Will he be coming back?” Sally asked.

“I’m not sure. No. Not for awhile.”

“You’ll miss him?”

“Maybe.”

“Probably.”

“I bet you guys regret renting the floor to us after all this.”

Sally had trouble expressing what she wanted. She felt a sudden closeness to Laura, perhaps out of sympathy. She had no idea what she would be missing with Tom out of the picture. She wanted to sit by her and tell her all about Richard and his friends. She wanted to tell Laura about his self-assuredness and his inability to let go of logical thought and discourse. She wanted to tell Laura how alive she sounded from the second floor when she shouted at Tom and threw dishes across the room. It was a feeling that Sally could only hope to channel through their shouts.

“No regrets,” Sally said. “We’re glad you’re living up there.”

“No kidding?”

“Of course not.”

“Thanks. Really.”

“If you need anything, just ask. Really.”

Laura thanked her and stood up, her cigarette having gone out. She flicked it over the railing and smiled at Sally.

“You don’t know how much you’ve helped me,” Sally said.

“How do you mean?”

Sally looked again at the bruise under Laura’s right eye and felt herself cringe. Perhaps now wasn’t the best time for this particular conversation. She would tell Laura eventually, perhaps over a beer, that the only way she kept from screaming at Richard was by listening to the arguments on the second floor. For now, though, her friend and housemate needed a hand on her shoulder and a smile.

“Never mind,” Sally said.

“Right.”

“Remember. If you need anything.”

“Right.”

Sally was putting on makeup in the bathroom mirror. She was trying to keep her appearance simple, yet elegant, for their night out. Richard was in the bedroom putting his shoes on.

“What is this again?” Sally called from the bathroom.

“Just a reading.”

“But I should dress nice, right?”

“I want you to dress however you want.”

“Who’s reading again?”

“It’s an interview. Some journalist from Haiti.”

Sally finished her makeup and returned to the bedroom. She put on a light green summer dress, excited about the first warm night of spring. Richard eyed her up and down and smiled at her. “You look beautiful,” he said and it really touched her. For a

moment, she forgot all about her boredom and the resentment she harbored for Richard and his friends.

“Wait,” he said. “Don’t move.”

“What?”

“This just makes me think of something. Don’t move.”

He walked to the record player and pulled out a Smiths record. He put the record on and Morrissey’s voice echoed through the apartment. The music was good enough, but Sally caught herself getting annoyed.

“The way you look. It reminds me of this song right now.”

“How do you mean?”

“Shh.”

She stood in silence while Richard smiled and listened to the record. He was unable to express his real feelings and hoped that a gay Englishman who made relevant music in the mid-80s could tell Sally exactly how he felt. Her moment was ruined. The sincerity in his voice when he called her beautiful was gone. Music that she usually found soothing and interesting sounded like chewing sand.

“Could we turn this off?” she said.

“You don’t want to hear it?”

“Please turn it off.”

“You love The Smiths.”

“I don’t want to hear it, Richard, goddammit.”

Hurt, Richard turned the record off. He walked to his wife and put his hand on her shoulder. He asked her what was wrong and she didn’t have a good answer for him. She kept repeating the same thing over and over: she just wasn’t in the mood for The

Smiths. It wasn't a Smiths kind of night.

"I just wanted you to know what I felt," Richard said.

He looked so pathetic, standing in his corduroy pants with his moustache that he viewed as an ironic statement on culture. Sally wanted to weep on his behalf and curl up onto the bed. She wanted to tell her much she loathed him in that moment.

"You wanted me to be more confident," she said.

"I did."

"Well I don't want to hear this stupid music."

"You don't mean that."

"I do."

Richard sat on the bed next to his wife. Sally couldn't look him in the face. She tried to pick at him and get him to bite on one of her insults. He dodged each attempt, instead telling her that she didn't mean what she was saying and that she needed some time to cool off. "I don't need time," she said, but he kept assuring that she did. He told her that everyone feels a little frustrated sometimes. Sally found herself growing more annoyed by how much sense he was making.

"Please, just relax," he kept saying.

"Don't you want to feel alive?"

"We are alive."

"Doesn't feel much like it."

"Why would it need to feel like it? We are alive. What feels more alive than being alive?"

"You don't get it."

Sally was shrieking now, but Richard kept his voice calm. He put his hand on her

head and told her that he loved her. He told her that maybe she should stay in tonight and cool off while he went to the reading. He said that maybe she needed a night off, a notion that she had a tough time arguing with. When the door closed shut, Sally curled up onto the bed and began to sob.

Her eyes cleared a bit and she stared across the room at the oil painting. Still hanging from when they bought the house. The vibrant colors were suddenly comforting to her. The woman on the quilt made her feel at ease. She didn't look as lonely as she once did, sitting there with her baby in the middle of the field. Instead, she looked comfortable and strong. She looked as though she didn't need anyone protecting her or her baby. She looked content.

When Richard had proposed to Sally, he was bleeding from his forehead. They'd just gotten done with what Sally could best describe as a crazy night out. Sally wanted to go out drinking, so they'd decided to hit a hole in the wall bar in Shadyside called the William Penn Tavern.

For the most part, the tavern was filled with college kids. Pitt and Carnegie Mellon students flooded the cramped space and put thumping rap music or 80s hair metal on the jukebox. It was a noisy atmosphere, dominated with frat boys dumping beer on the floors and asking for dozens of well-whiskey shots at a time. Above the bar, kitschy decorations were hung, mainly celebrating the Pittsburgh Steelers or the Penguins.

Richard and Sally got a table near the bar in the corner. They sat quietly for most of the night, polishing off pitchers of cheap beer and the occasional shot of tequila. Sally leaned into Richard's arms often, keeping her balance on the thin bar stool. She felt the warmth of the liquor through her body. They watched a Pitt basketball game on the

television and she caught Richard cheering along with the rest of the bar, something that he usually made fun of or refused to participate in.

At the bar, Sally ordered another round of drinks for her and her boyfriend. When the bartender returned with a pitcher of Yuengling and two shots of Jose Cuervo, a couple of the men at the bar started hitting on her.

“Who those drinks for?” one said.

“You oughta come hang with us.”

“I know you’re not going back to sit with that pussy over there.”

“Fucking a, brother. Take a seat with some real men.”

Sally never blinked an eye. She laughed at the boys and looked over to Richard, rolling her eyes and returning with the drinks.

“What was that about?” he asked her.

“Oh, you know. Just some drunk kids.”

“Did they bother you?”

Sally put her hand on Richard’s thigh. He was breathing heavily and leaning forward in his seat, a look of adolescent determination slapped across his face. Sally couldn’t remember ever seeing him that way, except for that one night. He looked ready to spring into action at the slightest hint of discomfort. A rather serious knight in shining armor complex.

“I don’t know,” Sally said. She hadn’t been bothered by the men, but she couldn’t but feel curious as to what Richard was going to do. She was excited. So, she lied. “They were saying some pretty inappropriate things.”

“To you?”

“About us.”

Richard didn't need to hear anymore. Sally watched as he got out of his barstool and approached the three men at the bar. He mumbled a few things to the men and then laughed at one of their responses. Without further warning, he wound up and delivered a hard blow to one of the boy's faces, knocking him out of his seat. Another one of the drunk boys tried to grab Richard from behind, but Richard knocked him over with an elbow to the nose. They struggled like that for a few seconds.

Sally saw the bottle before Richard did. The first man, whom Richard belted with the punch to the jaw, had gotten up off of the floor and picked up an empty bottle of Budweiser. He cocked the bottle back and smashed it across Richard's face, sending small fragments of glass across the floor and into Richard's forehead. He began bleeding heavily from the forehead, trying to wipe the blood out of his eyes.

He kept going. With blood streaming down his face, he knocked all three of the men out cold on the floor before the bouncer could come break anything up. When they asked Richard to stick around and wait for the police, he rushed over to the table and gathered Sally.

"We better get out of here," he said.

"Of course."

Sally hurried along with him, nearly forgetting her purse in the process. Her heart was beating rapidly and she could barely contain her sudden arousal. Richard was a man, in the truest sense, a fact that she hadn't been aware of before that night.

"I'm a little squeamish around blood," he said after they got home. Sally was cleaning him up with a washrag and pulling the few fragments of bottle out of his forehead.

"We should get you to a hospital," she said.

“No. I’m fine. I got you taking care of me.”

“Are you sure?”

And that’s when he said it. The details were nothing out of the ordinary. He asked her to marry him and Sally, still aroused and excited from watching her boyfriend defend her honor, agreed. She began to well up and kissed him on the mouth, ignoring the wound on his forehead.

After they were married, Sally gradually watched that man disappear. She knew that he was still there, underneath all of the inflated, bullshit opinions and overtly cold logic. Underneath all of that self-righteous, civilized human being exterior was an animal, ready to jump at the first sign of trouble. But, now, all Sally could do was sit around and wonder when, if ever, she’d ever get to see that side of Richard that excited her so much.

Light knocking on the door snapped her out of her daze. She looked at the clock. It had been an hour or so. She went to the door and saw Tom standing in the doorway, dressed in a sweatshirt and running shorts. She smelled the alcohol on his breath. He had to lean against the doorframe to keep from collapsing.

“I locked myself out.”

“You did?”

“Yes. Can you let me in to my apartment?”

Sally normally refused to violate anyone’s trust. She shouldn’t have let Tom into the apartment. But, she needed him to go upstairs. She needed the comfort of broken glass and kitchen knife threats. She rationalized it to herself, saying that Laura would do the same thing in her position. If she only knew how boring it was to be loved, she

would do the same thing.

Sally agreed and let Tom up to the apartment. She told him that she would be going out so he should remember his key if he left again, knowing that the illusion of an empty house might prompt a louder and more violent engagement. She turned her lights out and curled up on the bed, anxious for the fireworks to begin.

She pictured the fight before it happened. Laura would be confused as to how Tom got there in the first place, then confusion would be replaced by anger and shouting. She would throw something at him. Perhaps a lamp. Then, the shouting would begin. They would curse and fight and scratch and claw at each other. Maybe one of them would flip the table and Sally would hear wood and metal thud against the floor. They would move from room to room and Sally could hear it all. She could hear the absence of logic and calculated engagement.

