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HOW THE SKY TASTES:
EIGHT STORIES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
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in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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ABSTRACT

How the Sky Tastes is not simply a collection of stories. It is my best representation of single moments, human emotions, social issues, humor, and pure entertainment all in one. Each story, although unique and easily able to stand alone, shares qualities I find important in writing fiction. First, each story features realistically flawed, yet sympathetic characters dealing with difficulties in life. Secondly, the actual *moment* is important in each story—whether that moment is something shared between two or more characters or simply the time a certain character comes to a serious realization. Finally, the style can make or break the story. I do not believe in gimmicky writing—form must always have function—but I do feel that the writing must be representative of the characters and the stories that it serves. Experimentation is important in writing. Each story should have its own way of telling itself.

All these stories can be seen as experimental in some way, but also all these stories are told the way they *have* to be told. The characters tell the stories themselves and the writing just follows suit. It is my hope that readers can identify with most, if not all, these stories, and engage interest in these characters enough to care about what happens to them, even if they don't necessarily like them.

This is for Mikey.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my Jeanne Leiby for kicking my ass to get this thing done. Thanks also to Pat Rushin and Susan Hubbard who both, along with Jeanne, helped make me a better writer. I would also like to thank my Mom because she's the only person in the whole world who never had a doubt I would get to this point.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|-----|
| HOW THE SKY TASTES..... | 1 |
| ANYTHING RIGHT NOW..... | 19 |
| WHEN SPEAKING OF GALWAY..... | 25 |
| THE TREASURE HUNTER..... | 44 |
| JUST AS INFINITELY VAST..... | 61 |
| THE EXECUTION OF MY CREATOR BY GLENN MOSS..... | 95 |
| ONE DAY..... | 121 |
| SMILE ALL ALONE..... | 134 |
| APPENDIX: BOOK LIST..... | 153 |

HOW THE SKY TASTES

Floyd's got the itch. I can see it in his eyes. I see it all the time. Ever since I left the hospital, it's a look I pick up on real easily. The search for the perfect way to scream *what the fuck happened to you* without using those exact words. Symptoms of the itch may include: twitching in my presence, starting conversations with multiple 'Ums', tilting one's head back and forth while rubbing one's chin, and, of course, staring at me when my back is turned, and then quickly looking at the ground when I make eye contact. Here, in the paint department of Harry's Hardware, Floyd's got the itch and he's got it bad.

I didn't really want to return to this place but I need money. I need to forget about all the crazy. I need to stand here in my old, ratty jeans, my plain white polo shirt and my yellow apron and feel normal. Normal people have jobs. Normal people bring home paychecks and take lunch breaks. Normal people chit chat about customers and gossip about bosses and inter-departmental romances. I need normal again.

I don't know Floyd. He's just some kid that started working here a few months ago. He's probably heard the story or at least the rumors. I'd like to think that they've been blown out of proportion, but I doubt it. Everyone here knows all about my breakdown. When I walked past Donnie and Karen in plumbing earlier today, Donnie smiled and shook my hand while Karen just nodded. Jeremy in flooring gave me a high five while Taylor from lumber refused to make eye contact, strutting briskly past me. One of the cashiers gave me a hug and told me it's good to have me back. I couldn't remember her name and felt bad. She trembled in my arms. Some of the other cashiers waved while others pointed and whispered to each other. Maybe she wasn't the one

trembling. These people, for forty hours a week, were once part of my life. Now, they seem like strangers. Strangers that stare at you when your back is turned.

The paint counter is just as I remember it. The stainless steel counter with the oscillating fans lined with dust. The black rubber, egg-carton-holed floor mats over the stained concrete floor. Gallons of flats and semi-glosses and satins and eggshells stacked in the middle. Computers with cellophane wrapped around the keyboards. The rubber mallets with the different colored handles that we lacquered when we were bored. Everything's the same—save Floyd.

Floyd's maybe in his early twenties if he's not a teenager. He wears a buzz cut, dyed reddish-brown. He's trying to grow a goatee but he's only a kid and it looks like rat hair. His big, eager eyes make me feel old and misplaced. He looks like I did when I started here six years ago. His lips move a few times without any sound. Every time I think he's going to say something, he looks toward the floor and taps his right jean pockets with his left hand.

He smiles and reveals his braces. I remember having braces but then my teeth got crooked anyway. I hear some hip-hop beat in the distance and look around for a radio. Floyd removes a flat black cell phone from his pocket and begins a conversation that involves a lot of slow, methodical, head-shaking and half-hearted laughing.

I want to do something but there are no customers to help. It's dead in here today. I walk the aisles but nothing requires straightening—even the rollers are stacked right and the brushes hang under the right SKU numbers. That was never the case when I used to work here. We'd spend hours re-organizing the aisles, sometimes even picking up overtime, working late into the night. It was all just normal stuff back then.

Floyd is off his phone now. He still shakes his head and laughs a little.

“Sometimes my girlfriend can be so dumb.”

I nod back to him. I want to say something smart and offer the kid some advice. Do something that normal adults do for kids. I wish I could tell him a story with a good moral at the end—something that might change his life for the better. I don’t know how great of a storyteller I would be, but since I have a story to tell, I guess I couldn’t be all that bad.

My story would be about a madman. I would try to set up the background, going in to detail to explain that no one ever knew that he was a madman—he looked as normal as the next guy. He wasn’t always a madman. He once was simply a sad boy who dreamed of tasting the sky. This boy yearned to savor the sky because he was sick of the harsh, filthy aftertaste of the ground. The ground tasted salty and sour, with a bitterness that could linger for years. He was very familiar with the taste of the ground from when he first tried to ride a bike in the first grade to when Stacey O’ Hagan said she didn’t want to be his girlfriend to when his parents divorced—the taste, a lasting illness carried over from the beginning of time. Each time it returned stronger and stronger and each time he rolled over and looked towards the clouds. To taste the sky was a dream he held onto tightly all his life, so maybe it’s what made him so mad.

He got mad that rich people shit all over the poor and sometimes madder that he wasn’t rich enough to shit back. He got mad at governments lying to their people and even madder that he couldn’t lie to his mother when she asked him if she was still pretty after the chemo. He got mad that people used religions based on peace to justify their

own hate. He got mad that the environment is dying but madder at the hippies who thought trees were more important than people. Every day it was something new and every day it was something bad.

More and more things made this sad boy madder and madder and he couldn't help but think about them every day. He couldn't talk to anyone about them because he knew that no one would understand. They would just think he was crazy. He couldn't comprehend why he could hate the world but desperately want to be part of it at the same time. He never told anyone. He just went through his daily life and everyone thought he was normal. He went to school, played little league, had friends, drank beers, did drugs, had sex, drove cars, worked jobs, went to social gatherings, laughed at jokes, watched football on Sundays, showed up to family members' birthday parties, watched movies and TV shows, went on vacations, and he even fell in love with a girl. He did all the normal things normal people did and that's why no one ever saw this sad boy turn into a madman.

There is no telling the exact moment he became a madman, but it was probably around the time he heard his best friend died. There was a car accident on a rainy night on a road covered in leaves and his best friend was dead. People kept asking questions about how he died and why he died—was it the wet road or the leaves? Was he drinking or did he fall asleep? Was it his time to go according to some higher entity or are we completely alone in this universe? Did the cops do enough to save him? Who was the last person to talk to him before he died? Who will carry his casket? Is his family okay? Why and how and why and how and why?

But the madman couldn't think about those questions. He couldn't concentrate on those things. His hands shook and all he could think about was polluted lakes and big businesses that paid for presidential candidates' campaigns and bums on the street and wars over gods and AIDS and football and the Rolling Stones and fast cars and anything but the death of his friend. He shut down completely. He couldn't talk to anyone. Not even the girl he loved. He couldn't talk to her and maybe that's why he decided to hurt her.

I would get quiet at this point of the story. I'd look away as if I was trying to concentrate on something else as I waited to see if he was still interested in hearing it. I would need him to say, "What happened? How did he hurt her?" Then I could go on. I could tell the rest of my inspirational tale of terror and rebirth. But I'm not telling a story. I'm standing at the paint counter and Floyd is on his cell phone again.

An old lady with blue hair and a large purse walks up to the counter. "Where are your air filters?"

I point to the front of the store, behind the cash registers. A tall, white wall in plain view of the entire store holds shelves of every size, shape, and color of any air filter imaginable.

I say, "They try to hide them."

She smiles and likes my joke and thanks me. I tell her that she is welcome and to have a nice day. She walks away to grab a filter. Floyd is back next to me.

He says, "Do you play fantasy football?"

I say, "Sometimes."

He starts to say something else but decides against it and walks away to pretend to straighten the brushes.

Then, I see *her* out of the corner of my eye. She's there by the registers.

No air comes into my lungs but plenty of rapid thumps come to my heart. She's walking this way and I can't face her. I can't do that. Not that. I can sit though, so I sit on the padded floor and lean back against the base of the paint-mixing-machine. I try to smile but my face hurts. Floyd stares at me for a second but then glances back to the counter where the pretty, young, auburn-haired girl now stands.

It's not her. My lungs don't hurt as bad and I try to breathe normally, but start to hiccup instead. I don't leave the floor. It's comfortable.

Floyd and the girl kiss over the counter. He stretches a little farther over than she has to, which I think is polite. She wears a black skirt, a tight top, and an enticing smile. I think they are both staring at me now. I try not to stare back and look at the stack of flat paints to my left instead. One of the brands makes a washable flat now. Times sure have changed. I bet it isn't as flat as the regular flats. I think they are talking about me. They try to whisper so I can't hear.

"Who is that and why is he on the floor?"

"It's some guy that used to work here before."

"And the floor?"

"I think he went crazy once."

"What time is your break?"

"In about an hour."

"Marco's still on for tonight?"

“Always.”

“He doesn’t look that crazy.”

“Then why is he sitting on the floor?”

I catch myself glancing back at them. She tugs at her top lip. We make eye contact which she immediately breaks. They kiss again and she is gone. He stands in front of me now. I look up and force the most authentic looking fake smile I can muster.

He says, “That’s my girl, Georgette.”

I say, “Very cute.”

He nods. Then he turns toward the cash registers probably to watch her leave. I want to say something. I want to tell him about a girl. I want to tell him about relationships and life and all that. In my story, I would.

The story would continue with the almost-madman meeting a girl at school. He liked talking to her about nothing and she loved it too. He didn’t feel so crazy all the time when he talked to her. She always smiled and shook her head in a consoling manner.

Then came the call. The call that would trigger all the madness that had been building inside of him for all those years, bringing it to the surface. It was a brief call. Only three words were necessary—Harry is dead. Those were the only words the madman heard anyway. The person on the other end of the phone surely used other words like *passed on* or *heaven* or *brace yourself for bad news* or that sort of thing, but the madman was already done with the conversation and hung up the phone.

He walked back into his room, heading straight for his window. Stars decorated the clear night sky. The madman licked his window over and over again. The girl he

loved tried to console him by rubbing his shoulders and telling him it was okay. He didn't know she was there and her touch startled him. His body shook beyond control and he fell to the ground.

She said, "Are you okay?"

He heard the words but she sounded like background music. His attention focused outside the window on the sky above. Nothing else mattered.

She said, "It's not anybody's fault," and "It's okay to cry," and "Life isn't fair," and things like that over the next hour or so as the madman just sat there on the ground, salivating as he stared out the window.

Then she said, "Why won't you talk to me?"

The madman grabbed her by her shirt and leapt to his feet. He couldn't talk to anyone. No one knew what he knew or thought what he thought. How dare she ask him to talk. He slammed her against the wall, claspng his left hand tightly over her mouth.

The madman said, "Shut your dirty cunt up."

She made sounds under his hand, not words. She pushed him off her and he turned towards the window—the sky a clean black, tidy with stars gleaming.

She pleaded with him. She told him that he needed help. He's changed. That this isn't normal. Blah.

He pressed his face closer to the paned window. He unleashed his tongue and licked the cold glass. It tasted empty.

The madman said, "I need to taste the sky."

She hugged him from behind, placing her head on his shoulder. She spoke with a soothing voice. She told him she knows he missed his friend. He stopped licking the

window and punched through it, shattering glass everywhere. She screamed and ducked for cover. Blood gushed from his hand.

The madman said, “Don’t fucking tell me anything.”

She screamed his name and tried to talk to him but the madman slugged her in the mouth with a bloody fist. She fell back onto the floor, clutching her jaw. Through her crying, she pleaded with the madman, called his name, and reached for his hand. He didn’t even know she was still there. He was already out the door, heading towards the stars. He was determined.

If I actually was telling a story, I would pause here. I would wait for Floyd to ask what happens next. I would smile and know that I had him with a good cliffhanger. I would be pleased with myself that I had gained my audience of one’s attention and hopefully started to spark the inspiration deep inside of him. But I’m not telling a story. I’m just working here. Working like normal people do.

Floyd stands in front of me, motioning to the paint machines. “Remember how to do it all, don’t you?”

I say, “All of it.”

Floyd asks me if I remember how to mix paint and offers to show how if I have forgotten. I thank him and assure him that I know what to do. He tells me about the hot ass that comes to the paint department.

He says, “It’s MILF heaven over here, dude.”

I nod my head, not really sure what a MILF is. I think I have an idea, but I don't really care. Maybe I should care what a MILF is. Normal people care about things like that. They care to laugh about them or be offended by them.

But I don't get a chance to ask because there is a customer at the counter. The boss here at Harry's Hardware will tell you no employee can leave the customer waiting. Customer service is number one here. Normal people care about that sort of thing. They either care enough to abide by it or care to laugh about it behind the boss' backs.

The customer is a business man in his late thirties in a suit, blue chip in his ear, deep in conversation on his cell phone. He slides a paint color chip towards me and points to a color while continuing his discussion. I ask him what sheen he would like and he holds up his index finger before I can finish.

He says, "I'm sorry I got to go, Paul. Some guy's trying to talk to me at the same time you are. Yeah, I know. Okay, Paul. Talk to you."

He pushes a button on his cell phone at his hip. "Now, what was it that you wanted?"

I'm amazed that I'm not the least bit angry at this man. I commend myself on my extreme patience. I'm not sure if its normal to be so calm, but do know that normal bosses would appreciate it. I politely ask him what sheen he would like his "Teddy Bear Brown" paint in and where he was going to use it—meaning interior or exterior.

He shrugs. "Uh, it's for my son's room."

"I'd go with a satin then, Sir. It's easy to clean, but it's not overly-shiny like a semi-gloss. Perfect for kids' rooms."

He thanks me for my advice and tells me about how he hates painting and his wife won't stop bitching at him to get it done. I feel like a regular guy for a minute or two. I mix his paint, give it to him; he thanks me and then leaves.

We get busy soon after that. I explain to an elderly lady how to use spackling. I talk a man in a jumpsuit out of painting his stovetop. I recommend tinted primers for customers with dark colors. I mix gallons and quarts and five-gallon buckets. I answer whatever questions they throw at me. I smile and thank them for shopping with us. I make sure everyone gets some mixing sticks and a can opener before they leave. I try to add on brushes and tape and rollers and drop cloths to every order. The routine warms my heart. I feel like things are getting back to normal.

It slows up eventually and Floyd comes over to me. "I can't believe you let that guy talk to you like that."

I ask, "What guy?"

He says, "That dickhole on his cell phone buying his shit-brown paint."

I say, "He was okay."

He shakes his head. "I would have gone crazy on his ass."

I try to force a laugh and say something normal, but nothing comes out.

His face turns red and he looks to the floor. "I'm sorry."

I say, "Yeah."

If I were telling Floyd the story about the madman, this probably would be a good time to continue. He would say, "So, what happened to the madman next, Eric? Please tell me."

I would have to smile and tell him that the madman got into his pick-up truck, opened his moon roof, and took off down the road. The madman didn't know exactly where he was going but had a good feeling that the truck would know. So he just drove and drove. There was not a single cloud in the sky and he loved it.

He drove the truck to Ellis Bridge. Ellis Bridge stands high over the river that he once swam in as a child. It's the closest place to the sky in town.

He got out and walked to the metal barricades at the western side of the bridge. He took off all of his clothes and threw them back at his truck. He stood naked at the edge but didn't look down toward the running river. His eyes gazed high into the night. He held his arms out as if they were wings. He then closed his eyes and jumped.

Falling, he turned himself back to face skyward and opened his eyes. There wasn't a cloud in it. He stopped falling. He rose into the air, high towards the stars, he reached out to try and touch them. He didn't need to flap his arms, he just floated. He soared into the air, the wind brisk at his face. He didn't stick his tongue out to try and savor, he took full bites of the sky the best he could. But he couldn't taste anything. It tasting like his window—empty. He dove and then rose, he did loop-to-loops, but it remained tasteless. It was cardboard.

The madman had a feeling he didn't have much time left to grab that flavor he's longed for his entire life. He felt desperate. Maybe he was in the wrong spot. He flew farther across town.

He passed his elementary school and saw Steven Parnell picking on the madman when he was six years old, but he couldn't stop to stand up to the bully. He tried to fight

back tears as the bully teased him now worse for crying. He wanted to swoop down and stand up for himself but couldn't. The sky held him tight. He kept flying.

He flew over Fairfax Shopping Center where a twelve-year-old madman walked into Happy Harry's with Michael Gray, but he couldn't stop to tell himself not to steal those candy bars. He soared past his first kiss and wished he could yell to himself to take his retainer out, but no sounds came from his mouth. He flew past his trip to Ireland and hoped he would have spent more time with his family and less time at the pubs. He saw his date from prom and wished he called her back. He saw his car wreck, his college orientation, his car getting stolen, his mother crying, his father laughing, and even the day he met *her*.

He couldn't stop for any of it. He had to be somewhere else. He gained speed by diving, arms at his side, his heart pounding in his chest.

He rocketed high over the wooded road of Hollis, hoping he wasn't too late. He saw his friend's car and he swooped down behind it. The red Toyota sped on. The madman flew up next to the window trying to gain his friend's attention.

The madman said, "Pull over and come fly with me."

They raced neck and neck. It was the fastest the madman had ever traveled. He closed his eyes and felt the breeze smack him in the face. When he opened his eyes, his friend's car was no longer next to him. Back over his shoulder, the Toyota and a large oak tree had formed into one giant mess on the side of the road. The madman abruptly turned around and shot himself back in that direction. He couldn't look at the wreckage. He tried to look towards the sky and the stars, but it had clouded over. He flapped his arms and tried to fly but gravity fought back, slowly pulling him toward the earth.

The madman said, “Fuck you, I can fly.”

The madman felt the hard ground in his back when he lands. His friend’s disfigured corpse had dislodged itself from the car and lay on the hood. There was glass and blood everywhere. The madman could swear he saw the dead body smiling and then it was all gone—his friend, the car, the tree, the road, the memories, all of it.

The madman found himself on the shore of the river looking up at the sky. He couldn’t move. Sharp pains ran through his entire body. He tasted warm blood streaming down from the top of his head. His heart beat slowly in his chest and he knew he was still breathing. And it was right there looking up at the rising sun, the faint stars in the background, barely moving or breathing, that the madman finally tasted the sky.

Maybe it was the blood, although the sky did not taste of blood. Maybe it was the slow short breathes, although the sky tasted sweeter than any breath he had ever breathed. He was alive. It was the first time he realized he was alive and it was probably the first time he wasn’t supposed to be. The sky tasted like life and it was a taste that the madman would never forget. It wasn’t a disappointment like sometimes hopes and dreams are. Unlike like the times he hoped he would get everything on his Christmas list or expecting the greatest party of all time on his twenty-first birthday, this was genuine satisfaction. He kept staring at the sky for a few more hours before he started blacking out and before the ambulance arrived. He remembered one of the paramedics asking why he was smiling.

The madman said, “I’m full.”

This would be where Floyd would be speechless. He would mouth the word *wow* and shake his head. I wouldn't even feel like I copped out about describing the taste because words couldn't do it justice. I would even explain that and let Floyd know that someday, he too would taste the sky. Maybe Floyd would be inspired to live his life to the fullest and appreciate every minute of it. I wish I could tell that story. But I don't. I'm just standing here at a paint counter trying to be normal.

Floyd comes back, untying his apron on the way. "That guy needs help with the pressure washers. You mind taking it? I'm supposed to be on break now and my girl is waiting for me."

I nod my head. I understand. I know what it's like to take a break. I know what it's like to have a girlfriend waiting for you. I have normal thoughts.

A man in the jeans and Florida Gators T-shirt stands cross-armed admiring the 2500 PSI gas-powered pressure washer with the green spray paint on the side of it. I ask him if he needs any help.

He half-nods to acknowledge my presence. "How much is this thing?"

"It's \$198."

He points to the new machines by the paint sprayers. "Why is it cheaper than the others over there?"

"Well," I say, "this one has been refurbished."

He asks, "What does that mean?"

I bend down to finger the machine showing the ins and outs of the five and a half horse powered engine. I hadn't seen one of these things in a while. It's amazing how

many times I've sold these things, convincing people that they could use them when I myself had never even started one up.