Much to her disappointment, Sally didn't hear any of this. After about five or ten minutes of waiting, all she heard were some muffled cries. Then two loud pops, similar to the sound of packing bubbles under her feet. But louder. Then footsteps down the fire escape and away from the house.

Sally threw the locks on all her doors. She called the police and urged them to hurry over.

Sally and Richard stood in the living room on the second floor, looking at the mess in the kitchen. Blood speckled the tan paint on the walls. A large stain had set in the linoleum of the kitchen floor where a pool of blood had been sitting. Sally ran the sink until the water got steaming hot. She put a bucket underneath and mixed in some detergent.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t afford to hire somebody,” Richard said.

“It’s not your fault.”

“I know, but I’m very sorry.”

“It’s okay. We can clean it.”

Sally put the bucket down on the kitchen floor and put her yellow rubber gloves on. Richard sat down at the kitchen table and put his head in his hands.

“I still can’t believe this.”

“I had no idea,” Sally said.

“I know you didn’t.”

“I would’ve never let him in. I swear to you I wouldn’t.”

“I know, darling. I know you wouldn’t. Don’t blame yourself.”

But she wasn’t blaming herself for the murder. She didn’t want Richard to know that she yearned for the screams and crashes, but she wasn’t blaming herself for Laura’s death. She blamed herself for her sudden discomfort. She blamed herself for taking away the sanctuary she found in the violence that exploded from the floor above them.

“We ought to wait a bit before putting another ad out for the floor,” Richard said.

“Yes.”

“Wouldn’t want anyone to be put off by the crime.”

“We can give it a month or two.”

It occurred to Sally, as she kneeled over and began scrubbing at the blood stained linoleum, that by letting Tom in, she had taken away her ability to complain. Her boredom and loathing for Richard had suddenly turned to default satisfaction. Richard may have been slightly arrogant and a bit dry, but he at least he didn’t shoot at her. Suddenly, he was a perfect husband. She was all too aware that things could be much

worse. It pained her to no end.

“I’m getting a bit woozy,” Richard said.

“You are?”

“You know how I get around stuff like this.”

“You’ve never been good with blood.”

“I’m so sorry, darling. I think I need to step out.”

Richard made his way to the door and opened it up. He told her that he would just be out in the hallway if she needed him. She told him that it was okay.

“I mean it,” he said. “If you need anything at all, you just need to ask me.”

“I know.”

“Really. You need to know that I’m here for you.”

She looked into his eyes and again saw that brief moment of sincerity that had moved her in the bedroom on the night of the murder. Richard lived to put her at ease. As he stepped out into the hallway, Sally felt her eyes begin to well up for the first time since Laura’s death. She began pounding at the floor with the brush, cursing and splashing the water onto the linoleum.

She hated that goddamn kitchen floor. No matter how hard she pressed, she couldn’t get the blood stain off the floor. She worked and she worked until her arms were sore. In the end, she wasn’t causing enough friction.

Chlorine

Troy sat on the edge of his stool in the locker room. He flicked at the drops of sweat that ran off of the legs of his gym shorts. He worked a towel around his chest, patting down the moisture on his back. Troy glanced down at his gut, which had grown a bit since coming to college. He chewed his fingernails, biting off one or two and working them around his cheeks before spitting them onto the gray carpet.

The rest of the basketball team for Robert Morris University was showering after a long practice. But not Troy. He kept wiping away sweat, deliberately waiting out the clock until the rest of the team was clothed.

Troy's roommate, Jonathan, entered the locker room, a towel wrapped around his waist and his medium length blonde hair soaked and matted against his head.

"Tough one today," Jonathan said.

Troy grunted.

"I can't get used to the pace, man. I gotta get in better shape or something."

"Yeah," Troy said. "Not that it matters."

Troy knew he had little to no shot at getting time on a senior-dominated RMU basketball team. As a freshman, his only hope was his large frame. He figured that maybe he could be used in garbage minutes as a thug, using fouls and intimidating smaller players. Even for a basketball player, Troy knew that his size stood out. Coaches always told him to use his size. His high school coach always referred to him as a “big body,” but Troy never saw himself that way.

“We’ll get time,” Jonathan said. “Your big ass will, at least.”

“A big body,” Troy muttered. “That’s all I am for these assholes.”

The two got quiet for a minute. Troy hoped that Jonathan would chime in and tell him how he was much more than that, but he didn’t. Instead, he changed the subject.

“Aren’t you going to shower?” Jonathan asked. Troy hadn’t been showering with the rest of the team for almost a week now.

The rest of the team was filing in to the locker room. They turned the stereo on and started laughing and whooping with the music. Troy leaned toward Jonathan.

“Nope,” he said. “I’m not showering. At least, not until *he* leaves.”

He nodded his head toward another freshman from the Boston area, named Leo, who, at that moment, was dancing naked, twirling his towel around his head to the beat of a generic hip-hop tune.

Troy unlocked the door and plopped himself on the bed in his dorm room. He had just returned from CVS and he dropped the plastic bag on the bed next to him, letting its contents spill out. He rubbed the half-naked photograph of Brooke, a cheerleader on his autographed Philadelphia Eagles Cheerleader Calendar.

“I love December,” he said to Jonathan, who was spread on the floor, simultaneously playing Playstation and shoveling macaroni and cheese into his mouth.

“Yeah, man,” Jonathan said, not glancing up from the screen.

“No, dude, look,” Troy said. “I mean, I *love* December.”

Jonathan sighed heavily and paused the game. He glanced back at Troy’s calendar and grunted. Troy pretended not to notice, laughing to himself and sitting back on his bed. He figured that Jonathan was in the bad mood. Troy knew that his roommate loved that calendar.

“She actually works out at the same gym as I do.”

Jonathan didn’t respond. He shouted at the game after he lost and threw the controller down in front of the television.

“That’s how I got this thing autographed,” Troy continued. “I *know* some of these girls.”

Jonathan stayed silent and sat down in front of his computer. It looked like he was checking his email, but Troy noticed that there were no new emails on the screen. Still, Jonathan kept clicking. The silence was getting to Troy, and he wanted desperately for Jonathan to get in on the conversation. He had something important to tell him.

“You remember Jan?” he asked. Jonathan didn’t respond, so he said it louder.

“What?” Jonathan snapped, sarcasm and annoyance heavy on his voice.

“Jan. That short blonde we met during orientation week?”

“That was, like, four months ago, man.”

“Yeah, right,” Troy said. “She *still* wants me so bad.”

Jonathan said nothing.

“That’s why I was just at the pharmacy. She told me I should pick up condoms.

Ribbed.”

“Sweet, dude,” Jonathan said. He turned back to his computer.

“That girl wants me so bad, man,” Troy said.

He removed the package of condoms from the bag and, for show, opened them and took each one out. He placed the twelve of them in a clear jar above his bed. Troy stood up off of the bed and hovered in front of his dresser, fiddling with his cologne bottles and deodorants. He wasn’t sure why Jonathan wouldn’t respond. He might have been jealous, but Troy was only trying to start conversation.

“I’ll put a dent in these soon,” Troy said loudly, trying to get his roommate’s attention again. “She might even come by later on tonight.”

Jonathan got up from his computer and left the room. Troy stood at his dresser for another five minutes, alone with the television and his ribbed condoms.

Jan stopped over to Troy’s room at around eleven. They sat together on the bed and talked. Whenever Jan got up to go to the bathroom, or to inspect objects in his room, Troy would shift closer to where she had been sitting to see if, when she returned, they would get a bit closer.

“What are those?” Jan said, pointing to the jar above his bed.

“Oh,” he said, stammering a bit and, trying to sound cute, recovering. “What do you think those are?”

Jan grabbed the jar and thumbed through its contents.

“You got ribbed condoms.”

“Your favorite,” Troy said. Jan started to laugh hysterically. Troy joined her, unsure of what the joke was. They laughed together until they were red in the face. Troy started to bounce his knee rapidly and chew his fingernails. They had talked about the condoms on the phone earlier that week. She made a point to mention her favorites, and she implied that he should pick some up. He couldn’t figure out what was so funny about it.

“Is Jonathan coming back tonight?” she asked.

Troy stammered and couldn’t think straight. He looked at Jan’s blonde hair and how it looked a bit green underneath of the fluorescent light. He knew this was an opportunity, but he froze. He tried picturing Jan naked, or beckoning to him, but nothing about it turned him on. He felt impotent.

Instead of making a move, Troy tried to feign romanticism. He said what he assumed gentlemen say.

“Maybe we should take our time. Ease into it.”

Jan slept over, but Troy never touched her, with the exception of a short peck on the cheek to say goodnight. Troy had trouble falling asleep. Jan kept sighing heavily and rolling around.

The Steelers were down by a touchdown to the Patriots. Troy sat next to Jonathan on the couch at one of the senior’s house, loud cheers echoing through the living room every time the Steelers made a play. Leo, of course, was letting out hushed cheers for the Patriots.

“Cowher’s killin’ us,” said Antoine, one of the juniors on the team. “Can’t get anything going on offense. Can’t do shit.”

Troy got up to get a beer. He asked if anyone else needed one.

“What about boats?” said Antoine. The room erupted in laughter. Troy was the last to laugh again, unsure of what the joke was.

“What?” he said, before playing along. “Well, yeah, I mean, I’ll grab you one I guess.”

Before he left the room, Leo started retelling the story to the room. Troy wanted to wring his neck, slap him around a little. He wanted to shut him up, but feared his teammates’ reactions. He let Leo talk awhile, unsure of what the joke could possibly be.

“We were talking about fuel consumption in class,” Leo said, interrupting himself every now and then to slap his thigh or insert a giggle. “So, we say, like, cars, and air travel, gasoline power. And, fucking Troy raises his hand and is like, ‘What about boats?’”