I turn back to the customer. "Sometimes we get one back that just stops working and can't be easily repaired. We send it back to the company and they redo it inside out. They inspect everything and make sure it works again. Then they send it back to us and we sell it a bargain price to you."

He seems interested, scratching his forehead. "What was wrong with this one?"

I stand up and cross my arms next to him. "They never tell us what was originally wrong with it. They just assure us everything is all better now."

He continues to inspect the machine, closer now. He tells me he needs something to wash his driveway and his house maybe once in a while. I tell him that the power on the washer would be plenty for his needs. He says he's been putting off buying one for a while because of the price. I tell him he won't get a better price. He asks me about a warranty.

I knew it was coming. "It's pretty much as is. Thirty days to return it, but no official warranty."

He gets up looking worried. "What would you do?"

It's true that this old monster could very well just up and die on this guy, but it could always be brought back to the store to be repaired. Why not take a chance on it? A hundred bucks is a hundred bucks and he wants to save money. It's been refurbished, so it should work just the same as the rest of them.

I say, "Things can always be fixed. It's a good deal."

He smiles and thanks me. He tells me he'll talk to his wife about it and if it's still here the next time he comes, maybe he'll take a chance on it. I am pretty sure he'll be back. I tell him to have a nice day and head back to the paint counter.

An old black phone with a rotary dial sits not too far from my left arm. It reminds me of one we had when I was a kid where the only calls I had to worry about were from my friends who wanted to know if I could sleep over or play ball. But here that phone leads to questions about paint and return policies and store hours and normal things like that.

I could use that phone to call Heather. I would say, "Hey stranger," or "Guess who's back at work?" No, that's not right. That wouldn't work at all.

Maybe I would just say, "Hi Heather, it's Eric." Then I would just wait for her to respond. I would sit there in silence as long as it took. Maybe I would have to throw in a "Don't hang up." Or maybe I shouldn't because she has every right to hang up on me if she wants to. I could tell her the madman story from the beginning to the end and how inspirational it is to know that you're alive or I could just say that I'm sorry and I've changed.

The cashiers stand in front of their registers, avoiding eye contact with me. I can feel their stares when I look away. I wonder how long these looks will last. The aftertaste of the sky is still strong on the back of my tongue and I smile a genuine smile at the confused faces. I pick up two of the rubber mallets and bang a tune on the stainless steel counter.

I'm just a normal worker here, banging hammers on the counter, thinking of what to say on the phone to someone very important to me. I'm just like you. This is what

people do. The sky outside the clear glass, automatic doors is very blue and calm. I lick my lips. This is normal. This is normal. This is normal.

ANYTHING RIGHT NOW

When Star walked in her bedroom, home early from vacation to surprise her boyfriend of three years, she found him naked in bed with her thirteen-year-old cousin. Her cousin covered herself with Star's lavender satin sheets, while her boyfriend didn't move at all. He didn't even look surprised. He smiled at her. He didn't say a word. Her cousin looked worried and nervous—perhaps even a bit sorry. But not him. He just smiled and didn't say a word.

Here she is now. She falls face first to the floor. It doesn't hurt. Later maybe—but not now. Her head spins from the mix of alcohol and sugar. The carpet smells of stale beer and strawberries. It itches against her nose but not enough for her to do anything. She remains motionless, save her slow methodic breathing.

Flat on my face again, she guesses.

The party continues around her. Loud music blasts from the large speakers of a stereo system. She can't make out the song—she can only hear the bass thumping and echoing through the walls. People laugh and she knows they are laughing at her. She doesn't care.

A light breeze passes over her still body every time someone steps over her. She can tell what type of shoes everyone wears as they pass by—a pair of low-cut Adidas, followed by some hiking boots, a few sandals, and a pair of high heels. Shoes flying over her. She doesn't really care.

Bruce had snapped in his girlfriend's family kitchen. Her brother made some joke about Bruce being a rapist and they all laughed. There alongside the stainless steel appliances and the mahogany table with the Halloween tablecloth—that's where they all laughed at him. He face reddened and his fists clenched. Rape was somehow funny to his girlfriend's family. He burned inside. He started to sweat. He punched her brother three times in the face before her father broke it up. They threw Bruce out in the street and it was there bleeding on the pavement that he heard his girlfriend say that she never wanted to see him again.

Here he is now. Drinks go down easy tonight. He's not a big fan of rap music, but the beats hit him right tonight. People laugh across the room. A girl lies on her face on the floor in front of them. He rushes over to her and offers his hand.

He asks, "Did you fall? Are you okay?"

She takes his hand and rises to her feet. "Yes and yes."

She looks over her savior of the moment. He is not so bad looking, a nice combination of dirty-blond hair and blue-green eyes. He's got some facial hair, but it's groomed. Not a bad dresser. His shoes are brown Sketchers. She was sure no Sketchers walked over her while she was on the ground.

She says, "My name is Star."

He thinks she is cute. Not hot, but cute—maybe even pretty. Her nose is a little big, but not obnoxious. Her breasts are big enough and her ass isn't too fat or anything.

Her teeth are straight, which is a plus. She smells of booze and something tropical—kiwi maybe? Not a bad smell at all—very feminine.

He says, “I’ve never known a Star before. I’m Bruce.”

She says, “I’ve known two other Bruces.”

“Good guys?”

“No. Jerks.”

He frowns. “Oh.”

She shrugs. “Yeah.”

“Do you want a drink?”

“Sure.”

He makes her a drink with no alcohol. Pineapple juice, cranberry, and Sprite. He tells her that he learned how to make them in the Bahamas. He does not tell her that there is no alcohol in the drink. They sit down on an old couch. They sit in silence for a few minutes, each smiling at the other and then looking away, taking a drink.

Finally, Star says, “I want to tell you something, Bruce.”

“What is it, Star?”

“Today, I walked in on my boyfriend of three years having sex with my thirteen-year-old cousin.”

He doesn’t know how to respond. It doesn’t make sense to him. Why would a guy give up a good-looking girl like this to sleep with a child? Assuming her boyfriend is around the same age as the rest of the people in the party, he’s got to be in his mid-twenties at least. He can’t believe it, but then again he can. He remembers his friend, Kyle, who cut holes in porno magazines and then lined the holes with Vaseline so he

could take masturbation to a new level. His cousin used to tell girls he loved them back in high school to take their virginity. He once heard about this guy in high school who would pick up mentally retarded girls because he said they were easier to bang. Not all guys were like that, but some were.

He says, "I don't know what to say."

She says, "There's nothing to say. It's just fucked up is all."

"Definitely that."

He takes a long drink. His drink contains alcohol and it goes down okay. He finishes it and wants more.

"I want to tell you something, Star."

"What is it, Bruce?"

"Last week, I beat up my girlfriend's brother."

Star smiles. "Why did you do that?"

"He said I was a rapist."

She tenses a bit and shifts in her seat. "Why would he say something like that?"

He realizes she's a little worried. "No, it's okay. He was making a joke."

"A joke?"

"Apparently, rape is funny in their family."

She didn't understand how rape could be a joke. She couldn't believe it, but then again she could. Her family made jokes about death. They always found it easier to make light of death when someone close to them was dying. Her brother joked that they would stuff their dog, Puffy, when he died and attach a hose to him so he could continue to piss on the carpet in memoriam. Her father joked that their Uncle Jack should be

buried under the front porch so his wife could continue to walk over him. When both her grandparents died simulatneaously in a car accident, she could only joke that there was no need to fight over any inheritance because there was no way she was moving into a trailer. Her family loved those jokes. They laughed and laughed about them. She never knew how strange it sounded until she heard a family joking about rape.

She says, "I really don't know what to say."

He says, "Just fucked up, right?"

She smiles. "Definitely that."

They sit in silence for a few minutes. Her head spins. He thinks she really is a star. She thinks he is a nice guy. He wonders if she needs help. She wonders if she needs help. He wants another drink. She wants another drink.

He gets to his feet. "I'm getting another drink. You want one?"

She nods. "Maybe a little more rum this time."

She likes him. He's a nice guy. Nice, nice, nice. She wonders if there are more nice guys out there. She knows he means well but she knows she means not to be well. She wants to be used and use that guy right back. This guy is too nice for that. Bruce might have been the one had it been any other night. But not tonight. Besides nice, she wants anything right now.

He makes her the same drink with the same amount of alcohol. He knows she's too drunk and needs to sober up. He wonders if she will even notice or ever care that he cared enough to not let her drink anymore. He thinks that maybe, just maybe this could be that night where he meets the proverbial special someone. It could work. They seem to get along. He looks back at her but she is gone.

She's on the other side of the room, sitting next to some asshole with too much hair gel. He can't help but hear when she announces loudly that her boyfriend fucked a thirteen-year-old girl. People turn and stare at her and she seems unaware. Maybe she's aware and just doesn't give care. The guy she's talking to wears baggy shorts and low-cut Adidas sneakers.

That guy says, "What a fag."

She says, "I know it."

Bruce's stomach turns. He thought he was going to save her but wondered if she really wanted to be saved at all. He pours her drink on the floor and drop-kicks her cup across the room. He chugs his drink and leaves the party.

Just another night, he guesses.

Star lets this new guy kiss her and put his hands all over her. She hates the way he touches her and it feels good. His tongue in her mouth tastes like a rape joke and she can almost see the humor in it.

WHEN SPEAKING OF GALWAY

and I can't stop staring into her big green eyes because they are just so big and comforting. She must notice because she flashes me a quick wink before turning her attention to the bartender.

She says, "Two more pints of the black stuff, please."

The bartender says, "That's a good lass."

The jukebox blasts the Chili Peppers and I admit I'm a little surprised that I've heard mostly American music over here on the Emerald Isle as opposed to traditional Irish songs, but fuck it. I'll listen to anything right now. Anything because it's nine o'clock in the morning and I've got a nice buzz going or because I'm overseas for the first time in my life or because I'm about to see Jeremiah for the first time since Chrissie died—I don't know which. But anything will do for now. Jasmine looks beautiful but she's always looked beautiful for as long as I've known her and I'm sure that she looked beautiful even before that but who really knows because sometimes people take years to develop their looks like that ugly duckling that was really a swan or whatever. She smiles at me and offers her pint of Guinness in the air for me to clank mine against in a joyous cheer for... what? Ireland? Chrissie maybe?

I'm glad I'm here with Jas. We've always been close. Thanks to her I never needed a shrink and thanks to me she's always had someone so pathetic that she could always build her self-esteem by simply comparing her life to mine. We tried to date a few times unsuccessfully—very unsuccessfully actually. Every time we kissed, she laughed and although she always apologized for it, I never felt any better and sometimes felt like I would cry but never did because I try never to cry because men aren't supposed to do that.

She told me on occasion that it was okay for me to cry but I never believed her and just bottled it up inside. The one day that I did cry was when Chrissie died but I didn't let anyone see me or anything but I had to do it because I missed Chrissie and I felt bad for her family and Jeremiah and even angry and ashamed at myself because I knew that Jeremiah blamed me for her dying and all. The last time I saw Jeremiah was over three years ago and now he's going to be here in Galway any minute now and I really don't know what to say to him or how to feel about it.

Jasmine says, "Oh Artie, everything will be okay."

I say, "Sure it will."

She says, "Are you alright with seeing Jeremiah?"

I say, "I don't want to talk about it."

This bar reminds me of the one where I saw Chrissie the last night she was alive with the same glazed wooden bar top and matching stools but this one is more authentic because it really is an Irish pub because it's in Ireland and the one I was in with her was an American bar trying to imitate the style. We talked about a lot of different things that night but mostly about how we would love to actually sit in a bar in Ireland instead of pretending to be in one while still in America. We both wanted to see this world inside and out but neither of us had ever left the country—I think I had been as far east as Chicago and she had once visited an aunt in Vegas. Later that night, she grabbed my cock and told me that we needed to fuck the demons out but I told her I couldn't because Jeremiah was my best friend and even if they were having trouble in their relationship I still couldn't have sex with her no matter how badly I really wanted to because even as pathetic as I am most of the time, I still really believed that I was a good friend and she

got pissed at me and wouldn't talk to me for hours but later calmed down and asked if she could still stay over because she couldn't go home and I told her that would be fine and she could have my bed and I would take the futon. I found her naked and dead the next morning because she had taken a whole bottle of sleeping pills after I had passed out. She taped a note to the bottle that read, *Thought at least you would understand, Artie. Love, Chrissie.* But I didn't understand and I never figured it out and I just cried about it for awhile when I was alone. I wonder if Jeremiah ever cried about it and I wonder if he still blames me and I hate all this wondering it makes me want to cry again and I don't want to cry especially in a bar in Ireland. I remember that it rained that night that Chrissie died and I used to really love the rain. I ask the bartender for a refill and then turn my attention back to Jasmine.

I say, "So where is he?"

She says, "I thought you didn't want to talk about it."

"I don't. Where is he?"

"He's checking into his room with Denny."

"They're sharing a room?"

She nods. "We're sharing the other one."

"We are?"

"There are two beds."

"Oh."

We decide to down a shot of Jameson and then try the Tullamore Dew that I think is actually smoother and then we have a few more beers and spend a few more Euros. Chrissie would have told me that she loved being here that this kind of pub was one

where people that mattered got drunk—like writers and thinkers and difference makers all drank together throughout history and that reminds me that one of James Joyce’s girlfriends or wives or something had a house here in Galway somewhere and I wonder if I’ll actually take the time to go see it while I’m here and then I tell Jasmine that I need a nap and she tells me to hold on because Denny and Jeremiah should be down soon and that we were all going out to eat and I tell that I can’t and that I need to take a nap and think I say something about Chrissie which confuses her and then I find the elevator and by the time I find my room I’m surprised that I actually have a key and figure out how to use it and then I see my bed across

when Jasmine wakes me. She smells sweet. She must have showered and brushed her teeth. She tells me that we are meeting Denny and Jeremiah at the some bar that sounds like, *The Keys*, but is spelled, *Quays*. I get out of bed, surprised to feel so wide awake and not really hungover at all. I shower, shit, and shave, then get dressed and spray myself with some cologne that Jasmine bought me for my birthday last year. She says I smell nice and asks me if I want a shot. I can’t turn one down in Ireland, so we drink to a good time abroad, and then head to the pub.

The most remarkable thing about the Quays is the stage that appears to be hovering above the bar floor. Two young girls wear these short, colorful dresses covered in Celtic symbols like crosses and such, complete with knee-high socks. They do a jig around to some bagpipes and guitars while Jasmine and I drink and dance below. She tells me that Denny and Jeremiah must have stopped at another pub on the way and that we should just have a good time until they get here. That sounds good to me and I order another round

and I can't believe that I'm actually dancing and realize maybe I'm just having a good time

and it's the first time that I've been alone with Jeremiah since I don't really know when and I feel like I'm shaking but I don't really think that I am I think I'm just imagining it and I don't know what to say. It's not like he's talking either. He's looking around as if he's going to see someone he knows when he has to realize anyone he knows besides me or Denny or Jasmine resides across the Atlantic Ocean.

I say, "How you been?"

He says, "What?"

I yell, "How you been?"

He says, "Okay. You?"

I want to tell him that things are okay but that I really hate my job and that I'm writing but that it's for a meaningless local newspaper and that I only cover PTA meetings and county fairs. I want to tell him about my two girlfriends that I've had since we last talked, Cori and Lauren, and how they were both hot but later turned out to be total manipulative bitches. And I want to tell him about the great and shitty movies I've seen since because that used to be something we always got a kick out of back in the day and I wanted to talk some sports since three whole Eagles seasons had flown by since we last spoke and I want to tell him that I miss him. I want to tell him that I miss Chrissie and ask him if he still thinks it was my fault that she died.

I say, "Been okay."

We don't say much else to each other and both pretend to be highly engaged in the girls dancing to *Wild Rover* on stage and I even sing along as I wait for Denny and Jasmine to get back from wherever they got off to and before long they are back and I talk to Denny. He tells me that he sells cell phones now and that his old lady is always nagging him and that he loves her but sometimes he needs to get away and he asks me if I know what he means and I tell him that I do know and that this is the first time that I ever left the country.

He says, "No shit. Me too. Pretty cool, huh?"

I say, "It is that."

"I like the way they talk over here."

"Me too."

He drinks some of his beer. "That and those Irish eyes. You got to love those sexy eyes."

"You got to."

Me and Denny always got along even though we were never all that close we were drinking buddies and I don't think that I ever saw him outside of a bar or sober for that matter and maybe that is why it was always easy to get along with him. He was originally a friend of Jasmine's brother, Jimmy, but when Jimmy got into some bad shit the friendship turned more towards Jasmine who was always a good girl and through her he met me and Jeremiah and Chrissie and his wife and other people and we all hung out back in the day. Jasmine keeps trying to ask me things so Jeremiah can hear and join the conversation but it is too loud and I can't hear her and she can't hear me and Jeremiah can't hear anyone and Denny just keeps talking to me about Irish girls so Jasmine signals

to me that we need to get a table upstairs and my stomach grinds because I know this will mean we will have to talk. At the table, Jeremiah doesn't look as uncomfortable and even is smiling and his smile doesn't look forced like I'm sure mine does every time I try to smile.

Jeremiah says, "So, Jas tells me you're a reporter."

I say, "It's a tiny local paper."

He says, "You're still writing."

Jasmine says, "Stop playing it off as nothing. Yes, it's a small paper, but he's the head reporter. He writes at least five articles every time an issue comes out."

Denny says, "That's the shit."

I say, "I'm the *only* reporter. The other two guys are editors."

Jasmine punches my arm. "So?"

Jeremiah says, "You're doing something with your life. Good for you, man."

Denny says, "Fuck yeah. Who wants a shot?"

I don't know if I am really doing anything with my life and I want to tell them all that but they seem happy and I don't want to disappoint them so I keep my mouth shut and just smile and nod and Denny gets up to get some shots from the bar and Jasmine tells us about another pub not far from where we are and how we might all

King's Head and they call it the King's Head because I think the Irish back in the day were calling for the King of England's head because they didn't want to be part of the United Kingdom, or maybe it wasn't the United Kingdom back then, but they didn't want the English to control them and wanted their independence and all and that's

understandable because I know there have been times in my life where I didn't want people telling me what to do and it would only piss me off if they did and goddamn there are some fine looking Irish lasses here and I think I have to talk to some of them and maybe I should introduce them to Jeremiah because I don't think that he is seeing anyone and it would be nice if I could introduce him to a nice girl and I was the one that introduced him to Chrissie and now I need a drink and the band is playing covers of American rock songs and I didn't come over here to listen to cover bands play pop and rock songs or maybe it didn't have anything to do with that and I need a drink and Jasmine and Jeremiah are upstairs at a table and Denny is at the bar ordering drinks and I need a drink.

Denny says to the bartender, "I need ten pints of Guinness, five pints of Smithwicks, two bottles of Bud, and eight shots of Jameson."

I say, "How are we going to carry them?"

He says, "I'll get a tray."

"Don't ask for a tray."

"No, man. We need them. It's okay. We need them."

I think I ask him about Chrissie but I mumble too much and he doesn't care that I'm talking anyway because he is too busy yelling at the bartender that the tray is too small for all the drinks and I try to tell him that I miss Chrissie and I miss Jeremiah and I miss rolling from bar to bar with everyone and he's not listening to me and no one at the bar can understand his slurred American accent and I feel totally isolated and need to take a piss. When I get out of the bathroom, I notice two attractive young lasses smiling at me and even though they may not be smiling at me, I pretend they are and walk up to them.

One has a blue sweater and red hair and the other is a blonde with a long white-sleeved turtleneck shirt and I walk right up to them and say hello and they giggle at me.

The redhead says, “Are you an American, Friendly?”

I say, “I am very much so.”

Then they laugh and the blonde one mumbles something in the redhead’s ear that I can’t make out because her accent is much thicker than I first thought and the redhead giggles back and then her green eyes meet mine.

She says, “We like the way you talk.”

I say, “I like the way you talk.”

We chat up a conversation for a few and I tell her my name is Artie and she tells me her name is Lisa and tells me her blonde friend’s name but I forget it as soon as the words come out of her mouth and I tell her that Galway is such a beautiful city with the docks and cobblestone streets and shops and she tells me that she’s lived here for all of her life and her friend giggles and speaks more gibberish that I can’t understand and then Lisa looks familiar to me and I could swear that I met her somewhere before and ask her if she’s ever been to America before and she tells me that she hasn’t and her blonde friend looks around the bar as if she is looking for better and more interesting people to talk to and I tell them they have to meet my friend and lead them upstairs.

It takes me a while to find Jeremiah and Jasmine because the King’s Head is dark and all the wooden tables and chairs look alike and the darkness combined with the booze makes all the people look alike. The look on Jeremiah reminds me of when he told me that I killed Chrissie and that he would never forgive me for it and I am immediately struck

with a feeling of sorrow and anger and I don't really know what to say and maybe I am just imagining this feeling anyway and Lisa looks really good in her sweater.

I say, "Girls, this is Jeremiah. You have to know him. He's Jeremiah."