The room erupted again. Troy wasn’t completely sure of the joke. He spent most summers down at the New Jersey shore and had seen people throw over \$500 worth of gas into their boats. There were a lot of cars in America, but none that took as much gas as a boat. He felt like it was a legitimate answer.

“I swear to God, man,” Leo said. “Fucking boats? Troy might’ve solved the energy crisis.”

Troy went to the kitchen to get a beer, blocking out the laughter. He chugged one in the kitchen, crushed the can, and threw it away. He repeated it twice more before returning to the living room with a fresh can. He resumed his position next to Jonathan.

“I don’t get the goddamn joke,” he muttered to Jonathan. “Boats take a lot of gas.”

“Yeah,” Jonathan said. “I know. He’s just messing around with you, man. That’s how Leo is.”

“Fucking queer.”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Jonathan said. “He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“That faggot,” Troy muttered. “He thinks he’s so much smarter than me. At least I’m not out blowing dudes.”

“Doesn’t he have a girlfriend back home?” Jonathan asked.

Troy didn’t answer. He finished his beer and watched the Steelers blow a late lead to the Patriots.

“I don’t see why it wouldn’t win the Oscar,” Jonathan said from the backseat.

Troy sat up front while his father drove the white Cadillac. Bob, or Big Bob as Troy called him, was in for the weekend to catch the last home game of the season. Neither Troy nor Jonathan saw much time in Robert Morris’ blowout loss. Jonathan seemed to keep himself in high spirits, but Troy was much worse at keeping his misery to himself.

“I could think of a few reasons why,” Big Bob said.

“It’s supposed to be real good,” Troy said.

“You didn’t actually watch that piece of trash, did you?” Big Bob asked his son.

Troy got quiet. He didn’t want to disappoint Jonathan, who considered himself a movie buff. Jonathan was bringing Troy along, trying to teach him what qualified as good film. Before they started hanging out, Troy spent most of his time watching movies that he knew were dumb and lacked substance.

“Well,” he started. “I didn’t watch the movie, no.”

His father waited for him to continue. He felt pressured by his father's silence and, forgetting Jonathan's expectations, told his father what he wanted to hear.

"I don't think I could," he continued. "I mean, two cowboys up in the mountains, all alone. That makes me sick."

"Tell me about it," Big Bob said. "I know no one in our family is going to go see something that portrays people like that in such a *human* light."

Jonathan sighed from the back seat. Troy pretended not to hear. He couldn't understand. Jonathan hadn't grown up Catholic like Troy had.

Troy, Jonathan, and Leo were walking down Beeler Street. They had just attended a Carnegie Mellon party. Troy kept himself together, but Jonathan was stumbling while Leo tried his best to hold him up.

Up ahead, Troy spotted three other men standing together on the sidewalk. Jonathan, in his drunken haze, had started kissing and caressing some CMU girl on the dance floor at the party. Troy had been warned to keep his friend away from her. Her boyfriend was on the football team and had a bad temper.

Troy didn't say anything to Jonathan then, and he wasn't about to say anything now. He would look guilty if he decided to speak up now.

As they approached, the three men tried surrounding them. One of them, a flabby Saudi looking kid, took his shirt off and confronted Troy.

"You motherfuckers!" he kept shouting.

"Put your shirt back on, man," Troy said. He laughed, but he was getting nervous. He didn't want to throw any punches, for fear of any cops coming by and

arresting them. CMU's campus was crowded with policemen. He heard Jonathan being confronted by the boyfriend.

"I didn't know she was your girlfriend, man," Jonathan kept saying. "I didn't know. I don't even go to school here."

The fat Saudi was still shouting. Leo cowered off, trying to make small talk with the third man and convince him to leave them alone. Troy kept watching the confrontation between Jonathan and the boyfriend, ignoring the Saudi's shouts. He couldn't help feeling as though Jonathan deserved what he got. He was always sticking his tongue down anyone's throat. He even suspected that he and Jan had done something behind his back.

The boyfriend stopped Jonathan from talking and it seemed to Troy that everything went quiet, save Leo's chit chat.

"The thing is," the boyfriend started, as if he was about to say something profound. "I think you *did* know."

He followed through with his right hand and hit Jonathan across his lip. Jonathan, who was already blackout drunk, didn't need much assistance going to the ground. He was knocked unconscious for a few moments, before coming to and shouting for someone to help him.

The three men were whooping and hollering. Troy took the Saudi by the shoulder.

"All right," he said. "You had your fun here. Now, just be out. Be out."

They walked away from the scene of the incident. Leo crouched next to Jonathan and tried to help him up. Jonathan was crying, asking anyone to help. He kept asking what happened. Leo didn't have the heart to explain. Troy played dumb.

“I don’t know, man. I didn’t even see what was happening.”

Troy couldn’t let on that he’d seen everything. He had a reputation with his teammates, both on and off the court. The team looked to him as an enforcer, a large man capable of protecting his teammates. If Jonathan or Leo knew that he had let these men get away so easily, his reputation would be shattered.

He let the men get a safe distance down the street before he started to shout.

“Hit me!” he shouted. “You bitches! You should’ve hit me!” Troy was slapping his chest and screaming toward the sky. Leo put his hand on his shoulder to calm him down.

Jonathan went to the hospital that night for stitches. He had a mild concussion and his shirt was ruined, soaked through with blood from his busted mouth. As he, Leo, and Troy sat in the waiting room, Troy kept reassuring them.

“If I’d have known what was happening, I would’ve fucked that dude up,” he said. “I was just so drunk. I didn’t even see that they hit you.”

It was the last night of their freshman year.

Troy sat at his laptop, playing internet computer games and watching Sportscenter on his television. Someone knocked on the door.

“What?” he said.

“Hey, could I borrow your car?”

The voice was Leo’s. All of the freshman basketball players, who were now sophomores, had moved into a house off-campus.

“What do you need it for?”

“I have to go pick up my girlfriend from the airport,” he said. “It won’t take that long.”

“Oh,” Troy said.

He sat for a moment. Leo had been annoying him again. Over the summer, most of the animosity between the two had disappeared, as if Troy had completely forgotten he existed. But, the first time he saw Leo slide on a pair of fresh Nikes and a sport coat he had painted a design on himself, Troy lost it again. Leo’s voice even started to annoy him. He sounded so goddamn *gay*.

“I gotta go to the library,” Troy said. “Sorry, dude.”

“Can’t it wait like a half hour?”

“Nah man,” Troy said. “I have a group meeting in a few minutes.”

He rushed out the door, brushing past Leo. Troy went to the library and sat at a computer in the basement, messing around on the internet for another hour or so before returning home.

After practice, Troy and Jonathan sat in the trainer’s room. Troy iced his feet and ankles.

“I basically don’t have any ligaments in my ankles,” he said. “It’s just bone on bone.”

“Right,” Jonathan said. He started chuckling to himself.

Lately, it seemed like everyone was laughing at Troy, even when he wasn’t making a joke. Whenever he told his teammates anything, such as his encounters with girls, or some of his experiences while no one else was around, they started to chuckle. Everyone was in on a joke that Troy didn’t get. He felt alienated.

“Leo keeps trying to borrow my car,” he said to change the subject.

“So?”

“I’m not giving him my fucking car. I usually duck out to the library.”

“Dude,” Jonathan said. “That’s pretty cold.”

“Fuck him. Why should I let him borrow my car?” Troy said. “He’s always so worried about himself. It’s selfish as shit.”

“Isn’t refusing to share your car with him just as selfish?”

Troy didn’t say anything. He hated being proven wrong, and he would never admit it. Instead, he shook his head and fiddled with the ice on his ankles.

“I ought to just kick his ass one time,” he said. “Wipe that smile of his face.”

“I don’t know. I think you should relax. I mean, why do you hate the kid so much anyway?”

“He’s just such a bitch,” Troy muttered. “He’s such a fag.”

He iced his ankles until they went numb. He limped out of the training room and drove himself home, refusing to offer any of his housemates a ride home.

In the locker room, after a thrilling victory against St. Francis of Pennsylvania, the men gathered after showering. Troy still had his uniform on, waiting for Leo to finish get clothed before he disrobed.

“Seven Springs tonight?” said Jeff, one of the seniors on the team. “My dad’s got a place out there. He said we can use it tonight.”

Leo, Jonathan, and Steve, another senior, all got excited. Troy jumped up as well, excited for the opportunity to ditch campus.

“Definitely,” he said. “We can get some girls up there, some beers. Let’s get crazy tonight.”

They whooped and cheered and, finally, Troy felt as if he’d made an impact on the group. On the car ride up, the five of them spent an hour on the phone, trying to recruit groups of girls to drive out to Jeff’s house at the mountain resort. It was raining, though, and most of the girls were afraid to make the trip.

“I think it’s gonna freeze,” Jan said to Troy on the phone. “I can’t make it.”

“Come on,” he said. “We haven’t hung out that much. Just get up here.”

She told him she would think about it. He sent her text messages throughout the night to remind her that she was missing a good time.

Eventually, they gave up trying to get girls and figured to have a guy’s night out. They drank three boxes of wine. They shotgunned two cases of beer. Troy killed a half bottle of whiskey before passing it around to the other four.

Leo had his shirt off, but it wasn’t even bothering Troy. He had completely forgotten about his discomfort, along with his limited role in the team’s victory that night. He kept drinking, feeling as though a lot of the excitement surrounding their trip to Seven Springs was a result of his idea. Even if the girls didn’t come through, at least he got the guys excited.

Jeff put on his father’s skiing helmet and started to walk around the room, head-butting the walls and his friends. This gave Troy an idea, and he retired to the bedroom to get dressed in complete ski garb. It drew a large laugh, and the other men followed, dressing as ridiculously as possible in snow pants, windbreakers, and oversized ski boots that they could barely walk in.

“Let’s go down the lodge,” Jonathan said. “It’ll be hilarious.”

They all agreed.

The lodge was empty, with the exception of the people that worked there. Jeff and Jonathan went off to the coffee shop and restaurant to try and find any girls that might be hanging around. Troy, Leo, and Steve went down to the pool area. Much to Troy's delight, there was a basketball hoop set up at the edge of the pool.