Jasmine and Jeremiah introduce themselves to the two Irish girls and even exchange handshakes and I wonder if Jeremiah is happier with me since I introduced him to some girls or if maybe someone wants another drink because I know that I want one and then I realize the girls might leave if they don't sit down so I run to the nearest table and grab two chairs and the couple at the table gives me a weird look I guess because I didn't ask them if they were using the chairs and I don't care and take them anyway and place one on either side of Jeremiah.

I say, "Yes, girls. Sit down. This is Jeremiah."

Jeremiah says, "I just met them."

Jasmine says, "*We* just met them."

I feel sorry for ignoring Jas and hope she isn't mad at me. "Sorry, Jas. This is Jas, girls. And this is Jeremiah. You *have* to know him. Jeremiah, this is Lisa and her blonde friend."

Out of the corner of my eye I catch a glimpse of Denny moonwalking towards us and I start to laugh because that used to be his thing back in the day and it would always make me and Chrissie and Jas laugh and laugh and laugh and Denny yells over and over again.

"Drinks, drinks, drinks. Get your drinks from the generous American."

I run right up to him. "I'd like to take advantage of that generosity, Sir."

He says, "Well, I was only giving them to the Irish, but one American won't hurt."

I take a pint of Guinness from the tray and Denny takes one and we toast to Ireland and Irish lasses and then we drink and I can hear the music from downstairs and it sounds better than it did before and I hope they play *Wild Rover* soon because it's my favorite and it was Chrissie's favorite and I miss her and Denny tells me that I drank my first beer way too fast.

He says, "Better have another one."

So we toast again and I say, "To Chrissie," and he says, "To Artie," and we enjoy our pints and then we head back to the table and Jeremiah and Jasmine are still there but the two girls are gone and I am confused and wonder why they would leave when we were having such a great time.

I say, "What happened to Lisa and Blonde Girl?"

An emotionless Jeremiah says, "They left."

Jasmine says, "They got mad at you and left."

Denny says, "You met Blonde Girl?"

Jasmine tells me to sit down and Jeremiah is drinking a beer, looking at the ceiling and I leave to look for the two girls but I can't find them anywhere and I even head back downstairs and realize that the music wasn't any better as they are just playing old rock songs from the fifties and I see another redhead at the bar and she is even more sexy than Lisa and Denny follows me and hands the rest of his drinks out along the way.

He says, "She looks like Chrissie."

I say, "A little."

"Except her red hair is probably real."

"Probably."

Denny pats me on the back and leaves me for the dance floor and I head over to the new redhead and tell her my name is Artie and before she can respond I tell her that I'm American and that she has to meet my friend and she agrees and I lead her by the hand back up the stairs to Jeremiah and Jasmine and Jeremiah sees me coming and looks pissed but I can't figure out why so I tell this new girl I got to sit down next to him. I say, "Jeremiah, this is Lisa."

She says, "My name isn't Lisa. It's Mary."

Jeremiah shakes her hand and gives her a half-hearted smile and then looks away completely avoided eye contact with me and Jasmine must sense something is wrong because she gets very polite and overtly friendly and introduces herself to the new girl.

I say, "You okay, Jeremiah?"

He doesn't answer me so I sit down next to him and try to get him to look me in the eyes but he avoids my every move and bangs his fist in a soft rhythm on the table over and over again and he looks over at Jas.

He says, "Tell him to stop staring at me."

But I'm not staring at him. I'm just trying to get his attention and talk to him like we haven't done for years even though I really have no idea what I want to say I really just want to see if he wants to say something and then maybe I could think of something to say afterwards and then maybe everything will be like it was and we will all be friends again and maybe even Chrissie could somehow come back.

Jasmine says, "Artie, maybe you should take Mary back downstairs. She probably wants to dance with you."

I say, "I brought her to meet Jeremiah."

Jeremiah says, “I didn’t ask you to bring me anything.”

Mary gets up from the table. “I’m going back downstairs.”

Jasmine waves to her as she leaves. “Nice meeting you.”

Jeremiah won’t stop looking at me now and I wish I didn’t try so hard now to get him to look me in the eyes because I’m scared of what to say and I don’t know what to do and I wish Chrissie never died and I look back and forth from Jasmine to Jeremiah.

I say, “I just... You know... I was only... I don’t...”

The words don’t come to me and I wish for a second that I was a great artist and I could somehow paint a picture to express how I felt inside but then I realized that I didn’t know how I felt inside and he keeps staring at me and I think I see hatred in his eyes and I feel a sharp pain in my stomach and I want to throw up and he finishes his beer and slams it down on the table.

He says, “If you want to replace something, start with the beer that was in this glass.”

I say, “You want another beer? Fine. I’ll get you another fucking beer.”

I get up and head to the bar and my stomach feels as if someone has stabbed me and is turning the blade back and forth, refusing to pull it out and Jasmine follows me and she puts her arm around my shoulders and she feels warm and I don’t want her ever to move it again.

I say, “Should I get him another beer?”

She says, “No, I’ll talk to him.”

I say, “What the fuck is the matter with him?”

She says, “Are you okay?”

I say, “I don’t know.”

She tells me to sit at the bar but not to order any more drinks and that she would be right back in a few minutes and then we could go back to the hotel and call it a night and that everything would be okay in the morning and then she leaves me and I can't stop thinking about Chrissie and her dyed-red hair and her naked body on my bed and how we used to talk all night about why our lives were so boring and now I wanted to be back in that boring life instead of here and Denny comes up to me, sweaty from dancing and he hands me a shot and I down it quickly and it burns and then he hands me a beer to chase it with and I thank him.

He says, "Everything okay?"

I say, "Jeremiah's pissed because I keep bringing him girls."

"I knew he was gay."

"I think it's Chrissie."

"Chrissie's dead, man."

I don't respond but sip my beer and Denny goes on and on about how Jeremiah needs to get over Chrissie and that he's no fun anymore and way too uptight and how the music is great and the woman are beautiful and realize that I can't sleep in my own bed tonight and can't watch the shows I want to watch on television and if I open my mouth to anyone they will know that I'm not from here and I don't know why I'm here and I miss Chrissie as much as Jeremiah does and maybe even more.

I say, "Does he blame me for her?"

Denny says, "Don't know."

"Was it my fault?"

"Do you think it was?"

“I don’t know.”

He pats me on the back to try to comfort me to say don’t worry about it maybe or it’s all in the past or maybe just shut up about it, but it’s comforting anyway and I appreciate the effort and he makes me do shots and I tell him that I’m going to puke but he tells me that’s bullshit and

Chrissie is dancing naked across my room and I know she’s dead but she doesn’t look dead and I ask her if she has any more pills and she tells me she thought I would understand and before I can tell her I don’t understand she is dead again and I don’t know what to do or say and I look around for Jeremiah to tell him it happened again but

passed out because I wake to Jeremiah shaking me and I wonder where I am and see that most of the people have left and the bar is brighter and I really don’t know where I am and my head pounds and my stomach is still grinding.

I say, “Where’s Chrissie?”

He doesn’t respond and even though I know that his eyes are brown, they look crimson to me and I don’t know why and I’m confused and I don’t know why I said that because I know that Chrissie is dead and maybe I was having a dream about her while I was sleeping there on the bar and Jeremiah never responds as he is escorted quickly out the door by an embracing Denny and Jasmine comes up to me and tells me it’s time to leave and I agree with her and get myself up on two wobbly feet and follow her out onto the dark Galway streets and I can tell it’s not home because it looks too authentic, like it’s

always been there. I follow Jas down the cobblestone streets and I try to count them but then I can hear that she is crying.

I say, "Did I make you cry?"

She says, "No, it's not your fault."

"Was it Jeremiah?"

"This was all a bad idea."

"Ireland? I love it, Jas."

She tries to wipe her eyes and she looks like she did when we were young and as striking as ever. "You're just saying that."

We walk along the river now and there isn't much light and the river runs a deep hint of navy blue and I know it is really a brownish color by day, but now it looks cleaner and a fisherman stands in the middle of the narrow river and casts out and we stop walking and Jasmine faces me.

She says, "You guys used to be such great friends and I wanted you to be that way again."

I say, "But there was Chrissie."

She says, "Do you hate me?"

"Oh come on, Jas, you know I could never hate you."

"I'm sure you could if you try hard enough."

I want to kiss her more than I ever had in my entire life and even more than I've wanted to kiss anyone in my entire life or even fuck them but I hold back because I know it never works but then she leans in and presses her warm, soft lips against my cold, chapped ones

and then backs away and I can only stand there frozen, unsure of what to do and her tears dry but she doesn't wear a smile.

I say, "You didn't laugh."

She says, "I don't think it's funny anymore."

She walks slowly back towards the Imperial Inn and tells me to come along and I tell her that I will be there in a moment and the fisherman still fishes and it starts to rain and I look up toward the sky and let the drops fall onto my face and I try to think of what Chrissie meant by me understanding why she did it and I thought maybe it did have to do with me or maybe it was just here or maybe it was just the rain and so I let the rain into my mouth and then I fall to my knees and vomit and I used to love the rain

way back to the hotel and find Jeremiah and Jasmine at the table and see Denny at the bar ordering more drinks and there a few raggedy fellows at the bar next to them and they are loud and obnoxious and I try to ignore them and sit at the table with Jer and Jas.

I say, "Can we talk?"

He says, "About what?"

And I'm not sure what exactly we can talk about but feel that we need to talk and I try to think of words that can get a conversation started and Jasmine looks worried and Denny makes his way back to the table and puts drinks in front of us all.

I say, "I didn't kill her."

He tenses up and I can see that he is shaking and sweating and I wish I didn't open my mouth and I'm unsure that I should open my mouth again and no one is saying anything

and all I can hear are the two annoying drunks at the bar and I think that I can even smell them.

Jeremiah says, "Of course not. It was me."

Jasmine says, "That's not true, Jeremiah."

Denny says, "It wasn't anyone's fault."

The guys at the bar laugh way too loud and for a second I think they are laughing at us and I want to attack them but I realize they have nothing to do with us and I can see tears streaming down Jeremiah's face and Denny tries to comfort him but he won't let him and Jasmine grabs my hand and it feels like home and I try to think of something that will give everyone closure and make everyone okay and I want the perfect words and think about Chrissie and her note and pills and I don't want to think anymore.

I say, "I think she needed some sort of love that no one could give her."

And just like that Jeremiah smashes his beer bottle against the table and leaps to his feet and grabs me with one hand and punches me with the other hand full of sharp glass and I feel the pain in my stomach grow worse than it was before and I see blood pouring out and I fall back and it feels like I'm falling off the face of the earth and that I will never land and the guys from the bar wrestle the bloody bottle from Jeremiah's hand and tackle him to the ground and Denny tries to get them to go easy or something and Jasmine is on her knees next to me crying again.

Jasmine says, "Artie, Artie, Artie."

Jeremiah cries out from across the room, "Why did you have to introduce us?"

I want to die and I feel selfish and that I don't care about others and Jasmine rips her shirt off not caring that her breasts are exposed and tries to tie it around me to stop the

bleeding and I want to call out and tell Jeremiah I'm sorry and I want to remember
Chrissie and I wonder what Irish hospital food tastes like and

THE TREASURE HUNTER

Awake now, Davey hoped to find his mother cooking eggs and bacon, toasting toast, and pouring orange juice. That's what she was doing in his dream—cooking him his favorite breakfast. Daddy was there too. The kitchen floor was a sandy beach and a giant X marked the spot. Daddy told him when they finished their breakfast they could find the treasure. Mommy and Daddy were dressed like pirates. She wore a patch over her left eye and he had a peg leg and a hook hand. A green and yellow parrot squawked as it flew around the room. Everyone was smiling. It was warm, like at the beach. Daddy was happy with Mommy and Mommy was happy with Daddy. Both were happy with Davey and that made Davey happy.

But in real life, Mommy wasn't there. Davey didn't like real life sometimes. He liked his dreams much better. When he arrived at the bottom of the stairs, instead of finding his mother's thin body, bouncing golden-brown curls, and big blue eyes, Davey discovered an old, fat lady with flat, graying black hair and eyes that seemed colorless. She bellowed out a manly *hello* and then coughed loudly. Davey didn't respond. He never talked to the women Daddy brought home. Since Mommy left, there seemed to be a new one every week—each one fatter, uglier, and older than the one before.

He grabbed a box of Frosted Flakes from the pantry and milk from the fridge. He poured the two of them together in a plastic bowl and ate breakfast. Daddy came down a few minutes later with both his eyes and mouth opened wide in silence. Daddy didn't say good morning or anything. He just walked over and sat next to his ugly monster of a woman. Daddy never said good morning anymore.

Daddy asked, "Why aren't you out playing?"

Davey slurped milk from his cereal. "I'm going to."

His father scratched himself. "When?"

Davey said, "As soon as I'm done with my cereal." He wasn't sure his father even heard this last comment because he was kissing and touching his strange lady the same way he used to touch Mommy years ago.

Davey said, "Who is she?"

His father looked at him. "Some chick."

The beast laughed and grabbed Daddy between his legs. Daddy kissed her again. Davey's stomach turned. He felt like he was going to make sick like the Halloween he ate too much candy. Even though Mommy had left, she's still the only one he wanted to see Daddy kiss.

He stopped eating his cereal. "When's Mommy coming back?"

Daddy didn't even look at him. "Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never."

"*Where* did she go?"

Daddy laughed loudly along with the nasty beast next to him. "Hopefully she took the slow boat to China."

Davey wanted to throw up. He didn't know exactly where China was, but did know it was far away. He didn't understand how Daddy could not care about Mommy and worry about if she was alright or not. He didn't want any more cereal. He got up to leave.

Daddy called to him. "Have fun out there, kid. Find some buried treasures like your old man used to."

Davey didn't look back. "I will."

Their laughter echoed out the door with Davey to the end of the driveway. He continued on to the sidewalk. He made sure to look both ways before he crossed Sandra Road to continue down Bradmoor. Davey once heard Mommy complain to Daddy that they needed to get out of this neighborhood because all the houses looked exactly the same. Sandra was Bradmoor was Foote was Potomac was Fairfax Blvd. She couldn't tell the difference and it was driving her insane. Davey didn't know what insane meant but could tell from Mommy's tone that it wasn't something that she wanted to be driven to.

He never understood how Mommy couldn't see the difference in the houses and the streets. They were all different colors. Their house was red brick with dark green shutters and the Jones' house was all white panels with brown shutters. Some of the houses had wooden fences, some had metal, and some had none at all. Some houses shared driveways with their neighbors and others had their own. There were all sorts of dogs and cats. The Sheridans even had a rabbit in a cage in their back yard, right next to their all-plastic two-toned brown shed. And the streets were all different too. Sandra Road was pretty flat and had the most speed bumps after Fairfax Blvd which had the most curves. Davey sometimes thought the whole road was round if you saw it from space. And Bradmoor had a really great hill that lead down to the best entrance to Fairfax Park North which was much better than Fairfax Park South. South did have the better baseball field, but North had the better creek, more swings, and the best land to look for buried treasure.

Davey always loved the park. On arrival, he stopped at the creek to throw a couple stones in the deeper part. He by-passed the swings and the monkey bars to head towards the dirt lot on the other side of the concrete basketball court.

Mommy had told Davey the builders were building a center where Davey could play things like basketball and hockey as well as swim in pools and climb giant rock walls when he got older. That was before she left. The center still wasn't done. Davey figured he still wasn't old enough to use it anyway.

They'll finish soon, Daddy had told him. In the meantime, he was to stay away from the construction site. But Davey thought there could be plenty of treasures buried under the loose dirt and it was best to try and find it now before they finished building over it. Davey kicked at the soft earth with the tip of his left foot. The dirt gave way and Davey continued to kick at it. The park seemed pretty empty and Davey felt like he was exploring a new world as he kicked and kicked at the dirt.

Craig wandered up a few minutes later, hands in pockets. Craig did what he usually did when he walked up to other people by himself—he circled Davey slowly with his arms behind his back, looking only at the ground for a few minutes without saying a single word. Craig was a pretty good friend and usually Davey got excited to see him, but today he concentrated on kicking dirt.

Craig asked, "What you doing?"

Davey said, "Kicking dirt,"

"Why would you want to kick dirt?"

Davey kicked harder. "Don't know. Just do."

Craig shrugged then joined Davey in the dirt-digging project. The two of them walked around in circles kicking the loose ground with their sneakers. Davey didn't mind the help. He figured two kids could dig deeper than one kid. Davey really hoped they could find buried treasures like Daddy used to do. He used to search for pirate treasure in the Florida Keys with Mommy. Maybe Mommy went back to the Florida Keys. Maybe not.

They used to talk about it—Mommy and Daddy. They used to have fun. They all sat around the kitchen table. Daddy and Mommy drank Margaritas and Davey was allowed to have all the Pepsis he wanted. Daddy played Jimmy Buffet on the CD player. Mommy and Daddy laughed and touched and kissed. It was the way it was supposed to be.

Daddy would ask, “Did I ever tell you about the time I found Darkbeard’s treasure?” It was Davey’s favorite story. He’d heard it a hundred times but wanted to hear it a hundred more.

Davey’s face lit up. “Tell me about it, Daddy.”

Mommy laughed. “Not Darkbeard again.”

Daddy rubbed Mommy’s shoulder. “If it wasn’t for Darkbeard, we would have never met, Love.”

Mommy beamed and shook her head. Davey knew that she didn’t mind hearing about the treasure again. He knew she loved the story as much as he did.

Daddy started the story, “It was off Sugarloaf Key. I couldn’t find anything and thought of giving up. I thought that I should be a banker or a car salesman or something. Not a treasure hunter.”

Mommy said, “Imagine you in a bank with a suit.”

They all had a good laugh at that one. Davey could never picture his father in anything but T-shirts and jeans. He couldn’t see Daddy calling people sir or ma’am with a smile on his face.

Daddy continued with the story, “I’d been scuba diving off the coast of Sugarloaf Key for months, scanning and digging everywhere I could looking for that crazy pirate’s booty. I thought I would never find it. That it was lost forever and ever.

Finally on the day that I was going to quit treasure hunting for good, there it was. An old wooden treasure chest—just like the ones in the movies and all the pirate stories. It was absolutely amazing. I brought it ashore and broke it open. The wood had weathered, so it was easy to break. Inside, I found only a single metal box about the size of my belly.”

Mommy rubbed his belly. “It was much smaller back then.”

Daddy kissed her on the top of the head. “Yes, dear. Thanks for reminding me.”

Davey laughed at that every time like it was the funniest thing he had ever heard. Daddy wouldn’t get mad. He even laughed with him.

Daddy went on, “Now, I realized in all my excitement on finding the chest that I had left my shovel somewhere in the ocean so I had nothing to break open the metal box with. So, I ran, carrying the heavy box, for miles.”

Mommy burst out laughing. “It was barely a quarter of a mile.”

Daddy looked at her and shook his head. “Well, it felt like miles. You don’t know how heavy that thing was.”

Mommy went on, “And you were hardly running.”

Daddy smiled. “Can I please tell the story, Dear?”

Davey always asked the same question even though he knew the answer. “Where did you go, Daddy?”

Daddy turned his attention back to Davey. “Well, son, I found the nearest bar. It was one that had the most beautiful bartender in the world.”

Mommy raised her hand. “That would be yours truly.”

Daddy said, “Yes it was where Mommy worked. I asked her for something strong to break the box open. She was confused because she thought I was making some sort of crude joke.”

Davey never got that but laughed the same at all the other jokes that night.

“But when I explained to her what I meant, she gave me a shovel she had behind the bar.”

Davey asked, “Why did you have a shovel behind the bar, Mommy?”

Mommy said, “To bop the drunks over the head when they had too much to drink.”

Daddy continued, “I hit it over and over again and finally busted it open and I saw beautiful gold coins that dated back to the old pirate days.”

Then Davey would ask his favorite question in the world, “How did it make you feel, Daddy?”

Daddy's face lit up. "Like I was on fire, Davey. I felt as if warm flames engulfed my whole body and I could do anything that I wanted. And because of that I asked Mommy to marry me right there at the bar and she agreed."

Daddy kissed Mommy hard and then said, "That's what it takes, Davey. Determination."

Mommy had tears in her eye. "That and a strong shovel."

Daddy said, "Okay. Determination and a strong shovel."

Davey laughed and drank Pepsi and wished it never ended.

Craig stopped digging for a minute. "My dad told me that China is on the other side of the dirt."

Davey stopped digging. "My Mom might be in China."

Craig went back to kicking the dirt without any response. Davey thought maybe if they dug long and hard enough they might reach China. Maybe Mommy would be there and give Davey a hug. He'd introduce Craig as his best friend and Mommy would be proud of him. Maybe they could find buried treasure on the way to China and one of the treasures would have pretty jewels in it and he could give it to Mommy. She'd be so happy.

Davey kicked the dirt harder now. "Do you like Chinese food?"

Craig didn't stop kicking. "What?"

Davey didn't feel like responding. Whenever people asked for him to repeat what he said, he felt embarrassed for saying anything at all. It didn't matter whether or not

Craig liked Chinese food anyway—with all the treasure they found on the way to China they can build whatever restaurants they want and eat any kind of food in the world.

Craig stopped. “Can we get in trouble for this?”

Davey kept going. “Why would we get in trouble?”

Craig looked unsure. “Can’t we dig in your backyard?”

Davey said, “No treasures there.”

Craig shook his head and went back to kicking dirt. Davey knew just kicking the dirt wasn’t going to get the job done. His Daddy used more than just his feet to find the treasure all those years ago in the Keys. He stopped kicking the dirt. He got on his knees and dug deep in the soft ground with his hands.

Davey said, “I think if we use our hands we can dig better.”

Craig kept digging with his foot. “I don’t want to get dirt under my nails.”

Davey didn’t care *how* Craig was going to dig, as long as he dug. The cold dirt soothed his fingers. He thought the ground was another friend like Craig. Maybe even *better* than Craig.

Craig stopped kicking. “When is your Mommy coming back?”

Davey didn’t stop. “Maybe tomorrow. Maybe never.”

Craig crossed his arms. “That doesn’t sound like a very good answer.”

Davey tried to shove his whole arm in the dirt and lift it up. “Can you start digging again?”

Craig kicked the ground a little—even slower than he did it the last time he was kicking. Davey figured since Craig was digging slower now, he would have to dig extra fast. He dug and dug. He threw dirt everywhere. He dug as fast as he could until he felt

a sharp pain in his right hand. He drew back from the hole and screamed. He grasped his right hand with his left and felt tears in his eyes. There was blood. Davey hated blood.

Craig reached out to him. “Are you okay?”

Davey tried to tell him that he was cut but only blubbering came out. He cried when he tried to talk so he stopped trying to talk. He hated crying and didn’t want Craig to think he was a crybaby.

Craig jumped to his feet. “My Mom can fix you.”

Davey let Craig help him to his feet and followed him back across the park. He was happy that Craig didn’t say anything about him crying like a little baby.

As they crossed the wooded area of the park, there were other kids, probably second or third graders, swinging on the swing set. Some were boys and some were girls. Davey knew them but didn’t look any of them in the eye. He didn’t want any of them to see him crying. If they called him a crybaby, it would only make him cry more. The other kids stopped swinging and talked amongst themselves.

One of them called out, “Hey kid, you okay?”

Davey didn’t want to say anything because he knew if he tried to talk again he would start blubbering and he didn’t want to look like a sissy in front of them. He just kept on looking forward, knowing that Craig’s house wasn’t far.

Craig called back to them, “He’s fine.”

Davey wished that Craig hadn’t said anything—that they could continue toward the house. The older kids continued to chatter which turned into laughing. Davey knew they were making fun of him. He wanted to go home to his Mommy and cry on her lap but he knew her lap wasn’t there and that made him want to cry even more.

“Don’t worry about them,” Craig said. “We’re almost there.”

Inside the house, Craig’s mom cleaned the cut out with peroxide and gave Davey a Flintstone’s band-aid. She was a very pretty woman. He liked her big brown eyes and her short blond hair. She had large hands and short nails, almost like a man’s. She was not as pretty as Mommy, but pretty enough. She was also very gentle and kind. Her touch was soothing and she worked slowly, as if not to hurt him. She was not as gentle or kind as Mommy could be, but gentle and kind enough. She wore a red sweater with a flower pinned to it and blue jeans. She didn’t wear shoes or socks and her toenails were painted to match her sweater.

“Okie-dokie,” said Craig’s mom. “Good as new, Kiddo.”

Davey stopped crying. He felt much better. Craig’s mom’s voice calmed Davey. He rubbed his bandage. “Thank you.”

She smiled at him. “What were you kids doing out there?”

Davey didn’t want her to know they were digging. Daddy always said to keep your treasure hunting secret or others will try to steal your treasure. He looked toward Craig sitting on the couch, hoping that he wouldn’t say anything either.

Craig said, “Looking for treasure.”

Craig’s mom got up. “Just be more careful.” She ruffled Craig’s hair and then walked through the door back to the kitchen.

Davey remembered the day Mommy walked through the door for the last time. Mommy’s bright blue eyes looked dull and blue-black bags hung under them. She

carried two suitcases and placed them on the floor by the front door. Davey just stood there, unsure what to do or say.

Mommy rubbed her hand across his head. “Don’t worry, Baby. Mommy will be back soon.”

Davey asked, “Where are you going, Mommy?”

“Mommy needs a vacation, Honey.” She turned and grabbed her suitcases.

“Don’t cry. Just think about when I come back and how much fun we’ll have.”

Daddy came down the stairs. “Yeah, we’ll all have a blast.”

Mommy glared at Daddy. “Don’t you start.”

Daddy said, “Looks like you’ve already finished.”

Mommy didn’t listen to Daddy. She came back to Davey and hugged him.

Davey didn’t want her to let go. He wanted her to hold him forever. He cried.

Mommy let go. “We’ll be together again. Baby, don’t blubber.”

Davey asked, “What do you need a vacation from, Mommy?”

Mommy didn’t answer right away. She just stood there, above him, ruffling his hair. Davey thought she was looking through him, not at him. It scared him. He thought maybe he had turned invisible overnight and nobody told him.

Davey said, “Mommy?”

Mommy said, “Sometimes Mommies think they shouldn’t be Mommies and that they never met any Daddies.”

She backed away, stumbling a bit. Davey thought maybe she was too drunk and needed a bop on the head with a shovel like she gave to the guys at her bar in the Keys.

He thought he saw in her eyes that she was still deciding whether to stay or not. Maybe she thought that she was making a big mistake. But then she turned toward the door.

She said, “Be a good boy, Davey. Grow into a good man.”

Davey didn’t understand that. “I don’t want to be a man.”

She walked right out the door. Daddy followed her to the door to yell at her to never come back. Davey wished he hadn’t done that. He cried a lot that day.

Davey wanted to dig now more than ever. He knew that whatever was on the other side of the ground had to be better than being here without his Mommy. He also knew that hands or feet weren’t going to cut it. A blue and black plastic stood in the back of Craig’s backyard. Davey knew Craig’s father kept tools in there.

Davey asked, “Do you have any shovels?”

Craig looked towards the shed and shrugged. “You still want to dig?”

Davey nodded. Craig walked toward the shed. Inside there was a lawnmower, a snow blower, and a pressure washer, among other gardening tools. There were three large shovels and a spade leaning against the back wall. Craig asked him which one he wanted.

Davey said, “I think we should take them all.”

Davey once had a dream that he was in a shed. It was locked and he couldn’t get out. He wasn’t scared though. There were treasure chests everywhere. Each time he opened one, he got a new prize. There was gold, puppies, toys, bikes—everything he wanted and there were millions of them. Outside the shed, he could hear Mommy and

Daddy tell him to open each one and then they would be there to let him out. He couldn't stop smiling because he knew they would be there soon.

Craig fumbled around picking-up the shovels. Davey knew he was just stalling, but didn't care too much.

Davey said, "Do you like your dreams?"

Craig said, "I think dreams are scary."

Davey was surprised. "I don't think they are scary at all."

Craig grabbed a shovel. "Sometimes I'm scared to sleep because I'm afraid of nightmares."

Davey didn't know how to explain to Craig how happy he was in his dreams compared to how sad he felt when he was when he woke up and realized they were only dreams. "Sometimes I think that I'm alive in my dreams and dead in real life."

Craig shrugged and they took all the shovels out of the shed.

Walking back across the park, Davey felt much tougher carrying the shovels and hoped the older kids were still there. But they had left. The sky clouded over and it drizzled lightly. Davey didn't care about rain. He just wanted to dig.

Craig said, "It's raining."

Davey said, "It'll soften the dirt."

Craig nodded. "Make it easier to dig."

Back at the hole, Davey drove a shovel deep in the ground, scooped out a large pile of dirt and threw it over his shoulder. "Much better."

Craig grabbed the spade and started poking at the ground, throwing some dirt here and there. Davey didn't care—any help was good. He had to keep on digging.

Craig stopped poking. "Do you think we'll find treasure?"

Davey said, "Of course we will."

Craig said, "I don't think there were many pirates in Delaware."

Davey just kept digging faster. He didn't care there weren't any pirates in Delaware. There still could have been bandits and thieves from back in history and they could have buried treasures all over the park. It didn't matter anyway. They could still make it to China.

The hole got deeper. They stood inside of it—it was up to their knees. They kept digging deeper and faster. Craig seemed to help more the deeper they got. Davey could understand that. Once you could see something worked, it made it easier to do.

Davey hit something hard. It rang loud like metal on metal and made the shovel shake. He felt the vibrations throughout his entire body. He loved it. It didn't make him feel sick at all. Davey dropped the shovel and kneeled down in the dirt, clearing the ground away from his discovery—a large, round metal box.

Craig asked, "What is it?"

Davey fingered the cold dark object. "A treasure." All he could think of was the fire that his father felt when he found his treasure. He knew the fire was there. He tingled all over. He had to be close to the treasure now.

Davey grabbed the spade from Craig and banged it on the object. The vibration felt good. He hit it harder and harder. Tiny sparks flew.

Craig backed off. "It's a pipe, Davey."

Davey kept hitting it harder. “It might be the door to China or the Keys. You don’t know.”

Craig blubbered, “My Daddy told me that pipes carry water, gas, and all your dookies and pee under the ground.”

Davey knew it was treasure. If it wasn’t a treasure it had to be the door to somewhere else. Maybe Mommy would be there. He put all the strength he could muster into every swing of the spade to the treasure chest.

Craig said, “I’m getting my mom.” And with that he ran off.

Davey didn’t care what Craig wanted to do. He was going to discover a treasure no matter what. Mommy and Daddy would be so proud. He felt his eyes tear but he knew they were good tears like when he laughed too hard or how Mommy got water in her eyes from Daddy’s stories.

The shovel broke a hole in the treasure chest. It hissed loudly at him. It was dark inside. At first, he was disappointed but then he smelled something. It reminded him of all the times his mother had cooked his favorite, spaghetti, on the stove for dinner or eggs and bacon for breakfast.

But he knew he couldn’t fit in the small hole. He called out to her but she didn’t answer back. He just had to make the hole bigger. He took the spade over his head, the rain pouring on his head, mixing with the sweat on his forehead. He gathered all the muscles his small body could muster and struck down on the passage way, the spade sparking wildly. The smell got stronger and Davey felt lightheaded—he knew it must have been the way Daddy felt. He took a deep sniff of the rising odor and saw the

blackness creeping in from the corners of his eyes. He tried to keep his eyes wide but everything went dark.

When he opened his eyes, he wore only his bathing suit. His feet felt warm, buried in the white sand. The sky hung bluer over them than he'd ever seen it before. The sea gulls called out welcome to him from above. And she was there—Mommy in her bathing suit, sipping a Margarita. She looked like a movie star. He ran to her and she hugged him. He loved her touch—it made him feel safe. He didn't want it to end. Daddy waved to him from the ocean in his scuba gear—the pirate ships, waving their jolly-rogers, sailing behind him. They were all happy and he knew that it would never end.

JUST AS INFINITELY VAST

My name is Howard Westing and I'm originally from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. But transfers from one facility to the next led me to my current residence here in the center of the giant penis hanging from the United States of America, just outside the *City Beautiful*, Orlando. I have three jobs because I need to stay busy.

My first job every day is to deliver papers. I leave my apartment by four a.m. I head to this shady warehouse just off Orange Blossom Trail, ignoring the crack head hookers along the way. I pick up the papers off a large pallet around back. I toss them on the back seat floor of my old Honda, making sure they are in my reach from the front seat. I then grab a large, clear bag full of little white bags covered in advertisements for Disney World and various injury lawyers. I'm supposed to take each of the papers, roll them up, and put them in a bag so they don't get wet if it rains. Some of the guys do all that right there at the warehouse. They talk about broads and sports and booze and put their papers in bags. But not me. I put them together as I go. I get there earlier than most, grab my bags and my papers, and take off without saying a word to anyone. This is probably my favorite job of the three because I see fewer people. On a good day, I'll see nobody.

Dolphin's Cove is the largest of three developments I deliver to. I really hate the sight of it. The gigantic sign haunts the main entrance, advertising the community to all passers-by. The sign depicts a white family working on their tans by the pool—all wearing sunglasses, sipping lemonade. Large palm trees wave above them and dolphins jump in the distance behind them. They are all smiling—even the dolphins. In bright colors below the family, the sign shouts,

“Welcome Back to Life!”

These places are all the same—over-priced houses all with variations on the three basic colors of pastel gray, pastel clay, and off-white. They all have dumb names like *Dolphin’s Cove* or *Manatee Hideaway*. None make sense because Orlando is in the center of Florida. There is no ocean here. No sea life.

As I pull out of *Dolphin’s Cove*, trying to ignore the sign urging me back to life, a chubby tan man in short shorts with no shirt waves to me. I don’t wave back because I am not allowed to communicate with the residents. Instead, I swallow down the vomit and concentrate on the palm-tree-lined road ahead of me. It doesn’t take me more than an hour to complete my paper route. I’m usually home before six, but today I have a meeting—at fucking Starbucks.

So inside the crummy Starbucks, Ibrahim is quiet for a while before he finally says to me, “Have you had any meaningful relationships with significant others since we last spoke?”

And he’s an okay guy and all but I hate having to deal with anyone who reminds me of the system, so I never give him much. “Mr. Ibrahim, you know I purposely stay to myself.” I give him a nice dramatic pause for effect before continuing. “All relationships—not just sexual, but any *human* ones—can only lead to pain.”

He smiles big white teeth at me. “Come on, Howard. You know who you are talking to, man. You cannot bullshit. You can bullshit with some of the others but you cannot bullshit with me, man. Tell the truth.”

I say, “You know I’m almost twenty-seven years old now, don’t you?”

He says, “So what that have to do with me, man?”

I fold my arms across my chest and pretend to be sore. “So why are you still checking up on me every month?”

Ibrahim smiles more than any other person I know. He either is in love with life or he is fucking retarded. “Because you need checking up on sometimes. Everyone does.”

I hate coffee shops—franchised or not. I don’t drink coffee and I don’t like the people. He’s not even drinking coffee. He’s drinking tea and eating a muffin. The truth is I live in a heavily-populated metropolitan area surrounded by people all the time, yet meetings with Ibrahim are the only time I ever say more than a few words.

I say, “Everyone?”

“Everyone,” he says. “Especially sex offenders all grown up.”

He says *sex offender* as if they were words that just bounced off tongues in coffee shops. It’s just something about Africans, I guess. Not black people like here in America but immigrants straight from places like Ghana and Nigeria. People who work at places like treatment centers for juvenile sex offenders. People like Ibrahim. Not to say American whites and blacks didn’t work there, but most were Africans and they never let you forget you were a sex offender. They knew that it was something none of us there were proud of and that sometimes it was the only thing we responded to. And here he is, six years after my full rehabilitation and release from all the treatment centers I’ve ever been to, calling me a sex offender again.

I look him straight in the eyes. “I’m rehabilitated, remember?”

He laughs a little. “I know you said the right things and did the right things for those white people who ran the center. I know that you have learned what you did was wrong and that maybe you didn’t know it was wrong *when* you committed your offense. And I know the state released you because you graduated all of your levels. All that I know.” He returns the favor with a pause of his own as I sit in silence.

He continues, “But what I don’t know is what you will do when you don’t have a girlfriend and you want sex. I don’t know what happens when you get frustrated and don’t have a healthy relationship.”

I don’t know what he means but English isn’t his first language. I don’t answer him. I just stare at the girl behind the counter in her ridiculous green hat and wonder if she’s wearing matching bra and panties under that uniform. She has a nice smile. I look away.

Ibrahim says, “What do you do without love?”

I have to laugh. I decide to give him something to chew on besides that muffin of his. “Mr. Ibrahim, the space inside your heart can always stretch to hold all the love in the world. Its space is infinite. It must be. But what happens when you get abandoned by those you love? That space clears out and you are left with nothing. That emptiness is just as infinitely vast as a loving heart is full. With every heartbeat, the loneliness echoes. I sometimes wonder if you could ever refill that emptiness or if it remains barren forever?”

Ibrahim now crosses his arms, his beaming smile never fades. “So, now you know philosophy? Is that what you want to be—philosopher? Poet? You are such a funny child, Howard.”

I almost yell, but restrain myself. “I am not a child, Mr. Ibrahim.”

Ibrahim just shakes his bald, dark chocolate head and gets up from the table. He stands to my side and bends down to tap my left breast plate with his right index finger. “Mr. Westing, you spent your teenage years in facility, cut off from the world. You missed proms and pep rallies. You missed summer movies with your friends and trips to the beach. The most significant relationships you’ve had are with youth counselors and therapists. Look in a mirror sometime. You are still a child, Man.”

Welcome back to life.

Back in my apartment, I jerk-off two times in a single sitting before I realize I am not happy. Loneliness and unhappiness seem to go hand in hand. Most of the residents in the system masturbated on a daily basis. The only time we ever had alone was in the bathroom. We weren’t encouraged to whack it or anything—it was a don’t ask, don’t tell kind of deal. It wasn’t the easiest thing to do though—staff was right outside and they’d bang on the door and yell at us on it if we took longer than five minutes.

We had to report all sexual fantasies we had to our therapists during treatment time. They wanted to make sure we were having responsible fantasies. There could be no violence in our fantasies. All fantasies had to be respectful and consensual. We were supposed to ask our subject if they wanted to enjoy a sexual encounter before proceeding. I think they may have wanted us to be married in any fantasies at the facility in Alabama, but it’s been a while. In mine, I didn’t always ask permission but I told my therapist I did. I mostly got it on with celebrities like Carmen Electra or Brittany Spears who always begged me to fuck them, so I figured the encounters were consensual.

Today, my fantasy is with a woman I saw on the television a few weeks ago. She isn't a celebrity or anything. She was just being interviewed about a hurricane that hit the town she was from and she looked so sad. She had big brown eyes and very straight teeth, so she stuck in my mind. I remembered her because I said to myself that she was a woman that I could be in love with. Silly Ibrahim, always talking about love.

In my fantasy, I drove up to her house and told her how sorry I was about the hurricane. I held her hand and told her if there was anything I could do to help to let me know. She told me she hadn't had any good dick action in a while and a good fuck just make her forget about storms and destruction and all that's bad in the world. She kept looking at me with those big brown eyes and I think that's why I came twice.

I jump in the shower and clean off all the shame. Fucking Ibrahim. I feel guilty about masturbation for days after seeing him. There is a crack forming in my bathroom mirror. The landlord won't do anything about it. That I know. They told me that the landlord here is sympathetic to people down on their luck. I've come to learn that the landlord is just an asshole looking for a tax break. His name is Todd. He moved here from Brooklyn, New York. I know this because he brings it up in every conversation and always wears a ragged old Yankees hat. I remember his name because he referred to himself in the third person at least ten times when I filled out the paperwork to rent this place.

Todd runs a tight ship here...

Todd likes his apartments kept up...

Don't ever be late with Todd's rent...

Todd doesn't like deadbeats.

But I don't blame Todd for being an asshole. Most people are assholes and when you deal with assholes, sometimes you have to be an asshole. He's just one stinky anus in a sea of millions.

I finger the crack in the mirror and it feels cold. I feel a sharp sting on the tip of my ring finger and I pull back in pain. Blood drips out from a tiny slice in my skin. I suck it up and just as quickly there is more. Just looking at me, you probably couldn't tell that I raped a young girl when I was fourteen years old. I don't look that different from most other people, but neither did most of the guys that I went to the treatment centers with. We're not all overly fat or scary skinny. We don't all have shaved heads or wear our hair particularly long. We don't avoid eye contact or have bad postures. Sometimes, we can even smile and look like we enjoy life.

We were taught all that. One of the main focuses that the program tried to instill on us was to become real men. Staff like Ibrahim taught us to look people in the eye. They taught us to grasp another man's hand firmly in a handshake and to not release until they do when meeting someone for the first time. We learned to say please and thank you. We follow most responses with 'sir' or 'ma'am.' We are taught to respect others—especially women. We are taught to be responsible for our own actions and our own decisions in order to establish better lives for ourselves.

I grab a band aid and cover up my cut. Then I put on the standard uniform of Harry's Groceries: khaki pants with a brown belt, a white short sleeve, button down white shirt, a black tie, and a green apron. I add my own personal touch with my canvas-colored hiking boots and head out the door. I make sure to lock all three of the dead bolts to my apartment.

A lady with long black curly hair and a green hat passes out flyers to anyone who enters Harry's Groceries. She smiles at me and tells me that Jesus loves me. I thank her and take a flyer. It's soaking wet. I glance at the passages from the Bible and the instructions from the Reverend Doctor So-and-So from Wherever, Wherever on how to apply the lessons all to my life. He says all life takes is strong faith.

I think in order to believe in God, one would have to faith in humanity. If people were made in God's image, it doesn't say much for God. Maybe God is just an asshole like the rest of us.

I crumble the paper and throw into the red, white, and blue wastebasket by the automatic doors. My band-aid falls off from the flyer's moisture and I throw that in the trash too.