The lifeguard on duty, a tall blonde named Lacey, laughed as the boys fought each other and tried to drunk on one another. Troy used his size advantage to show off for Lacey, making her laugh as he held off both Steve and Leo before dunking.

He started to get dizzy from the swim and the alcohol, so he got out of the pool. Steve and Leo went on messing around with the basketball hoop.

"Are you from around here?" he asked Lacey.

"I'm in high school," she said, giggling.

It didn't bother Troy, and he went on talking to her. He flirted with her, and danced around the idea of her coming back to their house.

"My mom will be here to pick me up," she said. Troy figured she couldn't have been older than fifteen or so.

"You can call her and tell her you have a ride."

He giggled when she giggled. Before he could say anything else, Jonathan returned and tackled him into the pool. Troy faked hurt, and then dragged Jonathan under the water when he came to help. They messed around like that for a few minutes, roughhousing before starting to play pool basketball again. Troy didn't even notice that Leo had started talking to Lacey, picking up where he left off.

The basketball bounced out of the pool and Leo picked it up. He flung it back into the pool, where it bounced off of the water and stung Troy in the face. Troy didn't say anything. Jonathan laughed and picked the ball up, running past Troy and dunking.

Troy didn't remember throwing Leo in the pool, and he certainly didn't remember throwing the chair. The last thing he remembered was climbing out of the pool and approaching the lifeguard chair. When he realized what was happening, Leo was screaming and blood was gushing from the bridge of his nose. Jonathan had lifted Leo out of the pool. He was crying. Troy had never seen so much blood. It seemed to pump from Leo's nose, covering his face and dripping into his eyes.

"Give me your towel," Jeff was saying to Troy.

Troy didn't respond. He didn't even pretend to care. Whatever he'd done, he was sure that Leo deserved it.

"I need it," Troy said. He stood a few feet away from the commotion, drying himself off. He took the towel and tried hard to rub the chlorine out of his eyes. His contact lenses were beginning to itch.

When the paramedics came, Troy disappeared to the arcade. They drove Leo to the hospital that night. Jeff, who was premed, kept saying something about facial reconstructive surgery, and how it didn't take too long to heal. Troy didn't say much. He kept muttering about regret.

Let Bygones be Skeletons

I was sitting at the table with Marie when she read the news in The Daily Local. She dropped her fork against the plate and gasped real loud, and it scared me half to death. I thought maybe she was getting violently ill, or cramping up, or some god awful thing, because nothing in the Local could shake her up that bad. It didn't seem possible. The Local was reserved mostly for high school sports scores and lame stories about marijuana busts in Downingtown.

“What’s the matter?” I said after a minute. She had just been staring across the room, not even focusing on the newspaper she still held in her hands. “Are you feeling okay?”

“It’s Ronnie,” she said.

“Ronnie who?”

“You remember Ronnie Macklin?” she asked. The name rung a bell.

“From high school, right?”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice soft.

“Short kid, goatee. Really hairy and loud,” I said.

“Yeah,” she snapped this time, annoyed. “Yeah, that’s him, you remember.”

She kept staring across the room, occasionally shaking her head or clicking her tongue. It looked like I could startle her, or knock her out of her chair just by snapping my fingers or clapping my hands real loud. Something had her rattled, but she was waiting for me to pop the question.

“So, what about him?” I finally said, obliging her. I was expecting something earth-shattering. Maybe he’d killed his family, or stolen a few cars, or bombed an abortion clinic.

“He died,” she said. “Two nights ago. He died.”

She looked at me with wet eyes. I was waiting for more, but that appeared to be it. She wasn’t talking anymore. Ronnie was dead, and she was crying.

“No kidding,” I said, unable to think of anything else.

“He’s our age,” she said. “Christ, he’s so young.”

“We’re not that young,” I said. Marie ignored me. We were 25, which was young, but I thought that in order for someone to die tragically, they had to be under the age of 18. Legal adults didn’t die tragically. “How’d he go?”

“Hit by a train,” she said. “Police think he was drunk or something, and he just got hit by a freight train.”

“Jesus,” I said. “What a gruesome way to go.”

Marie started sobbing. She dropped the paper underneath the kitchen table and held her head in her hands. I stood up behind her and put my hands on her shoulders to

comfort her. I hadn't seen Ronnie since graduation day, and I was sure that Marie hadn't either. I was shushing her, rubbing her shoulders and hoping she would stop crying.

"When was the last time you saw him?" I asked, hoping to ease her troubles and my curiosities at the same time.

"Not since a year or so after graduation," she choked out.

"You haven't seen him in six years?" I asked. My voice was probably a bit harsher than it should've been when trying to comfort my crying girlfriend. But, it was my immediate reaction. Ronnie's death wasn't funny to me, but it certainly wasn't sad, and I'd always thought Marie and I had a similar relationship with the kid. We saw him at parties, we said hello in hallways, but we certainly didn't share any big connection with Ronnie Macklin.

"That's what I mean," she choked again, this time shouting. "I never got to say goodbye."

At the funeral, I tried my best to support Marie. She had been acting distant for the few days leading up to it. I wanted to ask her why she was so broken up, but I felt like I would be somehow disrespecting the dead. If I asked why she cared, I would be implying that she shouldn't, which wasn't the right way to honor a dead guy from your high school.

The turnout at the wake was decent. The funeral home wasn't full or anything, but enough people showed up so that the family didn't have to be embarrassed. I recognized most of the faces in the room as soon as we entered. It was like a high school reunion a few years too early, with the depression and everything.

Marie was holding my hand the whole way up to the funeral home. When we entered the room, I felt her grasp my arm tightly and it seemed as if she lost balance momentarily. She regained her composure and leaned against me.

“Are you going to be all right?” I asked her.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “I think I’m going to need to be alone, though.”

“Are you sure?” She didn’t seem like she should be alone. I never made a habit of leaving people alone when they requested, because it was always an invitation to disaster. When people wanted to be alone, especially Marie, they tended to do something drastic that would’ve been avoidable had somebody just stayed with them.

Something in her eyes told me to let her go and find a seat. She let go of my arm and I looked for someone I could bear speaking to for the remainder of the day. I caught eyes with a pudgy blonde man, who I immediately recognized as Scott Kensington from the high school baseball team. He smiled and waved, which I found rather inappropriate for a funeral, and I headed his way.

“Hey, man,” I said. I searched for the right funeral etiquette and settled on a phrase I’d heard often on television or movies. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m all right,” Scott said. “I’m all right. Just a shame, you know?”

“Tell me about it.”

“Ronnie was such a great guy. I mean, hell, you remember him in high school, right?” he said. I nodded. “We used to just roll around after school and get fucked up. I mean, we would drink some whiskey,” he paused for a moment to look around. Satisfied that nobody was listening, he continued, “smoke a little weed, find some chicks, whatever. I loved that kid.”

“I hear you,” I said. “For sure. Those sound like good memories.”

“Yeah, man,” Scott said. “Memories are all we have, when it’s over.”

“Are they?”

“Do you have any good memories of Ronnie?” he asked. I hesitated, knowing that I shouldn’t acknowledge my one clear memory of Ronnie at his own wake. I didn’t have much experience with death, but I knew enough to understand that my Ronnie memory wasn’t honorable, nor should it be mentioned aloud. However, had I recalled my memory to Scott, it would’ve sounded something like this:

In 11th grade, Ronnie and I were in the same gym class. He always liked to consider himself a class clown, which was all right with me, I guess, but he tended to try and take his jokes too far. It never seemed like he did it for amusement, as much as he did it to earn respect of certain people.

For some unknown reason, I was one of those people. Me and my buddy, Pat, would stand around in gym class before Mr. Black (remember that bald sonofabitch?) got there and make jokes. Ronnie always tried to impress me and Pat, but we just about never laughed at his jokes. So, one day, Ronnie takes it a little bit too far. While we’re joking around, he gets our attention, turns around in the middle of the circle of us, and tries to fart. Only, it doesn’t quite work. There’s this real gross sound and he turns back around, pale and with his mouth wide open. The fucking kid shit his pants.

He runs out of the gym and into the bathroom, and me and Pat sprint after him. He throws these shitty boxers out of the bathroom stall, and we can hear the kid’s breathing and it sounds like he’s ready to cry. I’ll never forget that goddamn look on his face, like his brain wouldn’t allow him to fully comprehend how badly he had just embarrassed himself.

That memory wouldn't be appropriate. I felt like an outcast or an imposter. I was there to honor a dead person who I only remembered as a pants-shitter. I didn't want to be found out, so instead, I told Scott:

“Same memories as you, really. We got drunk on the regular, man.”

He chuckled a bit and slapped my shoulder. He seemed satisfied by my reply, as if it validated his memories. Our memories with Ronnie were the best memories, and nobody could tell us different. We were party animals. We lived it up. Unfortunately for Ronnie, he lived it too fast, and we were here to honor our comrade. One of the fallen.

“Can I tell you something?” Scott said, his eyes wide and a bit misty. “I slipped a little bit of weed in his front pocket when nobody was looking. That way, after he's gone, it's like he's still partying with us.”

Before I could respond, I heard a thud from the front of the room. Marie had collapsed in front of the casket, sobbing loudly and pounding the floor. A small group of family members and friends gathered around her and helped her into a chair.

“What the fuck?” I mumbled.

“She's taking it hard,” Scott said. “Poor thing. You know, they dated a little in high school.”

“Marie?” I said. “No, no, she's with me. We dated all through high school.”

“Oh, yeah,” Scott said, stammering a bit. “I mean, it wasn't like that. It was while you guys were apart for a bit. You know how you and Marie split every now and then.”

It made sense, or, at least, a little bit more sense than it had made before. Still, the sobbing and crying seemed over the top. Even if they had shared some time together, it

couldn't have been for more than a few months. Marie and I were never separate for more than a quarter of a year. It certainly didn't warrant a shocked collapse at a funeral.

"It's time for the burial," Marie said to me, sniffing as I put my arm around her. "Everyone's going to be heading over to the cemetery."