Inside, I clock in without saying anything to anyone. I grab my drawer from the safe room and walk towards my register without making eye-contact with customers or fellow employees. I think one of the baggers attempts to wave at me as he walks back to break, but I keep heading to the front of the store, pretending not to notice.

The manager stands at my register. He moved to Orlando from Milwaukee, Wisconsin. He is a short, bald, unhappy man with a constant red face. He looks upset. His glasses annoy me because they make his eyes too big—like he has two magnifying glasses under those thick frames. He waddles over to me tapping a black pen against his clipboard.

He says, "You're late, Westing."

I say, "I am?"

He crosses his pudgy arms. "It's already 9:00."

I put my drawer in my register and sign on without even looking up at him.

"Wasn't I supposed to be here at nine?"

He takes off his glasses and his eyes shrink to pebbles. "Five minutes till.

Always five minutes till, right?"

I nod. "Right."

He puts his glasses back on and his eyes become balloons. "Goddamn right."

I say, "Goddamn."

I didn't actually mean to say it. Sometimes, I only half-listen to people and then I'll just repeat words I hear them say. It usually works well enough to get them to leave you alone. Not this time.

His face brightens to a bold burgundy and his coin sized mouth opens to an apple.

"Watch yourself, Westing!"

"I will."

"You know I can have you replaced here in a second?"

"Yes."

"Do you know how many people are at my door everyday begging for your job?"

"Lots."

"Goddamn, right."

"Right."

He doesn't say another word, just points to the number nine light above my head. I turn it on. He points to the plastic gate blocking the customers' access to my line. I walk around and open it up. He nods and walks away. I wipe my counter off with a dirty rag I find on the floor.

After a few hours of old couples complaining about prices and other people that don't speak English trying to shove expired coupons into my face, *she* comes to my line. I have trouble breathing. She can't be older than sixteen or seventeen years old, but I can't help but stare. Her golden hair looks red when she turns to her left and blonde when she turns to the right. It's pure magic—I try to look away or at least blink.

She probably has known all her life how she looks—how people look at her and what they think. Her eyes are big and pale blue. At first glance, they look only blue, but I look deeper and see the gray and yellow specks dancing around the iris. She has light freckles across her nose and cheeks.

I can't help but notice that her breasts are small but very full. They would be large enough to fit in your hand. They seem to perk up on cue every time her lips curl into a smile. Her hips curve in an all too sexy way and I want to put my hands on them and slow dance to the song in my head. It's a song I wrote back in the system during poetry class one day. I never set it to any specific music, but never had trouble singing it in my head:

Beautiful, renegade.

To meet you only makes me

Fade away.

Beautiful, fallen star.

I couldn't possibly look forward

To anything else.

She buys bananas and a pack of gum. She keeps smiling at me. This doesn't happen to me very often, so I have no choice but to smile back. She pays with a credit card though the total is under five dollars. Usually this bothers me but with her I don't mind. I ring her card through the machine and then hand her a pen along with the slip she needs to sign. I've heard some of the other male cashiers make corny jokes when cute girls came to their line like when Nick from Boston, Massachusetts told a girl that tips were welcome but I can't think of any thing funny to say. I just hand her the receipt.

She says, "I think you are bleeding."

I say, "Okay."

She says, "There's blood on this receipt."

I say, "Right."

She says, "No, you are bleeding from your finger."

My finger is bleeding again and I immediately raise it to my mouth to suck. More blood follows, so I search for napkins or paper towels. All I can find is the damned dirty rag.

She grabs my hand. "Don't use that nasty thing."

I allow her to do whatever she wants. She rummages through her little pink plastic purse. She pulls out a tissue and holds it on my fingertip. She dabs and dabs until the blood flow stops. Then she retrieves a small spray can and sprays it on my pointer. It stings a little, but I try not to flinch.

She says, "Is that okay?"

I say, "Yes."

She rubs it again with another tissue from her purse. Then she takes out a small Band-aid with Winnie the Pooh on it. She removes it from the wrapper and gently places it on my boo-boo. My pulse pumps freely though my fingertip and I haven't felt better in years.

She says, "I made you better. I had the technology."

I think she made a joke, and even though I don't get it, I laugh accordingly. It's a obviously an uncomfortable laugh and I hope she doesn't notice.

She laughs as she offers her hand. "I'm Casey."

I say, "Hi, Casey."

My hand shoots out and takes hers, shaking it rapidly. I keep shaking it like a fool, not knowing when to stop. I like the touch of her soft skin. I wonder what kind of moisturizer she uses. I wonder what color her panties are. The system taught us to let the other person break any handshake unless it turns into an embarrassing situation where the two of you just stand there like idiots shaking and shaking like we are doing now.

She breaks the shake off as she laughs again. "So what's your name?"

I think I blush, but can't tell for sure. "Howard Westing."

"Nice to meet you, Howard."

"Nice to meet you."

She plays with her hair. "Do you like your boss?"

"He's okay."

She takes a glittery pen from her purse and signs the blood-stained receipt. “I think he’s a big, fat asshole.”

“Me too.”

She looks up at me. “I just got a job here.”

I can’t look away. “Good for you.”

She says, “Just now.”

I don’t know what to say so I don’t say anything. I start to put my pulsating finger in my mouth before remembering the Band-aid is there and return it to my side.

She says, “Look forward to working with you.”

“I’ll be at this register,” I say, “or maybe another one.”

She says, “That will work.”

She grabs her groceries, shoots me a quick wink, and leaves me smiling after her.

The smile won’t go away. My heart pounds rapidly and I feel like I might throw up. But I don’t want the nausea to stop. I don’t usually smile. I can’t help but wonder if I’m feeling genuine attraction in hopes of a meaningful, healthy sexual encounter or if I’m just lusting like a pervert. I’ll probably pleasure myself later, picturing her in different outfits or maybe no outfits at all. I scan groceries and wonder if she is thinking any of these same thoughts about me.

Welcome back to life.

When I arrive home I find the landlord yelling at a man as skinny as a skeleton outside my apartment building. He addresses the old man as a deadbeat.

He says, “Old men shouldn’t be deadbeats. You’ve had plenty of years to learn that lesson.”

The skinny man says, “I’m sorry. I’ll have the money next week.”

Todd says, “You know that Todd doesn’t like deadbeats.”

“Please stop calling me that.”

“I will when you pay the rent, Deadbeat.”

I walk up to the two men, not necessarily because I want to, but simply because they are blocking the entrance way to my apartment.

Todd says, “What do you want, Westing?”

I say, “Why do you say *deadbeat* so much?”

Todd says, “Fuck off, Westing. Your rent’s due too.”

The skinny man says, “Please fuck off.”

I could pay this man’s rent if I wanted to. I really could. But I know how people are. Old skinny here will think that I want to become friends and then he’ll never leave me alone. It isn’t that he told me to fuck off. That doesn’t bother me. I know he’s just embarrassed not having enough money to pay his rent. I also know that once I pay for him, he’ll never be embarrassed to ask for money again. That’s just the way people are. But I’m not paying Todd shit.

Todd says, “You know what they do with deadbeats like you two fucks in Brooklyn?”

I say, “Make them wear old, smelly Yankees hats?” I look to the skinny man, expecting at least a little crack of a smile at that comment but he is silent and appears scared.

Todd pokes me in chest. “I don’t know where you found your little attitude there, Westing, but you better lose it quick or you’re out of here.”

I say, “Check is in the mail, Todd.”

He says, “Better be, Deadbeat.”

I say, “Better be.”

The skinny man says, “Nice band-aid, faggot.”

They both laugh at me and I brush past them. I fumble with my keys and their laughs get louder. Sometimes I wonder why I have so many deadbolts. If people want to get in, they will get in. It’s not like I have much stuff they can take.

When I finally get inside my apartment, I find a picture of a naked dark-haired, dark-skinned girl spreading her legs and quickly rub one out. I pretend we met at a junior prom. We both came with different dates but after fun, interesting conversations about classes and after school clubs, we find each other irresistible. We have a great time dancing and she tells me we should be together forever. We hold hands and walk off the dance floor. We sneak underneath the bleachers and she blows me. I rub my hands through her soft hair and it smells like apricots.

After I cum, I cook myself some dinner: eggs and a steak. I’ve never been a great chef or anything, but I can keep myself alive. My father always told me I had to take care of myself because no one else would be there for me. He proved this theory on more than one occasion by spending more time out at bars than at home. Then proved it once and for all by disappearing completely after I got placed in my first treatment center. I think my mother used to cook before she died—at least I pretend she did.

After my dinner, I contemplate using Casey as a sexual fantasy before heading to my night job. But for some reason, I just can't masturbate to her. It doesn't feel right. Maybe it was Ibrahim's visit. I don't know. I don't touch myself at all. Instead, I take off the Band-aid and throw it in the little trash can I have in the kitchen. Around the scar on my finger, there is some dried blood. I'm about to wash it off in the sink, when I realize that if I squint my eyes hard enough, it looks just like a heart. I decide to leave it.

The shipping company I work for is owned by a middle-aged, heavy-set lady from Chicago, Illinois. Her name is Beatrice and I never see her. She interviewed me years ago and gave me the job. Since then, I've only heard her voice on the phone when she's asked to come in for an extra shift.

I load boxes from the conveyor belt to the trucks behind me. Some of the slower men at the warehouse only have one truck. I am responsible for three. Basically, the whole East Side of Orlando is mine. Some see the job as too repetitive and boring. I find it relaxing. It's like a puzzle that I have to master. I have to take all these variously-shaped brown boxes and fit them on the small metal shelves, making sure they all fit and are easily accessible to the truck drivers. It keeps my mind occupied and I don't have to think about sex or my unhappiness or how much I can't stand other people. I like it because it keeps me busy. I need to stay busy.

I work next to a man named Mark. Mark is from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Mark is responsible for the smallest truck in the warehouse—the Tuscawilla truck. The Tuscawilla truck is an extra truck that accompanies the larger Winter Springs truck. The

boss doesn't want to give Mark anymore responsibility because he is, according to her, "an ignorant redneck." She told me that one day on the phone.

Mark talks a lot to me. I rarely listen and he knows it. He likes to hear himself speak.

He says, "Never let them tell you they can replace you."

I say, "Never."

He says, "Nobody wants this job."

I say, "Nobody."

Then something catches Mark's interest. He stops loading his truck and walks up to me. Packages marked for Tuscawilla continue to come down the conveyor belt untouched.

He says, "Hey, what you got there?"

I say, "Huh?"

"On your finger. Is that like a pimple or something?"

"No, it's just a cut."

Mark looks around to make sure no one is listening to him and then crouches real close so his rancid-smelling mouth is only inches from my ear. "Be careful if you are bleeding around these niggers and spics. They all have AIDS, you know."

At the facility in Pennsylvania, they told us that some of the kids might have AIDS but nobody was allowed to know who they were. That information was protected by some privacy act. If anyone bled, everyone had to back off until a nurse with plastic gloves came and took care of it. That shit really scared me. But then I thought that maybe I deserved AIDS for what I had done. I helped anybody who was bleeding even

when staff told me to back off. I didn't care if they were white kids or black kids or Puerto Rican kids. They thanked me when I helped them and I felt better.

Mark says, "It's always good to have a nice, young, white man like yourself working here with me."

This is when I stop saying anything at all to him and concentrate on getting boxes on my truck. Most people in general are pretty fucking ignorant. I see no reason to think any one race is worse than any another. My father was white and he was probably the biggest piece of shit that I've ever known. Sometimes I wish I could tell Mark to fuck off, but it won't make a difference. He's not going anywhere and neither am I. He won't ever change. That's just the way people are.

The next day at the grocery store, Casey works the register next to me. She wears a tight blue top that reveals what Harry's Groceries' Employee Handbook refers to as her "midriff." This is a big no-no in the manager's eyes. She doesn't care that her flat stomach shows or maybe she just doesn't realize it's exposed. I get an erection every time she stretches. She is friendly with the customers. She smiles and waves every time she catches me staring in her direction. I smile back and then quickly turn away.

When it's time for lunch, I shut down my register. After folding my apron neatly and placing it under the counter out of the customers' reach, I head back to my locker to retrieve my brown-bag lunch. Casey catches up to me.

She says, "Do you want to eat lunch with me, Howard?"

I say, "Okay."

She says, "In the break room?"

I want to tell her that I don't eat in the break room. I don't want to say I dislike the people here at work or people in general. I don't want to sound silly. I don't want her to think I'm crazy.

I say, "I don't usually."

She says, "I don't want to eat with those people."

I say, "Sometimes I eat in my car."

She says, "Let's eat there."

I surely must sound crazy to her now. She probably wants to follow me out there to laugh and say that she was only kidding. She wants to make fun of me for eating alone in my car instead of with everybody else. People will ridicule. It's in their nature.

A few minutes later, we're sitting in my car. She doesn't laugh. She doesn't make fun. She appears rather comfortable in the beat-up front seat of my old Honda. She eats a peanut butter and jelly sandwich her mom made her. I eat tuna fish I made myself. We eat and drink and watch traffic enter and leave the asphalt parking lot.

She says, "How old do you think I am?"

I say, "Uh."

"Come on, guess."

"Twenty?"

Her eyes widen and her cheeks flush. "Do I really look twenty?"

I shrug. "Sure."

"I'm only seventeen. Could I pass for twenty-one, you think?"

"Sure."

I knew she wasn't twenty but I knew she would like it if I thought she was older—just like I would tell an older lady that she looked younger. I'm afraid now she'll ask how old I am. When I reveal to her that I'm almost ten years older, she will run screaming back inside. She'll tell the boss that I'm a creepy pervert. The boss will call the police and I'll be back in the system again. I eat more tuna fish. I should have used less mayo and more pepper.

She looks out the window. “Thanks for saying that I look twenty, even if you don't mean it.”

“I mean it. You could pass for twenty-one.”

I'm not lying to her. Even though I'm pretty good at guessing ages, most of the world isn't. She could easily pass for early twenties. With some makeup and her hair done, some fancy-schmancy evening gown or something, she could be a real woman. She could have old men hitting on her at any club she wanted.

She looks back at me. “Do you like working?”

I want to look out the window, but I can't take my eyes off hers. “It passes time.”

“Aren't there other things you like to do other than work?”

I try to think hard of something, but nothing comes to mind. I shrug.

She gets excited as she sits on her knees and softly claps her hands. “Oh, I can name at least twenty things off the top of my head you'd rather do.”

This gets me a little excited too. “You think so?”

“I bet I can.”

“Okay.”

She rubs her little chin with her purple painted fingernails. “I bet you like to sleep.”

“Not really. I’d rather work than sleep.”

“I love to sleep. Sports?”

“Never any good.”

“Me either. Do you like to read?”

“I read some. I don’t think that it would ever keep me from working though.”

She smiles, “No, silly. I just mean you *like* it better than work.”

“Okay, I like it better than work.”

“I read every day.”

“Newspapers?”

“No, I love books.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

“*Catcher in the Rye*. No, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.”

“I think I read *Catcher in the Rye* once.”

“No, *Slaughterhouse Five*.”

“Is that a horror book?”

She lightly taps me on the shoulder. “No, silly. It’s Vonnegut.”

“Right.”

I pretend I know what she’s talking about even though I haven’t read many books.

Most of the treatment centers had small libraries with lots of books and magazines. I

couldn’t read well when I got there, so I’d get whatever book had the most pictures.

Ibrahim was the one who taught me to read. I started reading old menus from the

cafeteria and then I graduated to the shampoo and moisturizer bottles. I remember once a few of my friends visited me at the center and I read them a story I wrote in creative writing about a boy who could fly. They said they liked it. But they never came back. I don't think the story had anything to do with it, but I tore it up anyway and never wrote another one.

Books sound interesting now. She talks about movies and TV shows she likes. She obsesses over *The Office* and *24*. I don't watch much television but I might start so we'll have more to talk about. She talks about music for a little and how she loves to go to concerts. I listen to music once in a while but I never know the artist. She has track listings on CDs memorized.

Then she says, "What about sex?"

Welcome back to life.

Up until that point, I hadn't thought about sex the whole time we'd been in my car. It was the longest I had gone without thinking about sex at all in a long time.

I ask her, "What?"

"Sex."

"What about it?"

"I bet you like sex more than work."

I don't know how to answer. It feels wrong for this girl to be mentioning sex. I wonder if she's had it and if so how many times. I bet she has a lot. That's not right. She's a sweet girl. Sex just doesn't seem right for her. She's above sex. It's too dirty for her. She loves it. She probably wants to fuck me right here in this car.

I finally say, "Yeah, I guess so."

“It’s better than work?”

“Sure.”

The smile leaves her face. She takes her legs out from under her and sits properly in the seat. She looks back out the window. “I wouldn’t know.”

“Right.” That I find hard to believe, but it somehow makes sense.

She removes a container of strawberry yogurt and a white plastic spoon from her lunch bag, “Nope.”

I’m not sure how I feel about this. I don’t think I should talk to her about sex, but I am curious to find out what she thinks. It’s probably not a healthy conversation to have with a girl of her age. I know that’s what my therapists would say. The few girls that I knew rarely talked about sex. In fact, the only person that openly talked about it with me all the time was my father. He told me that’s all there was in the world worth anything. I believed that once. I convinced a young, confused girl of the same thing years ago before either one of us understood any of it.

Casey finishes her yogurt. “Do you work tomorrow?”

I tell her I do and she tells me she does too. All of a sudden, I realize that I wouldn’t want to work anymore if she wasn’t there. She’s here now though and we both have to go back inside.

On the way home, I stop at a bookstore and buy some books. I grab a bunch by that Vonnegut guy because he is the only author that I heard her mention and all of the books are listed alphabetically by last name. I don’t want to ask anyone there who wrote *Catcher in the Rye* because I’m afraid they might laugh at me. People are judgmental.

When I get back to my apartment, I call in to the warehouse to tell them I'm too sick to work. I've never called in before. I think I shocked Beatrice.

She says, "You're what?"

I say, "Too sick to work."

"I didn't know you got sick."

"Sometimes I do."

"You really get *sick* sick?"

"Yes."

There is a long silence on the other end.

She finally says, "Well, go see a doctor, Westing. You don't want us to replace you, do you?"

"No, I'm just sick tonight."

At least three of the treatment centers I went to used to be hospitals. I remember looking out the window from my room and seeing the windows of the abandoned floors that the facility wasn't using adjacent to my building. There was old hospital equipment like IV bags on close-rack-looking things sitting there. Some staff would tell us there were ghosts on those floors and that's why we should never go AWOL. Sometimes, late at night, I thought I'd see ghosts through the windows, walking the halls. They looked like little children. I've never been in a hospital since.

After I hang up, I decide that I probably won't go in tomorrow night either. I have plenty of books to read. I read two of them straight through, sleep for twenty minutes and then get ready for my paper route.

When I get home from the paper route, I take a quick nap and start reading again. The books are interesting. In the one that I thought was a horror book, this guy travels back and forth in time through his whole life. I wish I could do that. I would spend as much as I could in my childhood years—before I was a teenager. Then maybe I would head to the future. Who knows? I may end up on another planet like that guy in the book.

Someone knocks on the door. It can't be the landlord. He *pounds* on the door. This is only a slight rap. I put the book down, folding the page to mark my spot. I peep through the hole and see Casey wearing a blue bikini top and jean shorts, her hair in a ponytail. I open the door.

She says, "Howard, we're going to the beach."

I say, "We are?"

"Right now."

"I have to work soon."

"Call in sick like I did."

I can't call in sick to the grocery store—especially if she did. For one, that means now they are two cashiers short and the manager will be pissed. Two, people will think we called off together. Rumors will be spread of the molesting, creepy guy and the young innocent new girl. I can't do it.

She says, "Are you going to call in?"

I say, "Yes. Hold on."

Why should I give a shit if the manager gets pissed? I've worked there for years and have never called off. One day is not the end of the world. Plus, I don't care if those people need help. It's not like they'd ever help me if I needed it. People only help others

if there is something they can get in exchange for the help. That's just how people are. I call in.

The boss says, "And just why can't you work, Westing?"

I say, "I'm sick."

"You've worked here for years and have never been sick."

"Then stop giving me shit."

I hang up the phone as hard as I can.

We head past block after block of Wal-marts and McDonalds and Home Depots and Applebees and pawn shops before hitting the highway. I guess one thing people like about Orlando is that it's not too far from the beaches. It only takes us about forty minutes.

This is the first time I've been to the beach since I was a kid. I hate the people at the beach more than the people at work. But I don't mind going there with Casey. There's something about her that calms me. I focus only on the things she says and does. She's distracting—in a good way.

She wears a tiny little blue bikini and I wear jeans and a T-shirt. My skin is sensitive to the sun since I spend most of my days indoors. I try to stay as covered as possible to avoid burning to a crisp. She does finally convince me to take off my shoes and socks. I crush sand beneath my toes and think that maybe the beach isn't so bad after all. I catch her staring at me for a while without saying a word.

I say, "What is it?"

She says, "You look like my father sometimes."

This worries me. She thinks I'm too old. Again, I feel creepy. I look for my socks to cover my bare feet. Time for her to get up and start screaming about the weird old pervert. But she just smiles, noting the look of concern on my face.

She says, "You remind me of pictures I saw of him."

I shrug, unsure of what to say or do.

She adds, "Like when he was young."

I say, "Oh."

She tosses a shell towards the ocean. "I never knew him. He died before I was born."

I look for another shell to do the same, but find none. "I wish I never knew my father."

She tells me that she moved here from St. Paul, Minnesota with her mother, who is originally from Canada. Her mom is cool but Casey misses her friends. She tells me this is the first time that she has ever seen the Atlantic Ocean and hopes to one day see the Pacific. I never cared about oceans before but now I want to see them all. Maybe all the seas and gulfs and lakes and bays too. I tell her that and she likes the idea.

She comes back to my apartment and tells me she needs a nap. I explain to her that I have another job to go to in a little bit, but she can rest as long as she promises to lock the door when she leaves. She smiles and promises. I get a shower, careful not to wash off the heart-shaped blood stain on my finger. The beautiful girl is sound asleep when I leave for the warehouse.

Beatrice stops me before I head to my trucks. I'm surprised that she is here.

She's never here.

She says, "You don't look sick."

I say, "That's why I'm here tonight."

When I get to my trucks, Mark is there waiting. He's not loading his truck at all.

He just smokes a cigarette and stands there.

He says, "You still got that pimple there."

I say, "It's not a pimple."

He says, "Why don't you pop it?"

I don't say anything and start to load my truck. It's hard to concentrate when all I see is the heart on my finger every time I grab a box and all I can think about is Casey and the beach and her blue bikini and Minnesota and midriff and her eyes and her smile and the boxes are just coming too fast. I keep going anyway. I grab box after box, quicker than I ever have before. Before I know it, my hands are covered in paper cuts from the cardboard edges. I just let the blood flow. I don't care where it goes.

Mark says, "How come you weren't here last night?"

I say, "I was sick."

He shakes his head. "I had to work next to a goddamned nigger and he smelled."

I pick up one of the packages off the conveyor belt and throw it at Mark, just missing his head. He ducks out of the way and looks at me with pure terror.

He says, "What the hell did you do that for?"

I say, "You don't smell so great yourself, you know."

Mark stares at me for a minute. He looks like he's going to cry. Maybe he's going to piss his pants. My hands are almost all red and blood drips to the floor and I don't care about any of it.

I say, "Look, you dumb cracker, I don't give a fuck about you, and I don't want to hear you say another word to me for the rest of my life."

Mark doesn't say another word and goes back to work on his truck—in silence. The rest of the night is the most relaxing shift I ever worked. I see the heart on my finger and I feel the pulse it generates every time I lift and parcel and it feels great. It's like it gives me powers or something.

I find Todd outside my door with a locksmith when I get home to my apartment. The locksmith fumbles around with his bag of tools and Todd stares at me as I walk closer.

I say, "What the fuck are you doing, Todd?"

Todd says, "What the fuck does it look like, deadbeat?"

I say, "It's looks like you're changing the locks at three o'clock in the morning."

Todd says, "Todd can do whatever Todd wants whenever Todd wants to."

I take my heart-tipped finger and poke Todd repeatedly in the chest. The more I poke, the more my hand bleeds. Blood splatters on Todd. "Todd is a piece of shit that needs to leave my apartment before he gets Todd killed."

The locksmith packs up his bag and rises to his feet. "We can do this some other time."

Todd doesn't speak. His eyes are big. He backs away from my pokes and clutches his chest. Blood covers his shirt and speckles his face.

He says, “Sorry, Mr. Westing. We’ll come back at a more convenient time.”

I say, “Don’t come back at all.”

He promises he won’t and then he leaves. My heart pumps louder in my chest and I feel stronger than I ever have in my whole life.

When I get inside, I head for the bathroom. I rinse my bloody hands in the sink, covering the cracked porcelain with crimson. Casey’s blue bikini hangs on the shower rod behind me. I take it down and feel the material. It is still wet and it smells like coco butter from her suntan lotion. The blood from my hand blends into a violet color on the swimsuit. I smell it again and the smell of blood mixes with the salt from the ocean and I don’t want to stop breathing in its mesmerizing aroma.

In my bedroom, Casey still sleeps in my bed. But now she lies naked, stretched out across on top of the sheets. While her legs, stomach, back, and arms are all a golden tan—her breasts and the area once occupied by her bikini bottoms remain a milky white. She looks beautiful and calm. I breathe slowly in and out, trying to imitate her breaths. I can feel that my penis is fully erect.

I take off my shirt. I can’t do this. I take off my pants. I need to stop. I am now naked and I am crawling into bed with her. She doesn’t wake up. I put my hands over her wrists and hold them firmly against the bed. I take my right hand and place it over her mouth. I can’t move. The pain in my hands is unbearable.

Welcome back to life.

I stop stroking myself to my deviant fantasy. I'm not in the bed. I'm on the floor across the room from her. My boner is covered in blood. Some of the paper cuts have split open further and my hands are gushing.

This is unhealthy. I can't do this. She is a young girl and needs to be treated with respect. I leave her naked in my bed and head back to the bathroom.

The crack in the mirror splits right down the middle of my reflection's face. It marks me as a sex offender. I trace the crack onto my face in my own blood. Maybe some people can't tell that I raped a girl once, but that's all I see as I try to think of a nice setting where a fantasy with Casey could be healthy and consensual but I can't think of any.

My erection won't go away. I don't know what to do. I'm shaking. I think of calling Ibrahim but I already know what he will say. He'll tell me I shouldn't have any underage girl in my house at all and then he would call the cops. Maybe I should just call the cops.

No. I can handle this. I just need to calm myself. I just need to remember how I hurt someone before.

She's in my head. Her name is Caroline. She's just a kid. She says she wants to have sex when I tell her what it is. But it isn't consensual. There are balloons on her ceiling from her birthday party the day before. She doesn't know what she's doing and neither do I. My father always viewed women purely as sex objects and without a mother what the hell else was I supposed to think of them as. She's crying. She's hurt

and she's crying a lot. One of the balloons slowly sinks to the purple carpet floor. There are so many tears I can't see her eyes.

No excuses. I don't care who my father was or when my mother died. It's not Caroline's fault at all. The blame lies squarely on me. I accept full responsibility for my actions. I hurt someone and I'm never going to do it again.

Welcome back to life.

I wash my hands letting the blood flow down the drain. There are no fantasies tonight. I return to my bedroom and cover Casey with a blanket. I sit on the floor across the room and rest my head against the wall. I have to look out for this girl and protect her. I have to explain to her that she can't go over to guy's places and fall asleep naked—that there are lots of dangerous people out there. Maybe she'll take me to her prom. Maybe she'll

I don't know what time it is when I wake up but it feels like it's been days. I wake up to Casey screaming. It's light out. She's found her clothes. My hands and my head throb. I try to get up using the wall for leverage.

I say, "What's wrong?"

Casey says, "There is blood on this blanket."

I'm about to tell her not to worry, that my hands are all cut up from the boxes at work, when she sees them for herself.

She says, "Howard, your hands are bleeding like crazy."

I say, "Boxes," and fall back to the floor.

She rushes to my side and puts her arms around me, bracing me back up against the wall for support. “Oh my God. You’ve lost a lot of blood. It’s all over the place.”

I say, “I just need some rest.”

She says, “I think it’s infected.”

“No, I cleaned it out.”

“You have to go to the hospital.”

“Definitely not.”

She looks like she’s ready to cry. She props me against the wall and removes her arms from around me. She stands over me now.

She says, “Okay, rest.”

I say, “I have to work in a few hours.”

She runs her fingers through my hair, “Just rest.”

She whispers in my ear that I’m not like other guys out there and she wants me to know that she is not like other girls and that’s why she needs me to rest. I try to respond but

I wake up suddenly sweating. I am on the floor next to Casey. I’m nauseated. My hands are numb and my skull pounds. I’m shaking all over. It feels as if there are bugs crawling around in my wounds. I don’t care if there are or there aren’t. She looks worried.

She says, “I’ve called an ambulance.”

I say, “I think I just need to rest.”

“No, you need blood and lots of stitches.”

“I hate hospitals.”

“Too bad.”

I’m too weak to argue. “Can you help me out on to my couch?”

She rushes over to me and grabs my arm to try and support me. She helps me to my feet. I feel safe. She guides me out of the bedroom into my living room and onto the couch. With my head on the pillow and my torso and legs stretched across the cushions, I try to stop shaking. The more I try, the harder it is to steady myself.

She says, “Please stop shaking.”

I grab my remote control from the floor and turn the television on. “I thought maybe we could see if any of those shows you were talking about the other day were on.”

There are tears in her eyes. I wish some to mine, but none come.

She says, “You’re not going to die are you, Howard?”

I say, “I hope not.”

“I don’t want you to die.”

“Then I’m not dying.”

She hugs me. She cries. Her warm, bony arms are the perfect belt around my waist. Her tears soak my chest. I wrap my arms around her and I am her bulletproof vest. I don’t want to move. I don’t know how many moments I have left in this world, but I do know that this is the greatest one I’ve ever had or ever will. I try to cry back. I try with all my might to force tears. None are there, so I sigh along with her whimpers.

I have to be at work in an hour. I can hear the ambulance’s sirens in the distance. My breaths are getting shorter. I take less. It’s easier to close my eyes.

Mr. Howard Westing, welcome back to life.

THE EXECUTION OF MY CREATOR BY GLENN MOSS

I only went to the bar that night to watch a basketball game. I didn't expect my life to change forever.

The place looked no different than usual—empty and smoky. It smelled of stale beer and bleach. I took a seat next to this stocky guy with unkempt dirty blond hair who appeared roughly the same age as me. I didn't plan on it. He just happened to be sitting by the TV with the Sixers game. My girlfriend, Vanessa, had a late class that night and I didn't want to sit around the apartment drinking by myself. I'd rather drink alone in the company of others.

They knew me in there. Heidi, the cute brunette, welcomed me back and told me how good it was to see me again. She mixed my usual—Captain and diet. The plan was not to get drunk—just to drink slowly and relax. But by the second quarter, I was well on my way to a nice buzz.

“I fucking hate the Lakers,” I announced to no one.

The guy sitting next to me said, “They suck.”

That's all it took to strike up a conversation in a sports bar. It turned out we were both Philly fans and both pissed off how much the Sixers sucked this year. The guy seemed okay and we yelled at the television together and bought each other drinks. Heidi asked if we were brothers. He had a great laugh at that one.

I said, “Only brothers in the tortured life of a Philadelphia sports fan.”

He laughed even louder at that. He almost fell off his stool. I had to ask what was so funny, but he just shook his head. I continued to pester him, getting angrier at his silly laugh until he came up with an answer.

He said, "I know more about you than you think."

I said, "Well, I think you know nothing. I hope you know more than that."

I imagined all the possibilities of how this crazy drunk could know anything about me. He could be stalking me. This guy was some gay serial killer like the guy who did in Versace. He was CIA and had been watching my every move for years, waiting for the right moment to bring me down. This was his pitch to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. He was God for all I knew.

He said, "I know everything about you, Glenn."

I wondered if Heidi could hear this lunatic rambling to me, but she was nowhere to be found. In fact, no one was around. I couldn't see any bartenders, bouncers, or fellow drunks. I was alone with this crazy piece of shit. My heart rate increased. I felt the sweat forming at my brow and I kept clenching my fists. I wanted to know if I was dreaming. There was only one thing I absolutely had to ask him.

I said, "What do you know?"

"Well, your name is Glenn Moss and you were born at Brandywine Hospital in Coatesville, PA. Your parents are George and Maureen..."

He spoke for hours, reciting every minute of my life right down to the last detail. I didn't know what to say. I sat there, mouth wide in silence, and listened.

He said, "I know it's hard for you to hear all this."

"You have no idea."

“I have every idea. I’m your writer.”

“My writer?”

“You only think, feel, and do what I want you to.”

Either instincts or the large amounts of alcohol I had consumed over the past few hours took over and I swung at him. He didn’t duck. He completely disappeared.

The bar was full again. I punched air. I fell out of my chair. People got off their barstools to stare at me. I landed in something that smelled like vomit. It stained my shirt. Heidi rushed around the bar.

She said, “Are you okay?”

I jump to my feet, ignoring my ruffled hair and my flushed cheeks. “Where did he go?”

She said, “Where did who go?”

I try to wipe the stain from my shirt. It smelled like cheese that had been sitting in someone’s trunk for weeks in July. “That guy.”

She looked worried. “What guy?”

“The guy I was talking to all night.”

She looked back to one of the bouncers who made his way around the bar towards me. He didn’t look worried. He looked angry and ready to hurt someone.

I said, “The guy I watched the Sixers game with.”

Another bouncer made his way from the back and the two of them stood there, ready to pounce. She looked genuinely concerned.

She said, “Glenn, you’ve been sitting there drinking and watching that game by yourself for about three hours now.”

I said, "Okay, I am drunk." I stumbled past the gazes and made my way out the door. The bouncers tried to grab my arms but I shook them off.

I said, "The fuck off me."

They both threw their arms in the air and allowed me to leave the bar. I don't remember any of the walk home except rubbing my head and trying to get the stain out.

Later that night, I was on top of my covers with all my clothes on. Vanessa undressed by her bureau across the room.

She said, "I didn't wake you, did I?"

I said, "No, it was the dream."

She smiled and then jumped in the bed next to me. "Was it a scary dream, baby?"

I said, "Not scary. Just fucked up."

"What was it about?"

"Don't want to talk about it."

"You're such a dick."

I ignored her as I sat up and took my shoes and socks off. She got out of the bed and back to her bureau where she continued to undress in front of her large mirror. She was so sexy there like that. She undressed like she was stripping for me and the coolest thing was that she pretended like she didn't know she was doing it. She ever so slightly swayed back and forth to a rhythm that played somewhere in the back of that amazing mind of hers and slowly slid her jeans down around her ankles, making sure to stick her ass high in the air in the process. She took those pants off without taking off her high-heeled shoes. Then it was button by button, as slow and as calculated as the jeans before

and she was just down to bra, panties, and high heels. She squinted at herself in the mirror before retrieving her glasses from on the top of the bureau. She knew I love those glasses.

She turned to me. “What’s fucking your brain’s ass tonight, Baby?”

I said, “Nothing.”

She walked slowly back to my side of the bed and climbed on top of me. She pulls my shirt over my head. She undoes my pants.

She said, “You’re shirt smells like shit.”

I said, “Do you read much?”

She pulled my pants off and threw them across the room. “Too much.”

After that, I forgot whatever the hell I was talking about.

The next few days, I went to class. I went to work. I hung out with Vanessa. Ate. Drank. Slept. Shat. Business as usual.

And then I found my black shirt on top of a pile of dirty laundry. I really loved that shirt and wanted to get that nasty stain out. I carried my bin of at-least-worn-once laundry to the apartment complex’s west side laundry mat with a stack full of quarters in my pocket and a box of detergent under my arm. I found the first open washer and dumped it all in, not caring about colors and whites. Vanessa always told me to separate that stuff, as did my mother anytime I talk to her on the phone, but I never care. I turned the dial and watched the water pour over my clothes. I took a strong whiff of the citrus-fresh detergent before turning towards the door.

That's when he walked in carrying a load of his own. He walked right past me and dumped half his dirty clothes into an open washing machine.

He said, "That stain looks nasty. Reminds me of a friend of mine who used to leave the remains of her TV dinners in the back seat of her car. One day, I was the lucky recipient of one that was three months old spilling onto my shirt as we headed to a club."

I wanted to attack him. I didn't need this guy stalking me and I didn't care what he knows about me or about what happened in back seats of his friends' cars. For some reason, there was something calming about his eyes and his sympathetic smile. I stood there.

I said, "What the hell do you want?"

He said, "Just thought we should finally meet."

"Who are you?"

He held out his hand. "I'm the one who writes your life. Nice to meet you. Again."

I didn't take his hand. Instead, I concentrated on the bumps and buzzes of the washers and dryers. He seemed to know I wasn't going to take his hand and poured more liquid detergent on his wash. He looked out to the parking lot where my car was parked.

He said, "Nice ride."

I said, "I like it."

"Acura GS-R."

"It gets me around."

"I had the same exact car stolen from me right out of an apartment complex parking lot just like this one."

“That sucks.”

He slammed the lid down on the washer and dumped another load into another machine. I really loved the smell of his detergent. It smelled like clothes did when I was a kid.

He said, “Do you remember the time you drove drunk to Philly to find Carlos banging Jasmine?”

I wished I hadn’t remembered. It was a few years back. Shortly after I had moved to Florida. I missed my friends. I missed my family. Most of all, I missed a girl named Jasmine. She was my girlfriend that I left behind. I got drunk one night and drove six states north. Well, I did pass out at a rest stop somewhere in Georgia but when I came to, I continued on. Anyway, I caught up with my family and my friends for awhile and it was good to see everyone again. Then I walked in on my former best friend, Carlos, balling my former best girl, Jasmine. I drove all the way back down here shortly thereafter. It was one of the most agonizing experiences of my life.

He must have recognized the recollection in my eyes because he nodded over and over again.

He said, “That was a story I wrote for one of my first workshops in college. It’s called, ‘The Thousand Mile Hangover.’

I said, “What?”

“It was originally called ‘Alcohol and My Other Love,’ but that called too much attention to the drinking problem that the narrator had and he really wasn’t supposed to be so self aware. I later called it ‘Last Call’ based on someone’s suggestion at another workshop. But I still like ‘The Thousand Mile Hangover’ best. What do you think?”

I said, “What the fuck are you talking about?” I had really no idea what he was talking about. I mean, I had a creative writing class once so I knew what a workshop was but I didn’t understand how he could workshop a story about me. Where exactly could this workshop be?

He said, “And I’m sure you remember the first time you met Vanessa?”

There was no way I could forget. I was in some dive bar that my Uncle Jesus used to take me to before he went to jail with my ex-roommate, Mikey. I was extremely lonely at the time and in the deepest depression of my life. I only went with Mikey because I was afraid if I stayed home alone I might have hurt myself. But Vanessa was there. We had one of the greatest conversations I ever had in my life and left together. It was probably the best night of my life.

He said, “That one was called ‘Cross Out the Eyes.’ Some of the best dialogue I ever wrote.”

I grabbed him by his pudgy shoulders and shook him. “I remember them. How do you?”

He let me continue to shake him. “I created those stories. Just like I created you.”

I stopped shaking him. “Like you’re God?”

He scratched his chin. “I’m not *the* God. But I am pretty much your god.”

Next thing I knew, it was nighttime and we were in a diner, sitting on cold wooden benches. We faced each other across a table with paper placemats. A grumpy, bald, fat man delivered large hamburgers and onion rings to us and then went back

behind the counter to wash a large pot. The only other people in the whole place were an elderly couple who sat at the other end of the diner, feeding each other by the window.

I said, “Where the hell are we? Did you drug me? What the fuck is going on?” I expected no satisfying answers.

He picked up one of the hamburgers and shoved it in his mouth. He spoke with a mouth full of ground beef, bun, pickles, onions, and tomatoes. “In a diner. No. Having dinner.”

I stared at the prick. He didn’t look like much with his scruffy, wannabe beard and pudgy face. The guy didn’t even comb his long-ass hair. He doesn’t look anything like a god.

He said, “Eat up. These are the best hamburgers you’ll ever have.”

I had no appetite. I felt sick. I thought I was dreaming and only wanted to wake up. This guy was such a scrotum. I wanted to strangle him there, eating his hamburger. I was about to grab him, when he spoke up.

“I know this is a lot to take in, Glenn. But there is no reason really you should strangle me here, eating my hamburger.”

Was this fucker reading my thoughts?

He said, “Not reading them. I’m writing them.” He took another big mouthful of his burger. “And please, don’t call me a fucker.”

He saw into my head and spoke my thoughts. I felt helpless. He went on eating the hamburgers. I stared at him because that’s all I knew to do.

He finally stared back. He put what was left of his burger down and wiped his hands on his shirt. He then proceeded to explain to me that he was simply an amateur

writer and I was, even more simply, just a character he had created for a series of stories. Even though I was one of many he had written about, I was his favorite because I was his closest likeness of himself.

He said, “Now don’t get carried away and think you know me as well as I know you.”

He went on to say that even though we weren’t exactly the same, most of what I did or wanted to do were all representations of his own experiences or dreams. I was either what he was or what he wanted to be. He also gave me characteristics that had nothing to do with him at all because his own life wasn’t interesting enough to write about. He tried to express his own pains and desires through me.

I said, “Jasmine?”

He said, “Loosely based on an ex-girlfriend of mine. They are quite different, both in appearance and personality, but the idea of having someone that you let go and still think about is portrayed through her.”

I said, “And Vanessa?”

“Based on the girl I hope to meet one day. I’ve only known her in my dreams and my stories so far.”

He went on to explain a lot of his characters to me. They were all combinations of people he knew, people he wanted to know, and people he never wanted to know. And what’s more, I saw them everyday.

He said, “Everything you see was created by me.”

I said, “You created Philadelphia and Florida?”

“No, they exist in real life. But the Philadelphia and Florida you see and know are interpretations of the way I experienced them.”