We got in the car and waited for a few others in the funeral procession to pull out of the parking lot. I glanced over and Marie's long, brown hair and her salty, moist cheeks. Her skirt was short and I stared at her thighs as it rode up in the seat. She crossed and uncrossed her legs, fidgeting in the silence.

"I still can't believe it," she muttered.

"Hey, so, about Ronnie," I said. "You're real broken up over him, you know. I mean, it seems to really bother you."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Well," I said. "Of course it does, but, you know, not like-" I stopped. Marie was staring at me now. I was stammering, and she knew me well enough to know that it meant something else was bothering me. I decided it was best to dive right into it. "Did you date him back in high school?"

She didn't say anything.

"Because," I continued. "Scott Kensington mentioned something about it, and I just didn't know. It would make sense, I guess, since we split a couple of times back then-"

"I did," she cut me off. "I mean, we didn't really date. We just kind of, you know, *messed* around."

The way that she emphasized "messed" bothered me. It seemed overdone, like she was justifying it by playing it down. I would've rather that they dated. Dating was

perfectly honorable and, as it was high school, everyone got a little curious. But, to say that she “messed” around with Ronnie meant she was performing dishonorable actions. She was acting on impulse, without affection.

“Oh, you did?” I said. “You guys just fucking messed around?”

“Calm down,” she said. “Please, Ricky.”

“I thought I was the only one,” I shrieked. My temper was flaring faster than usual. “I thought I was the only one that you had sex with.”

“Christ, you are. Is that what’s really bothering you about this?”

I didn’t say anything. It was what bothered me, or I thought it was. It also might’ve been the thought of her curled up with Ronnie, pale and dead in his casket on the way to a cemetery. She seemed like damaged goods suddenly.

“Listen, Ronnie and I never had sex, okay? He had a car before most of the other guys did, and we would drive around on the weekends and park somewhere and just, you know. I mean, do you really want to hear this?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it’ll make me feel better.” I knew that it wouldn’t, but it was the only way to get her to tell the truth.

“We never had *sex*,” she said again, stressing it so I could understand. “The furthest we ever went was a blow job.”

“A blow job?” I shrieked. I tried to keep still in the driver’s seat, hoping that none of the cars behind us could pick up on the tension. “You gave that creep a blow job?”

“I don’t think we should be calling him a creep,” she said. “Not today, Ricky.”

I groaned loudly and Marie tried to talk over me.

“Listen, you just didn’t know him like I did. Ronnie had a side that he didn’t show to other people. He was sweet and sensitive, not the loudmouth that everyone thought they knew.”

“Of course he was sweet,” I said. “Ronnie was probably sweet to all the girls that blew him in his fucking Jeep Cherokee.”

“That’s enough, Ricky,” she said. “Please, that’s just enough.”

“You know he’s a pants-shitter?”

“That’s just a rumor,” she muttered. “Now you’re just being childish.”

“It’s no rumor,” I shouted. “I was there, in that gym class, when he cut loose. I fucking saw it happen. Don’t you tell me that it’s just a rumor.”

“Please let me out,” she said. Marie reached for the lock on her door. “Please, just pull over and let me out. I don’t want to be in the same car as you right now.”

She hopped out of the car at the corner of Lancaster Ave and Cypress Street. I drove away, glancing in my rearview mirror to make sure that she was picked up by another car in the funeral procession. I continued down the road a bit until I got into town and parked in front of a bar called Crossroads.

My mother had always warned me to stay away from Crossroads. It was a biker bar, a notorious Pagan hangout, and I’d avoided it like the plague. But, to me, on that day, it was the only bar whose clientele demanded that it be open at 10 am on a Sunday morning. It was the only place where I could get my head straight.

Inside, there were pictures of Ozzy Osbourne and Iggy Pop on the walls. AC/DC was blasting on the speakers. The pool tables were empty, with sticks sitting across the green felt and the balls resting comfortably in their pockets. The only movement in the

bar came from the far end, where a man with a long, gray beard and a black bandanna over his balding head was having a conversation with the bartender.

I sat at a barstool a few seats away and caught the bartender's attention. He approached me, but said nothing. When I ordered a Budweiser, he started me down for a few extra seconds.

"You got cash?" he barked. I nodded. "Good. This is a cash only establishment."

He brought me the beer and I gave him a few bucks. From across the bar, I could feel the man in the bandanna staring my way. I glanced over at him a few times to confirm, playing it off as though I was admiring the decorations above the bar. He saw it, though, because he shouted over the music at me.

"You don't look so good," he shouted.

I shrugged, nervous and sipping at my beer.

"You seem a little overdressed," he shouted, a bit louder this time. "Not a lot of people dressed like that coming through here."

"I, uh," I stammered, trying to project over the music. "I was just at a funeral."

The man's face softened behind his beard. He got up from his stool and moved to the stool next to mine. He slapped my back and lowered his voice.

"I'm sorry, man," he said. "I know what that's about. I been going to too many of those lately."

"Yeah," I agreed, without thinking my response through.

"Buddy of mine just died last week, actually. He was the head of the Philly chapter for the Pagans."

"No kidding."

“Yup,” he continued, looking at the Harley-Davidson sign above the bar. “We had 10,000 bikes down there. I’ll tell you what, across the street, there were state troopers all over the place trying to take pictures of us and shit. I just wanted to smash their fucking heads in.”

“Yeah,” I said, suddenly at ease with the man, despite his violent description.

“I was like, ‘Fuck you,’ you know? My buddy just died, man.”

“Any excuse for people like that,” I said.

“Yeah,” he said. “Hell, yeah, I like this kid. Joey!” he shouted to the bartender. He signaled for the bottle of Jack Daniel’s behind the bar and two shot glasses, which Joey brought over right away. We pounded two shots. I let the sting hit the back of my throat, slamming the shot glass against the finished wood of the bar when I’d swallowed.

“So, tell me about your buddy,” I said.

“Oh, man,” he said. “It was a goddamn tragedy. Guy just woke up one day, at 43 years old, and collapsed. Had a heart attack, right out of nowhere. He kept in shape and everything, man. Just surprised us all.”

I’d been thinking a lot about surprises that morning. It seemed like everyone was being surprised by something, but it was mostly me. Marie’s history with Ronnie, Scott’s memories, or the fact that the only memory I could muster up involved something as embarrassing as an accident in public. It seemed like surprise was at the heart of all tragedies. Death was never tragic if it was expected. My new friend’s story about his buddy and the sudden heart attack and Ronnie being hit by the train were similar in that nobody saw them coming, least of all the two victims.

Tragedy was marked by suddenness. When my grandparents died, it wasn't tragic. They'd been working to that point for their entire lives. When healthy people collapsed, or drunk kids got splattered by freight trains, the world stopped and wept.

"So you two were close?"

"Well, we had our issues," he said. "But, closer than anything, you know? We all got stuff going on, and all that shit."

"I hear you."

"You gotta let the bygones," he started before pausing. "It's like they say about bygones, you know? They already happened, so, you know, fuck it."

He poured us two more shots.

"I'll drink to that," I said. We clinked glasses and I downed the whiskey.

On the way back to the cemetery, I had to pull over to vomit on the side of the road. I leaned out of the passenger side window and unloaded on the street and on my car, probably because I drank whiskey on an empty stomach. The grief wasn't helping much, either, as I started to feel sorry for Marie and for Ronnie. She was inexperienced with death, as I was, too, but this was her opportunity to truly grieve. The blow job in the back of his Cherokee gave her the excuse to really care. She wasn't like Scott, filled with hollow, interchangeable memories about weed and beer. She'd seen the sensitive side of Ronnie, and she could remember what it had been like to open up to him.

Most people never got chances to grieve at such a young age like Marie had that morning. If people our age died, it was always unlikely that Marie or I had a close relationship with them. It was merely a numbers game. If less people were dying at that age, there was less of a chance that somebody we knew would die. This was Marie's

chance to really care about her first experience with death, and I was wrong for trivializing it.

I got to the cemetery right when the priest was saying his final words. Everyone was crying, even Scott. Marie frowned at first when she saw me. I smiled and mouthed the words *I'm so sorry*. She nodded and walked toward me, standing in front of me as the priest mumbled behind her.

I stroked her hair and she leaned up to me with soggy eyes, expecting a kiss. I was willing to admit that I was wrong, but I still couldn't look at her lips the same way. I wasn't so sure that I'd ever be able to. I kept coming back to where they'd been, and the body in the casket. Instead of kissing her, I drew her near and held her head against my chest, comforting her as she gently wept.

As they lowered the casket, Marie seemed to gain more composure. She rubbed my side while her tears slowed. I thought that I even saw her smile, maybe as she remembered some memory of the sky, and how it looked while she and Ronnie stared up at it from the hood of his Green Cherokee.

All I could remember was that face in gym class. I remembered the wide eyes and the pale skin, and that sickening look of panicked disbelief as the unthinkable happened. I imagined that he looked the same way that last night on the tracks, right before impact.

Isn't it Pretty to Think So?

Chris stared across the table at his peers, the cretins in the boardroom pitching half-drunk storylines for novels that didn't make a lick of sense. They sat, strangled with neckties and smothered in pinstripes, the antithesis of an artistic movement, laughing and licking their chops at the ability to impress the board's Chairman. Chariman was smiling, too, with his slicked back silver hair and stylish, designer glasses.

Chris couldn't remember being so frustrated with his job. It had been a gradual decline, with the board constantly reminding him that the American people wanted to escape. They wanted to read about lofty, thick plots with no apparent metaphorical context and a brilliant twist at the end, like the fact that the killer was actually the narrator all along, who had amnesia, so he couldn't remember that he was actually tracking crimes that he'd committed.

"The title is *Dagger of Innocence*," one of his peers, Mitch Williamson, was saying at that moment. The board ate that title up.

"Oh, *Dagger* " one said.

“I like that. Good God, Williamson, you’ve done it again ”

“The juxtaposition of dagger with the term innocence, it’s like murder versus purity. It’s brilliant. The Times will eat that up.”

“Love it.”