“What’s real life?”

“That’s where I live and I’m writing about you right now.”

“And how do you know that’s any realer than my life?”

“Touché.”

I was supposed to be honored to personify the way this asshole saw himself. Every thought I ever had, every word I said, and every emotion I ever felt were all simply devices for this dickhead to tell a story. I was simply a portal for this pathetic fool to live vicariously through. I never heard of him. He was no writer.

I said, “Why don’t you live your own life?”

He said, “I try.”

And then I was no longer in a diner. I was in bed and I was alone. I wore my favorite shirt. The shirt smelled of his laundry detergent but the stain remained, right there on my left breast pocket.

I tried to avoid places that I usually went to in order to lower the chances of running into that fucking writer. Part of me thought he was writing me to do so and the other part of me hoped that I was somehow outsmarting him. I tried not to think about him out there typing words, making me do things. I wanted to talk to Vanessa about it but I was afraid he’d make her say and do things she normally wouldn’t do. I was afraid he would make her someone else.

One night, I was sharing a nice quiet dinner in the kitchen with Vanessa when the phone rang. I had honestly thought we cancelled the house phone a while ago since we both use our cell phones. Both Vanessa and I looked at each other and laughed. We both knew neither one of us wanted to answer the stupid thing.

I said, "You know it has to be for you."

She said, "Why do I know that?"

"Because no one wants to call me."

"Except your momma."

"You're funny."

She sighed and got up to end the ringing. She said hello with a little bit of a laugh and was, at first, happy to hear the voice on the other end. But that suddenly changed and she clutched her chest and worry ran across her beautiful face.

She said, "Oh, no. When?"

I immediately rose to my feet and rushed to her side. That kind of tone from a phone call only ever means one thing—somebody is dead. I put my arm around her and tried to shoot a look that asked what happened but she just shook her head and kept talking to the person on the phone. I stood next to her in supportive silence.

She hung up. She didn't say anything at first, she just kept staring at the phone. She finally said, "My daddy died."

I grabbed her in my arms and clenched tightly. "Oh my God, baby. I'm so sorry."

We didn't say much for awhile. We just stood there holding each other. I stared at the top of her head. She stared at the phone. I wondered if she thought it would ring once more and her father would be alive again.

She said, "I have to catch a flight to Michigan. Tonight maybe."

I said, "I'll go with you."

She shook her head. "No, you don't have to."

"I want to."

"You have school and you have work."

"So what?"

"I don't want you to go."

The look she gave me was hollow and distant. I'd never seen her look like that before. But she wasn't joking. She did not want me to go.

She said, "I'm sorry, Glenn. This is something I have to do without you. I hope you understand."

I didn't understand but I forced a half-assed smile that feigned support. She thanked me and then headed to the computer in the living room. I looked at the phone and wanted it to ring again so her daddy would be alive. Then it did ring.

I said, "Hello."

It was him. "Hey, buddy. How are things?"

I turned my back to Vanessa's general direction and tried to whisper. I made sure my whispers were as aggressive and angry as possible. "What the fuck do you want?"

He said, "I just wanted to send my condolences."

I almost yelled. "Did you kill Vanessa's father, you asshole?"

He laughed on the other end. It was a very hearty laugh.

I said, “What are you laughing at, you evil prick?”

He said, “Nothing happens in your world unless I want it to.”

I wanted to yell and scream and call him all sorts of names but I knew no good would come of it. “Why would you do that to her?”

He said, “Not her. You.”

Vanessa cried at the computer across the room. She had no idea that everything in this world was under one man’s control. This was just life to her. I had no idea how to start explaining it to her. My heart ached for her and there was nothing I could do.

I said, “What do you want?”

He said, “Why don’t you just come over to my place tomorrow?”

I said, “I’m busy.”

“But your girl’s gonna be out of town and you’ll be all alone.”

“Fuck you.”

I hung up the phone. I walked over to Vanessa and put my arms on her shoulders. I kissed the top of her head. Her hair smelled of strawberries and shampoo. I told her I loved her. I told her I was going to miss her. I told her that I understood. She thanked me. I went into the bedroom and closed the door behind me.

Vanessa hadn’t been gone more than a few hours when I hit the liquor store closest to me. I bought bottles of whiskey, rum, and tequila—the biggest I could find. I bought enough beer to fill the refrigerator. Then I bought enough to fill the empty portions of the closets and cabinets around the apartment.

I decided since this writer wanted me to live my life for him that I wasn't going to live anymore. I stopped attending classes. I didn't go to work. I didn't leave the house. I stayed in my room under the covers of my bed and I stayed drunk.

I couldn't get a hold of Vanessa on her cell. She seemed to call only when I was passed out. She left messages telling me she was staying away another day or another week. Maybe she'd be gone for a year. I figured I could wait because she wasn't the woman I loved. She was an imaginary character that some asshole wished he could meet one day.

I couldn't get a hold of anyone—family, friends, co-workers. I figured that even though none of them was real, hearing about what the writer was making them do could entertain me. Every call went to voice mail and no one called me back. I even tried calling Jasmine in Pennsylvania to see what adventures my writer had in store for her. I heard from her brother some bullshit about her being in Ireland with some guy named Artie Finn.

The only person that called me constantly was my fucking writer. He left long messages where he told me all sorts of useless shit. Like Artie Finn never had a last name until Jasmine's brother told me it on the phone. Artie had only existed so far in some story where he was referred to only by his first name. Also, Finn was actually the originally last name given to Jasmine in early drafts of "The Thousand Mile Hangover" or whatever my writer was calling it now. Apparently, Jasmine McGinley was first named Cori Finn after a girl that the author really did know who had nothing to do with the original story at all.

I unplugged the phones. I smashed all the answering machines. I threw my cell phone out the window. It didn't matter.

The next day everything was in pristine condition and working just fine. My writer left more messages containing mundane facts about his stories and invitations to come visit him at his house. I camped under the covers and drank.

I felt comfortable under the covers with all the lights out because I figured there can't be a story about some guy under his covers with all the lights out. There's no plot there. There's no dramatic tension or dialogue. It's just some drunk guy in his bed.

I even contemplated suicide but figured that was his ultimate plan anyway. I would die and he would have his masterpiece—"The Death of Glenn Moss." No way I'd give him the satisfaction. I just stayed there in my bed. I didn't move. I let the phone ring and ring. I let my writer talk all he wanted. I did nothing.

Then one day the phone stopped ringing. There were no more invitations to the writer's house. There were no more anecdotes about dreams he had that lead to great story ideas. There was silence and it was the most deafeningly brilliant sound I had ever heard. I left my bed and got a shower. I walked around the apartment and opened windows. It was a beautiful day outside. The fresh air smelled hopeful.

I went into the kitchen and cooked myself some breakfast. I turned on the TV to catch up on the news. I turned on the radio to catch up on some music. There was one message on the answering machine.

It was Vanessa. She said, “Hey, baby. Sorry we’ve been playing so much phone tag. I’m catching a flight back today and I’ll need you to pick me up at the airport around three o’clock. I miss you. I love you. Kisses. Blow job. Bye.”

My watch was broken. I smashed it while killing an answering machine the other day. It was nice of the bastard to fix all the phones and the machines and leave my watch a useless piece of shit. I was about to throw the watch out the window when I noticed the fiery mass on the news—a fucking plane crash near the Orlando airport.

I turned up the volume: *Rescue workers frantically search the burning wreckage in hopes of finding any survivors but optimism is bleak. Authorities have no idea what caused the crash, only that the plane was flying from Detroit, Michigan due for arrival at 3pm...*

I couldn’t breathe. My chest burned. The ring from the phone was deafening and I know who it was before I even answered.

I said, “What the fuck did you do?”

He said, “Now do I have your attention?”

“If you fucking hurt her.”

“Yes?”

“If you fucking hurt her.”

“I’m all ears here, Glenn. If I fucking hurt her, what?”

It was right then and there that I knew what I was going to do. I was going to kill my writer. I didn’t care if it cost me my own life. I would die and take the bastard with me.

I said, “You’re fucking dead, writer.”

He said, “Don’t make ideal threats, character.”

I said, “She was my fucking life.”

He said, “I’m your fucking life. Get your ass over here.”

I never thought I’d be able to stab someone. Having the will and patience to get in close to another living being and force a metal blade deep into their flesh, piercing through tissue and bone, hoping to strike a vital organ. Possessing the strength to fight that same person as they slowly died a painful death right there in your arms. I never thought I could do that until that day. My writer was going to die at the end of a blade. I grabbed the biggest knife I could find and jumped into my Acura.

I knew the way to his house. I didn’t need to write the directions down. They were burned in my head from the messages that I had listened to day in and day out the whole time Vanessa was gone.

I couldn’t stop thinking about her. I don’t care that he invented her and that I was just some character. She meant the world to me and now she was gone. He took my world from me and I was going to take his world from him.

When I pulled up to his house, I got the feeling that something was wrong. The house didn’t look any different than most other houses in the neighborhood except maybe dirtier. But I felt like the house knew something that I didn’t—like it was smirking at me.

As I walked up the cracking cement driveway, I caught a glimpse of human figure through the large bay window on the side of the house. It was Vanessa. She was nude and bound and gagged, but she was also very much alive. I ran towards her.

The driveway erupted and split in two right in front of me. I almost fell forward into its bottomless pit. Fire shot out from deep down within its infinite darkness and the heat was unbearable. I backed up and covered my face. The ground below me felt wet and I realized that I was walking in blood. I stumbled over a pile of human bones. I was no longer in a neighborhood. I was in a large battlefield. The field was scorched and barren and covered with remains of former warriors that had met their match. It was the most cliché thing I had ever witnessed.

A monster with crimson flesh ascended from the fire and roared into the pitch-black sky. It had horns and wings and big claws and fangs all covered in blood. It stood taller than two men. My knife was nowhere to be found so I looked around for a weapon, figuring the hack would have left me something like a sword in a stone. Sure enough, there was a long samurai sword sticking out off the buttocks of a fallen soldier. I bet that immature motherfucker laughed his ass off when he typed that moment of genius.

I grabbed the sword from the anus of the corpse, half expecting a loud fart sound but none came. I walked right up to the smelly beast who still roared his bloody head off, flexing his muscles and flapping his wings. He was probably about to breathe some fire but I never gave him the chance. I slashed the monster across his belly and green blood gushed in my face. The giant fiend fell to its equivalence of knees where it stared at me in awe. I swung the sword with all the force I could muster and I decapitated the creature. And as its enormous head rolled around on the bloody ground, I stabbed it a few times in the heart for good measure before the rest of the body came crashing to the earth.

The fire died down and I leapt the mighty crevice, marching forward to the house, sword in hand. I was ready to kick down the door when I realized it was cracked open. I

pushed it forward and went on inside. I ran to Vanessa tied to the wall with various leather belts. The house was dark and unfurnished. I removed the gag from her mouth and kissed her like we were in a porn flick. I removed the belts around her wrists and ankles and she grasped my tightly.

She said, “Glenn, what the fuck is going on?”

I said, “Something fucked is going on, baby.”

She looked herself over. “Why the hell am I naked?”

I said, “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

She said, “The last thing I remember is we were having dinner.”

I said, “What about your father? What about the plane crash?”

She looked like death. “My daddy was in a plane crash?”

I held her close against my chest. “No, baby. Your daddy is just fine.”

I took off my shirt and covered her nude body. Tears ran down her cheeks. She still looked worried. I kissed her forehead. Behind her head there was a hallway with a single faint light. I saw a shadow of man sitting. He was sitting and typing.

I handed Vanessa my keys. “Love, why don’t you go start the car. I’ve got to end something before we can leave.”

Even though she was confused and unsure, Vanessa nodded and left me there. She knew she could trust me or she just wanted to get out the fuck out of that house. I took a quick look out the window to make sure the monster didn’t have any friends out there ready to pounce on the half-naked love of my life. When I saw she was safe, I headed towards the room with the light. As I got closer, the tapping of keyboard keys got louder and faster. He was really on a roll.

There he was, sitting at a crappy little desk in his Beavis and Butthead boxers. He was so pale with his shirt off, I wasn't sure if he had a lamp on or it was his skin lighting the room. He never turned around. He kept typing away, his pudgy, little beer gut hanging out over his boxers' waistband.

I said, "What was with the monster and fire and all?"

He said, "I didn't want the scene where the hero rescues the fair maiden boring."

I said, "Why was Vanessa naked?"

He giggled like a little school boy.

I shook my head. "Do you know why I'm here?"

He finished typing something, then spun around with a big smile on his face.

"You're here to kill me."

I thought I had finally defeated this bastard. But I had been playing right into his hands the whole time. Why the hell would he want me to kill him?

He winked at me. "I know what you're thinking. Doesn't make sense, does it?"

He must have made me come here to kill him so he could kill me and claim self-defense. Maybe he didn't know at all. He was guessing. He was just guessing I was here to kill him because I was in his house with a huge samurai sword and no shirt.

He pointed to his computer screen. "I'm not just guessing. See for yourself."

I leaned past him to glance at the screen. I read the words, "I read the words, 'I read the words.' The only thing I could think to say is, 'I don't get it.'"

The only thing I can think to say is, "I don't get it."

He swiveled around in his chair a few times before he spoke. "You see, Glenn, I'm quitting."

I said, “Quit?”

“Yes. I quit writing. I’ve come to a realization that I’m just not that good at it. And also, listen closely because I’ve never written a monologue before and since I’m quitting, won’t do so ever again. I’ve been calling myself a writer for all this time simply because I don’t want to work in an office. I don’t want to do what normal people do and call it a life. I never thought I could be satisfied with getting some wife and raising a family in suburbia and picking out paint colors at the Home Depot and going bowling with my wife’s friends’ husbands every other Friday night and working nine to five and spending two weekends a year at some shitty beach in some shitty time-share and taking family road trips in an SUV to visit relatives on holidays. That’s why I decided to go into writing originally thinking that it was some magical gateway to Hollywood or the music biz where I could live in mansions and do whatever drugs I wanted to do and fall in love every weekend with a more interesting and more beautiful girl each time and have no responsibility and the ultimate freedom to constantly create. I know. It sounds ridiculous.”

I’ve never wanted to do anything like that either. I could actually relate to this man for the first time because of his simple, naïve pipe dreams. I wasn’t about to tell him that though. He already knows what I think anyway. He wrote it.

He continued, “There was a drive inside me. The thrust that kept me going was the knowledge that I had talent down there somewhere and once it came out there would be no stopping me. Recently, I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m just lazy. I have no talent, just a desire to not work. All my hard work was devoted to not having to work hard. I have no more writing capabilities than any other literate person on this planet that

happened to have stumbled across some Vonnegut novels or a Salinger story or two. Therefore, I've decided to give it all up and become a working stiff."

I said, "A working stiff?" My whole life was designed to be part of some elaborate plot to drive a wannabe writer into the working world. Did this motherfucker actually want me to feel sorry for him?

"I don't want you to feel sorry for me, Glenn. I just want you to kill me. Kill the writer. If I die at your hands, it ends all responsibility for me to create. I can stop being a writer and get on with my life. I'll make it easy for you. I won't even put up a fight."

He got into his bed with his arms sprawled and his legs crossed. He looked pathetic with his pasty half-naked body spread out and his round face pointing to his popcorn ceiling. This was it—his melodramatic ending to his failed literary life. I put the sword down.

I said, "Why do you think you have no talent?"

He said, "My writing is worthless."

"How so?"

"I try to write short and sweet, quick dialogue like Hemingway or Bukowski but it just comes out as sitcom talk."

"Why?"

"The words have no meaning."

"They have to?"

"Why else write them?"

I guessed he had a point. Words should probably have meaning if you were putting them on paper. No one wants to read gibberish or blubbing. So he can't write dialogue as well as he thought. So what? I'm sure every writer has weaknesses.

“And this is why you're quitting? Dialogue?”

“I'm not descriptive enough to be a writer. I never use enough words.”

First this guy wanted to be short and sweet and then he didn't think he used enough words. I figured there was more going on here. To the right of the soon-to-be-ex-writer, behind the desk where his computer sat, there were variously colored papers thumb tacked into the flat white walls. They were are not centered or hung well at all like the giant posters of *Scarface* or Samuel Jackson and John Travolta from *Pulp Fiction* that covered the other walls of the room. I stepped over a pile of dirty laundry to take a closer look.

They were letters addressed to the author from magazines like the *Florida Review* and *McSweeney's* and *Tin House*. They were all on different colored paper and typed with different fonts, carrying different letter heads at the top, but they all said pretty much the same thing: *Thank you for submitting your manuscript to us. Unfortunately, we don't have room for it at this time. Good luck in the future. Go fuck yourself while you are at it, loser.*

They were rejection letters and they were a lot of them. It wasn't the lack of talent or desire that held this man back it was simply fear. I turned back to the pathetic writer still blabbing about how untalented he was.

I said, “Stop throwing yourself a pity party.”

He said, “There's no party here.”

I said, “You fear rejection.”

He didn’t say a word. He just rested there on his bed.

I said, “You only think you are not talented because these magazines rejected your stories. You’re probably only saying those things about your dialogue and description because you heard them in a workshop somewhere along the line. Grow up.”

He said, “What do you know? You’re just a flat character like all the rest of the ones I’ve wrote.”

“I’m not flat. I’m just me.”

“Flat.”

“Hey, fucker. I have my whole life surrounding me, real or not, making me who I am. You, on the other hand, are very flat. You only see yourself only as a writer.”

He sat up. “That’s a good point, Glenn.”

I sat down in his chair. “Good because you wrote it.”

He said, “You see me writing anything here?”

That’s when I noticed he hadn’t typed anything in a long time. I swiveled around in his chair and faced the screen. The last line was still, “The only thing I could think to say was, ‘I don’t get it.’” He wasn’t telling me what to do. I was acting on my own. He just sat there complaining. I was in control.

I stood over him as he cowered on his bed. “You need to man up, writer. Stop being such a pussy.”

He shrunk down lower on the bed. “That’s a real misogynistic thing to say.”

I never claimed to be a writer but it's not like I was illiterate. I've read enough to know in literature you have to earn a death. You can't just kill a character to milk sympathy and force tears. If a death is not earned, it is not justified.

I said, "I'm not killing you. You're too pathetic to die yet."

I was tired of being this man's puppet. So what if he created Vanessa and Jasmine/Cori and my family and my friends, they were all part of my life and it's the only life that I've even lived. I didn't care if it was a fabricated life—it was *my* fabricated life and I was taking it back. I got up and walked towards the door. I turned back to him one last time.

I said, "You're a writer, motherfucker. So write."

I didn't look back to see him get up but I heard the renewed dedication in the tapping of the keyboard on my way out of his house.

On the ride back to my apartment, the sun was starting to rise. Vanessa rested her head against my chest.

She said, "Isn't it just to die for?"

I said, "It certainly is, baby."

We drove directly into the sunrise with the wide road ahead of us and the only thing clearer to me was the satisfying knowledge of who was writing who.

ONE DAY

Jimmy opens his eyes. He stands over another man's lifeless body, which remains face down in merging puddles of piss and blood on the asphalt behind Rex's Bar.

He stands there for another minute, breathing. Then he runs through the back alleys and side-streets. The scattered street lamps provide the only light on the empty town's streets. The moon hides behind black sky.

Once Jimmy comes to the main road, he stops and hails the only car on the road—a station wagon with a sign that reads, *Taxi*. The cab stops and he gets in.

The driver's pale, round face is almost hidden by the graying brown curly hair coming out from under his red Phillies baseball cap. "Where to?"

Jimmy gets in the back, looking back towards the alleys. "Just drive for now. I'll decide later."

They travel on. The cabbie drives and hums a tune. Jimmy tries to catch his breath while adjusting himself comfortably in his seat. Neither speaks for awhile.

The cabbie reaches up and smacks a small turtle shell hanging from the rearview mirror, forcing it to sway back and forth. "Did you decide yet?"

Jimmy says, "Maybe a diner."

"There's a Denny's two blocks up on the right."

"I don't want to go there."

"There's a Friendly's up towards 202."

Jimmy shakes his head. "Just drive another ten minutes down this same road. Then I'll go to the first diner you see."

The cabbie shrugs, taps his turtle shell, and hums his tune again. The shell silently swings back and forth. The cab remains the only car on the road and only the fire hydrants, trees, and streetlamps occupy the sidewalks.

A few minutes later, they are no longer in town. The row houses and brick sidewalks become fir trees and fog. The lack of streetlamps makes the air outside even blacker than before.

The cabbie looks into the rearview. “You get into a fight, killer?”

Jimmy’s eyes widen. “What?”

“You look like you got in a little scuffle.”

“I guess so.”

“You win?”

Jimmy says, “Next diner you see.”

Now.

The cab pulls out of the gravel parking lot, leaving Jimmy to walk toward the aluminum-sided diner with the huge white sign with gray letters that reads, *Hungry Holly’s Diner*. Some dirt decorates the windows and some graffiti highlights the walls.