Williamson was the worst. Chris could trace his downward spiral of frustration to the first moment that bastard arrived at the publishing house. He was the one who first brought up moving the publishing house in a different direction. He was the one who took away the art-house literature that Chris was bringing in on a steady basis. They used to publish titles that actually meant something; maybe they weren’t tearing up the bestseller lists, but they were getting critical acclamation and challenging the readers’ thoughts. Now it was all about thrillers, cheap genre lit that brought in the dollars.

“It’s kind of an airy Stephen King sort of thing,” Williamson said. “A fantasy thriller with a twist. A down-on-his-luck cop is chasing after the criminals who murdered his stepchild, but—and this is where the twist comes in—he can’t distinguish between reality and fantasy because of a crippling drug addiction.”

“Action?”

“Plenty,” Williamson said. “An excellent chase scene around the turning point in the novel where the cop can’t tell if he’s chasing his stepson’s memory or the gang’s kingpin. We’re talking explosions, sex, violence, the whole deal.”

“This is great.”

“We could get Michael Bay to direct.”

“Oh. My. God.”

“Brad Pitt, maybe? Matt Damon? We need an actor with that handsome, rugged, darker side appeal.”

“This could save the book. This could bring us back from the darkness.”

These were the conversations that made Chris consider mass homicide, a feeling that was fairly uncommon in such a tranquil setting as the publishing industry. He remembered growing up and hoping that he could one day find the next Hemingway or the next Faulkner, subtle writers who layer plotlines with deep characters and philosophical observations about life and love. Those were the writers that would truly “save the book.” Now, that term was just used in the industry to justify selling out themes for action so they could move more copies.

There were no book proposals in meetings that didn’t end up in discussions about film adaptations. Maximize profit. Contact the studio before it even goes into print. Chris used to be celebrated by his peers. Now, he was nothing in their eyes: a dying breed in the mainstream publishing industry who actually believed that in order to save the book, they needed to print literature that was worthy of the classics that came before it. To hell with plot and who we could get to direct the film. Let’s give readers a chance to read about real people and real problems in context.

Chris’ proposals never ended with film adaptation discussions. They usually ended with a dull thud as he sat back down in his chair, sullen and ready to post his resume for a job in advertising.

“Maybe you shouldn’t get so worked up about it,” Cathy said. She was prepping for lasagna on the floating island in the kitchen. She poured a heaping amount of Ragu into the pan on top of thickly layered noodles. “You can’t control what they pick and don’t pick. You can’t control how the industry moves.”

“I know that,” Chris said. “I do.”

“So, why bother getting so upset?”

“Because I like what I like, and I don’t understand why nobody wants to print it.”

“Is that even what’s important?”

“Yeah, I think it is,” Chris said. They’d had this discussion more times than he cared to remember. “I think it’s real important. I think it’s important to care about what I’m doing.”

“The money’s great where you are now.”

“Fucking money. Just cocksucking money, that’s what matters, right?”

“Don’t talk to me like that.”

His wife didn’t give a damn. Chris didn’t know why the hell he bothered talking with her about anything. She was too busy focusing on what kind of designer clothes she could afford to buy on a weekly basis. She was constantly calling him at the office from boutiques, telling him how much she loved him and oh, by the way, she just spotted a gorgeous pair of Chanel sunglasses that are only \$750. It was the glamour of L.A. for her. They went to status parties together and Chris tried to look natural in a nice shirt while she flirted with various B-listers and bragged about her husband’s high-ranking position in a leading publishing house. They made films out of their books How cosmopolitan

Cathy popped the lasagna into the oven and moved to the living room with a glass of Pinot Noir. Chris stayed back in the kitchen, pouring himself a small glass of whiskey at the counter. He loathed the decorating his wife had done in the house. There was brilliant flow from room to room and he felt dirty inside his own home, and indictment of the ab-fab lifestyle they had succumbed to when they moved to this retched city. Velvet lined reclining chairs next to a dark brown leather couch, contrasted with a white carpet

and light colored curtains.

“Is Danny going to be home for dinner?” he shouted toward the living room.

“He’s out with some friends. He said he’d be back around 9:30.”

“Oh. Okay.”

There was another one. His son, Danny. He’d always feared raising a child in Los Angeles, confident that the surrounding decadence would corrupt his thinking power. Sure enough, his kid shelled out ten dollars every weekend to see whatever bullshit the studio had put out that week. He only read books with predictable endings and shallow themes. He was the same as everyone in the boardroom at Chris’ publishing house, the same as every other halfwit in the city. He was the antithesis of intellectualism, worse than the average moron. No, the average person who took pride in their anti-intellectualism was completely tolerable to Chris. At least they acknowledged that they didn’t give a shit about high-minded philosophical writing. In Los Angeles, the cretins were pretending to care. They convinced themselves that what they were doing was artful. It made him want to vomit on an hourly basis.

“There’s just so much disparity between what they say and what they do,” Chris shouted again.

“How so?” Cathy said. There wasn’t a trace of interest in her voice, but Chris decided to vent, anyway.

“Well, one minute we’re talking about how much the book needs saving and then the next we’re talking about how great the novel would be as a film.”

“So?”

“You don’t see how that contradicts itself? Why does a novel have to translate to film in order to save the book?”

“Maybe that’s the way books are going now. Maybe that’s the way to save things, by reaching a larger audience.”

Chris said nothing. He wasn’t in the mood for this debate. It was pointless, anyway. Nobody saw things the way that he did. Nobody cared about preserving literature. Instead, everyone wanted to talk about how to adapt literature for a changing market. Adapt and defend and market and distribute. It was a pointless strategy all aimed at America’s number one goal: consume more, think less.

Why couldn’t books reach a larger audience with pieces that actually meant something? Films did it all the time. While the majority of films were completely shallow and pointless, there were still the rarities that made millions of dollars and meant something. Scorsese. Spielberg. Those were directors that made big budget movies while still keeping the art in tact. Meanwhile, the book couldn’t seem to get past the cheap, genre work that was equivalent to big budget studio films.

“What about The Da Vinci Code?” Cathy shouted from the living room.

Chris slumped at the counter. The oven timer went off and Cathy came to remove the lasagna and set up for dinner. They sat down together in silence and dug into the food. Chris pretended to enjoy it, but all the while he wondered why she could spend a thousand dollars on a pair of jeans but neglect to get herself some fucking cooking lessons.

“I’m done doing it their way,” Chris said when he was finished. Cathy grunted. “I’m doing things my own way from now on.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have the resources. I have the capital to get it started. I’m starting my own press. End of story.”

“Shouldn’t we discuss this some more?”

“No. I’m done discussing things.”

“What about the money?”

“Money’s what got me into this mess.”

He was prepared to be a martyr. He would probably fail, he knew that. But, he needed to take a stand. He needed to begin living a life worth dying for. He would fight for his first love, the book, and he would preserve the integrity of literature by himself. Chris made the decision, despite the disapproval from his wife. He tendered his resignation the next day at the office and went straight to the bank for a small business loan. The bank associate looked over his resume and references and was just enthralled that he’d worked for the publishing house that delivered his favorite book, *Death by Murder*.

Chris immediately put out a call for submissions in every magazine and newspaper he could think of. He was specific in his press release, announcing that a new publishing house, *The Scribe*, was about to launch. He called for young writers to submit their manuscripts, but only if they fit certain conditions. He wanted no ambiguity in his request. The press release read:

Are you tired of “modern” literature? Do you yearn for the days when the writing was what mattered and plot twists and sex scenes were secondary? *The Scribe*, a new and exciting publishing house from Chris McHough, is calling for submissions from any previously unpublished writer. No agents, please. We wish to open up direct contact with young writers who wish to change the face of literature and save the book from the depths of Hell.

He acknowledged that the final sentence was a bit melodramatic, but he wanted to draw attention to the press. He needed to catch someone's eye and he needed to hear from the young writers; the writers who still had egos and hadn't been poisoned by the demands of mainstream publishing. He needed the writers who had just finished reading Raymond Carver or Ernest Hemingway and tried their best to emulate their work in a manuscript. He wanted the young writer who was stuck in the past, which was the only way to move forward.

He received multiple manuscripts, but none of them really caught his eye. The majority of the pieces he got were certainly lacking in plot, but they had no depth of character or story. The majority of them depicted shallow characters wandering around in everyday situations. The writing was mediocre, too. Nothing fresh or original, just regurgitations of Hunter Thompson or Jack Kerouac. He was starting to wonder if he'd marketed his publishing house to the wrong writers.

There was one glimmer of hope among the pile of loose pages. A writer named Trey Treyerson, no doubt a fake name, had submitted a manuscript about a family in Colorado in the late nineties. The work fit exactly what he'd been looking for and would've blended in with the others, if not for the dialogue. He couldn't put it into words, but Chris saw something in the dialogue and the way each character's words bounced off one another's. It was clever, hip, but completely grounded in reality and deeply philosophical. It reminded him of his favorite classic literature. It held the subtlety of *The Sun Also Rises*, his favorite book, while also bringing out brilliant characters like the ones he saw in the work of Larry McMurtry.

The novel depicted a family in Colorado whose patriarch loses his job right around the time the tragedy in Columbine happened. The community was confused and

angry and the family struggled to point their anger in the right direction. It ended the way it began, simply and without event. Just one family, in America, struggling to understand what the American Dream really meant.

He dialed Treyerson's number, a Missouri area code, and got in touch with the writer's mother. He called back a few hours later, and The Scribe was in business.

Chris dried himself off in the mirror in front of he and Cathy's bed. He'd put on a few pounds since quitting, which surprised him. He didn't think he'd been eating nearly as much since the stress started to get to him. Still, he flexed his gut in and out to try and cheer himself up, telling himself that it wouldn't take too long to get it back to where it'd been. Once it was all over, once the book came out, he could start sleeping regularly again and getting to the gym more frequently.

"I gotta start exercising soon," he said to his disinterested wife.

Cathy mumbled something in return, wrapped up in the television set that was blaring American Idol in the corner of their bedroom. Simon Cowell said something reasonably witty and she slapped her thigh, laughing at someone else's misfortunes. Randy Jackson and Paula Abdul had their staged argument with Cowell and Cathy hung on every word, taking the side of Simon, as Chris figured most Americans did.

"The book comes out in a few weeks," Chris said.

"Oh yeah?" Cathy never took her eyes off of the television.

"We should get the early reviews here in a few days."

"What do you think?" she said.

"I think it's a great novel."

"Will the reviews say that?"

“Probably, but that won’t translate to any sales.”

Chris waited a few moments to see if his wife would respond. When she didn’t, he shrugged and slipped on a pair of gym shorts and a large t-shirt, hoping that he could ignore his belly for the night.

He caught himself feeling bad for his wife. Cathy was just along for the ride and maybe it wasn’t right for him to take on his sudden martyr complex in the middle of their marriage. She had needs, too, and perhaps it was wrong for him to gamble their money on a project that he was confident would fail miserably. He sat on the edge of the bed and tried to get his wife’s attention. He cleared his throat once, and then twice, and finally gave up, grabbing the remote from the bed and muting the television.

“I think we should talk,” he said.

“What’s on your mind, honey?”

“I think I owe you an apology,” Chris said. “I think I need to apologize to you for, you know, all that I’ve done these past few months.”

“Okay.”

“I shouldn’t have put you in this position. I shouldn’t have done all this without making sure we were on the same page.”

“Aren’t we on the same page?” Cathy asked innocently. For a moment, Chris almost believed her.

“I don’t think so.”

“Well, get us on the same page.”

“This isn’t going to make money, Cathy. You know that. I damn near told you that when I gave you my idea.”

“Oh,” she said. She turned her attention back to the television and attempted to

read Simon Cowell's lips. Even on mute, her attention span couldn't be broken.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry."

"Why can't it do both?"

"What?" Chris said.

"Why can't a book be great and also make money? Why are those two things mutually exclusive to you?"

"They're not," Chris said. "I mean, they are, but not for the reasons you think. It should be able to do both. It just doesn't anymore and that's what I'm trying to figure out."

"Hm," Cathy said.

"Maybe I'm going to be wrong. Maybe this thing will get glowing reviews and sell like mad." Chris was hopeful that this would be true, but that's all it was at the end of the sentence. Hope. Just useless, bullshit hope. Hope never accomplished anything, least of all in America. Hope was what got him into this mess in the first place. It was what started his career off in literature, hoping that he could bring a manuscript to a publisher that rivaled something by Hemingway or McMurtry.

"I wouldn't worry about it yet," Cathy said.

"Worry about what?"

"Any of it. Us. Where we'll be after all this, where your career will be. We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

Cathy grabbed the remote and turned the television's volume back up. She didn't want to miss the show's finale, leaving Chris to try and decipher what she'd said. Was she encouraging him? Was she implying that they might divorce if he lost their money?

Neither would surprise him. This was Los Angeles. This was a city that lived

simultaneously in the sectors of hopes and dreams and a cutthroat, “what have you done for me lately?” train of thought. Cathy was like most of the wives in this town. She was in love when her husband was in a position of power. She was miserable when he was struggling for recognition. All she really wanted was to be a debutante, prowling around status parties and masquerading as someone who was completely love struck and vulnerable; Chris’ Lady Brett.

Chris climbed into bed as Cathy turned the television off. She turned the lamp off next to the bed and rolled over toward Chris. She grabbed his torso and moved her hand around his skin, gradually letting her hands slip below his waistline. She still had her needs, even if Chris felt completely disregarded by her.

She kept on like this for a few minutes, whispering in his ear and running her hands along his body and even his expanding belly. She slipped her hands into his shorts again and let out a long sigh.

“I just can’t,” Chris said, embarrassed. “Not tonight. It doesn’t feel right.”

Cathy rolled over and fell asleep. Chris stared at the open closet door until the sun came up.

The first book to be released by Chris’ new publishing house was entitled Breaking our Strides. The title didn’t make too much sense to Chris, but Trey Treyerson seemed intent on keeping it in tact. He claimed that it was a metaphor, but didn’t want to explain himself. He thought it seemed counterproductive to explain what a text meant. That was the reader’s job.

Chris paced nervously around his office. He was waiting on the first reviews to flood in, hoping that there would be something good to report to his wife when he got

home. She'd been breathing down his neck about the business and wondering how it was doing. He'd run out on his loan a long time before the first manuscript went to publication and was now printing books out of his own pocket. Cathy was there every step of the way, reminding him of the life they used to have and asking him when she'd be able to go to more grandiose parties. Chris started spending most of his nights at the office, delaying any return trips home.

He sat down at his desk and stared at the phone. He was waiting for the inevitable. He knew what the reviews would say. They would call it a "subtle glimpse into the horrors of normal existence," or a "redemptive look at the American family and how we survive through the toughest of times." He didn't care how they interpreted the text. He knew the truth: positive reviews didn't mean anything. Some of the most negatively reviewed bullshit still sold well based on name recognition alone. Breaking our Strides wouldn't move any copies solely because The New York Times said it should. He might sell a few thousand copies to the New York literary elitists, but he wasn't about to set the world on fire with the common man.

He heard back sometime in the middle of the afternoon. Reviews began to flood in. Critics wondered about its marketability, as expected, but thought that the writing was incredibly solid. They poked fun at the name of the author, as expected, but stated that there hadn't been a better written novel in years. The general consensus was exactly what Chris was expecting. Great book, but how the hell would it sell?

One review was particularly flattering to Chris. A critic for the Chicago Tribune wrote, "Chris McHough started the publishing house The Scribe to try and 'save the book,' a feat that he may have accomplished here, if not for Breaking our Strides' lack of action and plot. The writing is superb, what writing is meant to be, but the point is lost

amid a sparse plot and slow-moving action. In the end, *Breaking our Strides* is a novel that everyone should read, but most people will probably struggle to pick it up.”

Will that one paragraph, the critic had summed up Chris’ entire point to starting this publishing house. He proved his point. There was no hope for saving the book. The greatest of all novels could come out, with critical acclaim, and not a single soul would pick it up. He couldn’t bring himself to call wholesalers to hear how presales were going. He knew what the answer was. With those reviews, the major booksellers would run and hide. They would stock a few copies because they felt as though they should, but they knew where the real money was. Generic genre thrillers and sci-fi fantasy novels would flood their shelves at eye level, while the swan song released by The Scribe would sit on the bottom shelf, away from the consciousness of the average reader. A novel that everyone should read, but nobody would.

He laughed uncontrollably while sitting at his desk. Gallows humor, he supposed. Chris began to wonder how Hemingway would be received if he published in the 21st century. “Great prose stylist, but slowly paced. How can he expect readers to push through nearly 300 pages of a war story with almost no war to speak of?” Metaphor had its place in the literary world of 2009, but it was either shallow or obvious, and always secondary. Sure, we wanted to think as readers, but only if we had an opportunity to think during mind blowing sex scenes or contrived action sequences. Hemingway would get destroyed by the average reader today. He’d be labeled as boring, an elitist who refused to adapt to the times. It made Chris smile to think of that label, a label that he would surely be slapped with after this latest disaster.

He called Trey Treymerson to let him know what he’d been hearing. The conversation, as expected, was a bit grim.

“The reviews are in.”

“And?”

“They love it. But, they don’t think it’s too marketable.”

“I told you we should’ve adapted the plot a bit.”

“That’s not the point.”

“What is the fucking point then?”

“The point is that you wrote a great book. And you didn’t cave into expectations.”

“So now we’re both broke.”

“Yup.”

“So what is the fucking point?”

“I don’t know, Trey. I’m not really sure at this juncture.”

Television transcript from 60 Minutes, episode aired 7/24/09:

Mike Wallace (narrating): Meet Chris McHough. He’s the owner, editor, publisher, and acquisitions directory of The Scribe, a new publishing house started to “save the book.” But, now, after just one book published, he’s completely broke. If you ask him what he thinks about that, he’ll tell you that it’s absolutely fine. We sat down with him at his Hollywood, California home to talk literature, the face of publishing, and where he goes from here.

Mike Wallace: So why did you start The Scribe?

Chris McHough: I think it was a way for me to prove a point. I’d been working for awhile in the industry, and it seemed to me that everything was going to hell. We weren’t publishing work that we thought could get the readers thinking. Instead, we were

patronizing the readers, pretending that they didn't know what from what and trying to move as many copies as possible.

Mike Wallace: You didn't feel like you were doing your job?

Chris McHough: No. Maybe. I don't really know how to answer that. I mean, I was doing my job the best I could, but it's a tough difference between doing your job and doing the right thing.

Mike Wallace: Putting out better books?

Chris McHough: Book. I don't know. We only published one book.

Mike Wallace: How did that come to be?

Chris McHough: I spoke to Trey over the phone a few times. It was after our call for open submissions.

Mike Wallace: You wanted the younger writers.

Chris McHough: Exactly. I thought it would be the best way to go. Get some writers who hadn't been jaded by the system yet. The younger writers are still willing to bend conventions and they don't succumb to the pressures of making money and selling copies. They just want to put out the best possible art.

Mike Wallace: How are you and Trey getting along now?

*Chris McHough: Not so well. I think I overestimated the integrity of the young writer.
[laughs].*

Mike Wallace: He didn't like the final product?

Chris McHough: He didn't like the sales figures, that's for sure.

*Mike Wallace: Why did *The Scribe* fail?*

Chris McHough: Well, we got great reviews from the critics. It seems like the reader wasn't ready to jump on board, though. Market analysis told me that, apparently, the book lacked any real forward moving action and plot. People apparently wanted to see

some violence in a book centered around a school shooting.

Mike Wallace: What did the title mean? Breaking our strides?

Chris McHough: I think it's a metaphor. I don't know, really. Trey really was attached to that title. I don't like speculating as to what things mean in text.

Mike Wallace: Why is that?

Chris McHough: I don't know. I think it's part of the problem. I think, in America, we are so incredibly anxious to know the answer. Black and white thinking, wrong or right. We want to be able to analyze a text and come up with a correct interpretation, instead of approaching it as a subjective matter, which it is. The fact that the text exists should be the only fact that matters. From there, with such a subjective piece of art, any analysis is correct. There is no right and wrong in a work of art. There is only what we feel when we read it. If someone is to walk away from a piece of literature with an interpretation, it means that there is something in the text that evoked that feeling, and therefore the interpretation can't be wrong.

Mike Wallace: Interesting theory.

Chris McHough: I honestly think that's where we've gone wrong. Analyzing texts became an elitist practice because they wanted to be right about whatever it was that they read. Now, in order to bring the average reader back into play, we create texts that are easy to interpret and have one very obvious right answer about what they are trying to say. That way, analyzing literature is no longer an elitist task. It's an everyman's task. That's what's so [expletive deleted] up about it. It never was an elitist's task. It became that way when elitist's started saying that their criticism was the only criticism that really mattered.

Mike Wallace: So, anyone can analyze a text? Regardless of expertise?

Chris McHough: I think that's what we do, inherently. Let me give you an example.

*When I was 15, I read my favorite book, *The Sun Also Rises*, for the first time. I read it through and loved it. I thought it was the most sad book I'd ever read, full of longing and loss and heartache. It spoke to me. Now, the first time I read it—and I know I'm gonna lose lit cred by admitting this—I didn't pick up on the fact that Jake Barnes was impotent from the war. I had no idea. I thought he and Lady Brett couldn't be together just because they knew it wouldn't work out, regardless. It was beautiful, even if my interpretation didn't take all of the character into account. But, was my analysis wrong, in the truest sense? Even if I missed that one detail, I still took into account the rest of the book and analyzed the themes that were there. Reading it once without the impotence provides a perfectly valid analysis of what Hemingway was trying to say.*

Mike Wallace: So, you're suggesting we focus less on the right answer and more on how we react, emotionally?

Chris McHough: It'll never happen. People are basically stupid. All they want to know is whether or not they can be right or wrong. That's all that matters in this country. It's the endless pursuit of being correct in meaningless arguments.

Mike Wallace: So, what's next for you?

Chris McHough: I'm [expletive deleted] broke, Mike. My publishing house is bankrupt. My wife won't speak to me. I don't think there's anything that's next.

Mike Wallace: Do you still feel you did the right thing?

Chris McHough: Well, I proved my point. Literature is dead today. Nobody is interested in thoughtful prose or characters with depth. They want action and [expletive deleted]. I don't know if what I did was right, but it felt necessary.

Mike Wallace: But, you're broke.

Chris McHough: Yup. Yes, I am. So maybe it wasn't so necessary after all. [laughs].

Chris was sitting at his kitchen table when he got the call. He recognized the voice as soon as he heard it, and he had to grind his teeth to keep from shouting. The voice grated against his ears and he clenched his fists against the table and shook his head. He'd almost been expecting this moment, and he stopped to appreciate the predictable irony.

"Chris, babe, how we doing?" the voice of Mitch Williamson said over the receiver. "We gotta talk."

"What do we have to talk about?"

"I heard about The Scribe, buddy. I'm sorry to hear it's gone under."

"Yeah, me too, Mitch. Me too."

"Brave thing you did. Gotta appreciate the balls, you know? The fucking bravado. You went to save the book and you failed, and then you said fuck you to the rest of America."

"Mitch," Chris sighed. "What do you want? You didn't call to talk about my publishing house."

"Oh, but I did, my man," he said, oozing businessman sleaze. "I most certainly did."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"Your story, Chris. I want to talk about your story. People are eating up your appearance on 60 Minutes."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. Apparently, people like being told that they're stupid. Americans just eat that shit up."

"This can't be real."

“Oh, it is,” Mitch said. “You better start believing it. We want to bring your story to print, publish the book, we might even be talking film adaptation here. A biopic. Like Ray or even fucking Finding Neverland ”

“I don’t know about all this,” Chris said.

“We’re talking big money here, babe.”

Chris glanced over at the folder on his kitchen counter, filled with bankruptcy paperwork and bounced checks. He thought it over for a few moments, Mitch waiting breathlessly on the other end. This was America, whether he liked it or not. He had bills to pay. He’d grown up mocking the American Dream for as long as he could, but now he was faced with the dilemma that each citizen of the country had to come to grips with at some point. He was a grown man, with a wife and a kid. He’d started his quest for martyrdom without considering their well-being, knowing full well he would fail and this day would come.

He was just another consumer, at the end of the day, no matter what industry he worked in. He was always consuming something and being broke in America was absolutely not an option. If you weren’t making money and capitalizing in this country, you had to be some kind of retard. Chris sighed loudly and decided to stop fighting against the current. Maybe Cathy would finally speak to him again.

So, there he was, standing in front of a boardroom that still despised him, even though they were after the revenues his face could generate. Even Chairman hid his contempt well, telling him how much he appreciated his work and how he knew that they would meet again under better circumstances. Each of them went around in the circle, firing off what they figured were the selling points for the biography.

“America loves an underdog.”

“America loves hearing about someone who tries to save an institution. In this case, the institution is our readers. Our children.”

“Education. Big seller with regular folks.”

“Who’s going to write it?”

“Doesn’t matter. Some journalist somewhere will be dying to get his name out there. We’ll get him for cheap. Not a big deal.”

“Chris, have you considered any writers?”

“No,” Chris said. “I hadn’t thought about it.”

He sat, awestruck by their eagerness. The board members, even Mitch Williamson, were basically eating out of his hand. It was the first time he’d felt completely respected in the boardroom since the 80s.

“What about the film?”

“Two words: George Clooney.”

“Oh, my, that’s good. We could even get him to direct. He directs now, you know.”

“No good. Ron Howard is already signed on.”

“I loved Cinderella Man.”

“Great director. Inspirational. Chris, what do you think of Ron Howard?”

“He’s good, I guess,” Chris said. “I don’t know about all the planning. I leave that up to you guys.” He was tired. He wanted to get out as soon as he could. The meeting had been going on for over two hours.

“America loves an underdog,” someone repeated.

“This isn’t really an underdog story,” Chris cut in. The room gasped. “I mean, think about it. I start at the bottom and end at the bottom. This isn’t a redemptive story.

I'm fucking bankrupt, guys.”

The room was quiet for a few moments. Chairman rolled his tongue around his mouth and put his fist under his chin. The board members breathed softly and tried their best to appear to be thinking hard. A few of them sighed heavily before their messiah, Williamson, stepped to the plate.

“That’s a bit of a downer,” he said. “We might have to tweak the details a little bit before we publish.”

Chris sat at home on the night of his film’s premiere. He told Cathy that he wasn’t feeling well and that she should go on without him. He wasn’t up for a night full of ass kissing and, while he was confident in his personal appearance, George Clooney was a bit of a stretch as the lead. Cathy was just excited to be able to dress up again in designer clothing and flirt with the rich and powerful. She wasn’t interested in how he felt. She gave him some ibuprofen and told him to rest. She told him not to wait up and that she might go to a couple of the after parties.

Chris knew what she’d be doing. She’d tell everyone about how lovely the film was and how it captured the spirit and essence of a brave man. She’d gloat about how proud she was of her wonderful husband, failing to mention the three months or so that she’d refused to speak to him and was, most likely, having an affair. Cathy would pretend that everything about the film was perfect, all the while perfectly aware that they’d changed the ending and things hadn’t worked out. The Scribe hadn’t survived any more than it had saved the book. He was a failure and, worse, he was no longer a martyr. He was a fucking sellout.

He went back to his home and sat on the back porch by himself, sipping wine and

watching the sunset through an exponentially larger sheet of smog. He didn't have the energy to think. His eyes drooped and he drank wine at a casual pace. He thought of himself as the image of a man who'd worn out his welcome. The publishing industry had chewed him up and spit him out.

He thought about how the scene would play out in one of Williamson or Chairman's stupid fucking manuscript ideas. This would be the point where the hero, Chris, made his landmark decision. It would have to be melodramatic, so that the reader could not only relate to it, but be moved to tears by it. It would have to bring down the house.

If it were a redemption story, the protagonist would go to visit the theater, just as the ending credits were about to roll. Everyone would be weeping and would be about to give a standing ovation, when the protagonist took the microphone. He would shout to the crowd that had gathered about how everything was a sham, it was all bullshit. He would profess that he was bankrupt and that they were nothing more than a bunch of sheep, consuming a product that had been watered down to suit their inferior intellectual needs. A few people might have laughed at the pretentious nature of the protagonist's speech, but they would still be affected. The protagonist would feel better about himself and would be able to come clean about being a sellout. Then he'd kiss Cathy on the lips and she'd tell him how she always knew he'd pull through and she never stopped believing in him.

Or, of course, it could have been a thriller with a twist at the end. The entire thing was a set up all along, and Trey Treyerson was actually Mitch Williamson in disguise. The twist would come when the readers found out that Williamson had set him up for failure just so the publishing house could get revenge. Chris would sue, but the legal

process wouldn't work, acting as some sort of cheap metaphor that the reader could understand about how justice is usually bought and sold instead of being fairly distributed.

But, Chris didn't like those kind of books. He wasn't about to live out some bullshit fantasy that could be produced in a sleazy Hollywood studio. This was real life. Trey Treyerson was a real person who was probably just too afraid to give out his real name for fear of failure. He wouldn't go down to the premiere and tell everyone what a sham the film was. He didn't have a backbone, which was probably why he was in this mess in the first place. Had he been able to take a stand, he wouldn't have taken the offer to sell his soul and his story because of one successful appearance on 60 Minutes.

Chris let the day end like a manuscript he would've loved. The protagonist sat on the porch by himself and sipped red wine while the sun set. He smoked a whole pack of cigarettes, something he hadn't done in over a decade. He didn't think twice about what was happening at a movie theater downtown and instead focused on what he would eat for dinner in a few hours. He was just an ordinary person, trying to push forward in a game that was rigged from the outset.

"Everything will work out," Chris said to himself. "People will start reading again."

He leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes, a wide smile across his face. He sipped at his wine and thought about his favorite ending to his favorite book.