Inside, the diner’s counter is solid mahogany with a glazed top. It’s topped off with checkered placemats matching the empty black and white barstools lined up in front. An elderly couple sits at one of the tables by the window sharing a late-night dinner of eggs, ham, toast, and a chocolate milkshake. A bald man stands cross-armed in his stained wife-beater behind the counter. His name tag reads *Phil*.

Jimmy asks, “Do you have a bathroom?”

Phil doesn’t uncross his arms. “Are you going to eat here, killer?”

“Yes, I’m hungry.”

“The bathroom is only for people who eat or work here.”

“I’ll eat. I need to use the bathroom first.”

Phil points in the direction of the elderly couple. “You see them?”

“Yes.”

“First door past them.”

Jimmy passes the old couple on the way to the bathroom. The man has a full head of white hair while the woman’s hair is gray and thinning. Both smile at Jimmy. He smiles back, and then enters the bathroom locking the door behind him.

The small, green bathroom smells of mildew and old mops. Jimmy washes his hands and face in the sink. Dirt and blood mix with the water and escape down the drain. He winces while pulling a tooth from the back on his neck.

He pulls a roll of hundred dollar bills from his pocket and counts them. He then takes a few of those bills and puts them in his wallet. He leans forward, his left arm bracing him against the sink while he runs his right hand up and down his face as he closes his eyes. Upon opening them, his cold reflection stares him down—the bags under his hazel eyes throbbing.

“Congratulations on your life.”

Now.

Jimmy takes a seat at the counter. He searches for a menu, moving from side to side trying to feel at ease. The old couple takes turns feeding each other with a fork. Phil comes back to the counter carrying a large stainless steel pot. He places it down in front of the Jimmy. “What are you going to eat?”

Jimmy asks, "You have hamburgers?"

"Sure."

"Are they big?"

"Sure."

"Okay, I'll take two of them with everything."

"You want fries?"

"No, onion rings."

Phil shakes his head, "You eat like my wife."

"Is that good?"

Phil heads back to the kitchen. "She's dead now."

"Oh."

Jimmy flicks the metal pot a few times with his finger, creating a hollow echo over and over again. A few minutes later, a young woman walks out from the kitchen. She removes the pot, placing it behind the counter on the floor. Her skin is bronze, her dark brown hair tied in a ponytail. Her name tag reads *Ines*.

Ines says, "You weren't going to eat that, were you?"

Jimmy says, "No, hamburgers."

She ties an apron around her black and white shirt, revealing only minor cleavage. She takes out a pack of cigarettes and some matches and lights up. "Good choice."

She then grabs a pot of coffee, holds it up, her head cocked to the left. Jimmy nods and she pours him a cup.

Jimmy says, "Thanks."

Ines says, "No problem, Handsome."

She leaves the counter and checks on the elderly couple. Phil returns with Jimmy's hamburgers and a basket of fries. He places them on the counter.

Phil says, "What the hell you do with my pot?"

Jimmy picks up a hamburger. "Nothing."

Phil glares him. He crosses his arms. Ines jokes with the old couple. Jimmy eats his hamburger.

Now.

Jimmy's cell phone rings. He grabs it and looks at the Caller ID. He then jumps to his feet, and heads for the door.

Phil says, "Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

Jimmy points to the door. "Out front to take this call."

"You plan on paying for your meal?"

"I'm not done eating. I have to take this call."

Phil crosses his arms. "Why can't you take it in here?"

Ines walks back to the counter. "Let him go, Philly-Phil, you big crank."

Jimmy says, "I get bad reception inside."

Phil says, "You need a new cell phone company."

Jimmy pushes the door open. "Okay."

Outside the diner, he turns back toward Phil glaring at him through the dirty windows. Jimmy smiles and waves. Phil gives him the finger and heads back to the kitchen. Jimmy answers his phone.

A voice on the other end says, "Where the fuck you been?"

Jimmy says, "Sorry, didn't recognize the number."

“Where the fuck you at?”

“Holly’s Diner.”

“The place where Terrence shot the ugly bitch owner a few years back?”

Jimmy kicks at the gravel. “I guess.”

“You get the money?”

“Yeah.”

“Good job.”

Jimmy digs his foot in one spot of the gravel. He’s now hit dirt. “Last job.”

Loud laughing comes from the other end so loud Jimmy has to move the phone from his ear for a minute. He stops kicking gravel and puts the phone back.

The voice asks, “You think you have any choice in the matter?”

Jimmy says, “I killed him.”

The voice hesitates, then says, “He probably deserved to die anyway.”

Jimmy says, “I want out.”

“Jimmy?”

“What?”

The biggest window on the diner frames the old couple laughing at each others’ jokes as the old man blows his nose into a red hankerchief.

The voice says, “There is no way out.”

Now.

Jimmy sits back down at the counter, his hands cover his face. Two half-eaten hamburgers and a full basket of fries rest in front of him.

Phil walks over to him, “I thought you said you weren’t done eating?”

Jimmy says, "I'm not."

"You haven't even touched your fries."

"I wanted onion rings."

Phil snatches the basket of fries from him. "We don't have any."

Ines walks back over and fills Jimmy's cup of coffee. "Don't mind Phil. He misses his wife."

"Okay."

She places the pot back on the burner. "Tough day at work?"

Jimmy says, "More than a day."

"I'm about to take a break," says Ines. "Care to join me?"

"Sure."

Ines leads him to the booth by the far right of the diner, opposite side from the elderly couple. Jimmy sits down expecting Ines to sit across from him. She instead sits close to him on the same side.

Ines says, "Sometimes this booth feels perfect."

Jimmy says, "I can see that."

Ines lights a cigarette and offers one to Jimmy. He doesn't smoke but takes one anyway. Smoking has never looked more inviting to him. As she lights it for him, her white blouse shifts revealing a tattoo of a young boy above her left breast.

Jimmy says, "Nice tattoo."

Ines doesn't even look at it. "My brother, Diego."

"Cute kid."

Ines puts the matches away. "He was."

“All grown up now?”

Ines takes a deep drag on her cigarette and then blows the smoke towards the diner ceiling. “Never got the chance.”

Jimmy’s face reddens. “I’m sorry.”

Ines says, “You didn’t know.”

They both smoke their cigarettes. In another life, Jimmy picks up his little sister from school. They are close. Talk about everything. She introduces him to her best friend, Diego. He thinks Diego is a smart kid and glad that she has found such a great friend. He drives them to the Dairy Queen for ice cream.

In this life, Ines’ eyes are reddening. She moves closer to him. “They never found the guy that killed him.”

“What happened?”

Ines looks down toward the table. “Some guy ran him over.”

Jimmy attempts to put his arm behind her on the wooden bench, but instead drops it back down to his side and looks at the table. She doesn’t need that from a guy like him.

He asks, “It was an accident?”

She says, “People kill for lots of reasons.”

He says, “They do.”

He can’t tell if she’s crying or not. The bench feels crowded and warm, like it’s full.

He asks, “You okay?”

She looks back at the old couple. “I just wish I had a face to go with the anger.”

Jimmy says, “I don’t know what to say.”

Ines gets up from the table. "One day."

"Yeah."

She lights another cigarette. "Thanks for the talk. I don't get to do that much around here anymore."

"Sure, Ines."

Now.

Jimmy eats his hamburgers at the counter. Ines brews a new pot of coffee. The elderly couple gets up to leave, walking hand in hand. They wave to Ines as they leave.

She waves back. "Have a great night, you two."

A few minutes after they're gone, Phil comes running out from the kitchen. "Did those old fucks pay for their meal?"

Jimmy says, "Take it easy, man."

Ines says, "I'm sure they paid."

Phil marches over to the table and picks up the check. He looks around the table searching the plate and napkins, then glances around the floor. "I don't see any money."

Ines says, "I'm sure it's there."

"They didn't leave it anywhere."

"Look around," says Ines. "Maybe it fell."

"I've looked. It didn't fall." Phil gets up, marches back to the counter, and picks up the phone.

Jimmy jumps up and scurries over to the table. He bends down to the floor and pretends to look around under the chair where the old woman sat. He takes the wad of hundreds from his pocket and places it on the floor. "Phil, I found their money."

Phil hangs up the phone. "What?"

Jimmy holds up the stack of green. "Looks like they left a big tip."

Phil and Ines, eyes wide, almost afraid, walk over to get a closer look.

Phil asks, "Where did you get that?"

"Right here," says Jimmy. "Under her chair."

Ines says, "That's some tip."

Phil takes the money from Jimmy's hand. "That wasn't there."

Jimmy says, "It was right here under the chair."

"I looked." Phil examines the money. "It wasn't there."

Jimmy says, "It was right there."

Phil counts the cash, "There's like \$1500 dollars here."

Ines stares at Jimmy. "Oh my God."

Jimmy goes back to the counter and finishes what's left of his hamburgers.

Now.

Ines sits next to Jimmy at the counter staring at him. She alternates hands running them through her long, dark hair she now wears down. Jimmy stares at the white plate in front of him, covered only in scattered crumbs.

Ines asks, "Where did you get that money?"

Jimmy says, "It wasn't mine."

Phil comes back in. He motions for Ines to get up, but she doesn't move. He then turns toward Jimmy, "I don't know what you think you are up to, Smart Guy."

"I'm not up to anything, Philly-Phil."

"I just called the cops, asshole."

Jimmy finishes the last bit of hamburger and licks his finger tips. “Do you think I could get those fries back?”

Now.

No one speaks for the entire fifteen minutes or so it takes for the police to arrive.

The sergeant, chest all puffed up, sits down next to Jimmy.

He places his gun on the counter. “You have some sort of night tonight?”

Jimmy just stares at his plate.

The sergeant asks, “You are Jimmy McGinley, right?”

Jimmy nods.

“We’ve been looking for you for quite awhile.”

Jimmy looks at him. “Here I am.”

Ines paces back and forth, clutching her chest. She then stops and stares at the two of them from the counter. “What did he do, Officer?”

The officer says, “He’s done plenty.”

Ines turns to Jimmy. “Like what?”

Jimmy says, “I’d like to confess.”

The officer asks, “Is this about Terrence Willard?”

The table the old couple sat at earlier remains as they left it. There was some food left on the old woman’s plate but not a crumb on the old man’s. Both plates contained forks, knives, and napkins and are pushed together at the center of the table. The chairs were pushed in.

Jimmy says, “No, this is about a little boy named Diego.”

A tear comes to Ines' eye. She cocks her head to the left, staring at Jimmy. Her lips twitch like she wants to speak but no words come out. She massages her shoulder.

Jimmy says, "It was a hit and run a couple years ago."

Ines punches her breasts slowly and calculated. "It was six years ago."

Jimmy says, "Six years ago over on Front Street."

Ines says, "It was on Matlack."

Jimmy offers his hands out for the sergeant to cuff him, "I ran him over six years ago on Matlack Street."

Ines says, "What are you doing?"

Phil says, "Arrest him."

The officer looks confused. He looks back and forth from Jimmy to Ines to Phil. He looks to the other policemen. They just look back blankly.

Jimmy says, "Arrest me."

Ines asks, "Why are you doing this?"

Phil puts his arm around Ines. "Will you please get this murderer out of my wife's diner?"

The sergeant shakes his head and handcuffs Jimmy. The other officers read him his rights. They lead him out of the diner. Ines breaks away from Phil and runs after them.

She screams at Jimmy, "What the fuck are you doing? *Who* are you doing this for?"

Jimmy turns to face her before the officers shove him in the back of the police car. "Here's a face."

The police shove Jimmy in the car. Phil grabs Ines and tries to comfort her as she tries to fight free. The police car drives off.

One of the officers turns over his shoulder, “Hope you’re comfortable back there, Killer.”

Jimmy doesn’t respond. The cage in front of him, the doors that can’t open from the inside, the low ceiling—he really fills the back seat.

In another life, Inez and Jimmy meet at a bookstore. They start dating and fall in love. He works in a bank and she teaches kindergarten. They get married in Paris and have beautiful children. They grow old together, sitting on a small couch holding each other close, feed each other, smiling. They die happy at the exact same moment.

In this life, the back seat feels cramped. No room to move. Outside the car, the purple sky awakens. Jimmy knows the sun will rise soon. He rests his head on the top of the seat, relaxes, and closes his eyes.

SMILE ALL ALONE

I used to have goals and dreams. Now, I have a wife.

Her name is Briana. I shouldn't be married. Marriage is old people. Marriage is my parents. Wives are for people I barely knew in high school, distant cousins, or complete strangers. Married people look like neighbors. They don't look like me.

Tonight during sex, I pretend my wife is Angie Parson. Angie was a cheerleader in my high school that (on a dare) gave me head under the table in the cafeteria my junior year. I never got to fuck Angie. She ended up dating Gary Pratt or Bill Morrison before the day ended. Tonight my wife will be Angie because I don't want her to be my wife.

My wife's big, brown eyes gleam. She slides back and forth on our Martha Stewart Everyday 3-Star Sunburst Bedding Sheets. Though naked and active, her dark curly hair hangs over her athletic shoulders, perfectly, like she painted it on.

She squirms, squeals, and moans. And she smiles. She always smiles. I don't buy the smile. It's the same way she smiled when we got married three years ago and bought this three-bedroom, two-bath house. She smiled when we got the cat, the furniture, and the appliances. She smiles the same way when she gossips on the VTech 5.8 GHz cordless phone, sipping the instant coffee. She smiles while she cleans. This is the same smile she wears when she works in her garden. She is happy and loves everyone and everything. Things couldn't be more perfect.

Afterwards, I try to sleep but my wife wants to talk—talk to her man. I wonder who *he* is. Her dumb cat jumps up onto my chest and purrs. It stares at me as its big, fat belly crushes my chest.

My wife grabs the disgusting beast and rests it on her chest. “Oh, Butters. Stop bothering Daddy.”

Black cat hair remains on my bare chest. I brush it off.

My wife asks, “Do you think we’ll live in Downingtown forever or do you think that we’ll end up farther out in Chester County where they’re developing now?”

I suggest that we move to California. Not because I care about California but because the word *forever* rings in my ears.

Her smile brightens. “I heard San Francisco is a beautiful city. Like in the movies with the hills and the trolleys and the Golden Gate Bridge.”

I say, “Did you know more people commit suicide at the Golden Gate Bridge than anywhere else in the world?”

She says, “I heard that new development out past Coatesville on Route 82 is really nice.”

The spoiled-milk-colored Kilz primer only slightly hides the water stains in the corners of the ceiling. One of my dreams was to go on a safari before I died.

I say, “How about Africa?”

She sits up now wrapping herself in her LL Bean Candy Hearts flannel nightshirt. She’s excited. “Could you just imagine seeing a lion or an elephant up close? Like in their natural habitat?”

As a child, I rested on my back and raised my legs toward the ceiling pretending to walk across it. I wonder what chalky flat paint feels like on bare feet. One of my dreams was to fly into space. “Let’s move to Mars.”

She grabs her Siberian white goose down pillow and lightly bops me on the head with it. “You are so silly. You have such a great sense of humor.”

I don’t raise my legs but imagine walking across the dry knock-down thinking that the floor makes a better ceiling. My wife talks about personality traits like senses of humor and what we pass on to our offspring. I get up to check on our baby.

I have a daughter. Her name is Maggie. She is a pretty little thing. The little hair she has looks black but they tell me it’s red. She smiles just as much as her mother but her smiles don’t bother me because they are genuine. The need to explore, learn new things, have fun—the reasons I smiled as a child. Not like my wife. Her smiles represent content for mediocrity and being grown up. For having a husband and a house and a daughter and two cars and shopping at the Home Depot.

I lift Maggie from her Chesapeake Collection solid oak crib with four position spring adjustments and hold her above my head. I think she’s laughing. Anything’s fun when you’re a child. Everything.

Daddy this is fun.

“I know it is, Maggie. It was fun for me when I was a kid, too.”

When were you a kid, Daddy?

“I thought it was yesterday, but it must have been longer.”

I kiss my daughter on her soft forehead and place her gently on her Winnie-the-Pooh printed cotton sheets. I envy her. Plenty of fun awaits her before she grows up.

I remember as a child throwing rocks at any intruders to Barry Scott’s tree house that I helped him built. They were small rocks and they were only deterrents, but they

were our ammo and protected our hideout. It was so nice being up there above the world, looking down on the rest.

I wake early the next morning, shower quickly, and dress in my usual casual attire—khakis, a collared shirt, no tie. All clothing my wife bought for me at Macy's during the fall sale. My wife still sleeps in our bed. The cat hisses at me. I give it the finger and head out of the room.

The downstairs is immaculate. All carpets vacuumed and all hardwood swept and washed. Not a dish in the sink and our appliances gleam. The stainless steel 30" free-standing range with double oven shines so bright I think it's smiling at me like my wife. One of my goals was to buy a car that made others jealous—one they would want to key to spite me. I take my keys from my pocket and scratch the surface over and over again until I'm satisfied. Then I head out the door.

I have a job. I sit in a cubicle and type things on a computer. The top of my metal desk consists of manila file folders with reinforced tabs, multi-colored post-it notes, an adjustable three hole punch with twenty page capacity, a rubber band ball, Advantas aluminum-headed push pins, vinyl-coated paper-clips, a black Swingline Optima stapler, titanium-bonded scissors, a Scotch Deluxe tape dispenser, a cobalt Martin-Yale electric letter opener, and a few plastic clipboards my wife bought at Staples. I have a telephone that I have to answer every ten minutes or so and say things like, "Uh-huh," "In like fifteen minutes," and "Yes, sir."

My walls are decorated in Philadelphia Eagles memorabilia and unfunny cartoons cut from the Sunday funnies. I didn't put them up there. My wife came in one day and

told me that my office looked bare and lacked style. I told her that it was a cubicle and didn't matter but she covered the walls in minutes and told me that it's fun to add a personal touch to things. She smiled. She also placed a picture of Maggie on my desk.

I have a boss. He's a balding man somewhere in his forties or fifties. He likes to tell jokes he read in email forwards. He likes to talk sports even though he doesn't sound like he has any idea what he's talking about. He wears ties with cartoon characters on them and likes to pat people on the back.

The boss asks me to take on another file at work. Knows that I can handle it because I'm such a gosh-darned hard worker. I tell him that it doesn't matter. He can give me all the files he wants.

I say, "I don't work on any of them. I just stack and rearrange them in different orders."

The stocky, old man gets a good laugh from that one. "A good sense of humor, too? You're going places, O'Donnell."

I say, "I'd love to go to anywhere but here."

Eyebrows raised, he says, "Good one. You know, if you didn't have such a convincing grin, I'd think you were serious, Kiddo."

I open my briefcase and take out a *Playboy* magazine and read about Miss May. She likes dogs. Me too. One of my goals was to work a job that I'd want to go to everyday like big movie director or baseball player. Anything where I could be rich and famous and didn't have to sit in a fucking office.

I surf the internet the rest of the day—check sports scores, read movie reviews, look at the weather in Rio de Janeiro. Yahoo.com has some fun games I play for a while. Work sucks.

Jobs weren't always so shitty. I used to have a blast when I worked at Harry's Sports Emporium. The openers would show up two hours earlier than regular business hours to unload the freight from overnight. We usually finished within the first hour, if we decided to finish it at all. The rest of the time we spent time goofing off. We lowered the basketball nets to eight feet and had dunking contests. We ran games of touch football down the main aisle—registers were one end zone and the exercise machines the other. We raced the pallet jacks like scooters. Another fun game consisted of pegging people in the face with a bag of tube socks when they weren't looking. Those were the days.

I grab my brown bag lunch—a tuna fish sandwich, some chips, and an apple. There is a note written on the flower-printed napkin:

*Hey Babe, I know my man is hard at work and deserves a nice home-made lunch.
Love you bunches. Bree ☺ ☺ ☺*

I crumble up the napkin and throw it, along with the rest of the bag lunch, in my black wire mesh round wastebasket.

At home, no one is in the house but the glaring, judgmental cat. It prances around as if it owns the place. I wish we had a pit bull that ate cats. A terry-cloth rag rests on the stove next to a bottle of stainless steel cleaner. The marks from my keys remain. I take the plastic bottle and squeeze a big heap of cleaner onto the floor. The white semi-

liquid piles up on the hardwood floor looking like glue. I set the bottle down next to my creation.

I find my wife in her garden with our daughter—one digs dirt and one tries to snatch the clouds from the sky. The ball-and-chain's flower printed blouse coordinates precisely with her blue overalls and gardening hat. She wears make-up so flawlessly applied she looks as if she is just naturally gorgeous—which she is, I admit, to a certain extent. When she sees me, she jumps to her feet, wraps her arms around me, and kisses me on the lips, tasting of sour milk and cinnamon. “How was my man's day at the office?”

That she asks me about my job bothers me almost as much as the smiling. I say, “Just like every other day.”

She smiles. “That's what you always say.”

I ask her if she's been cleaning the stove.

She tugs at her lip forcing the smile back to her face. “I tried to get some marks out of it I never noticed before.”

“Any luck?”

She shakes her head and picks up Maggie. “None at all. So I just figured I'd make the garden look extra special today to make up for the kitchen flaws.”

She did take care of her garden. Flowers bloomed—all sorts of pinks, purples, blues, and reds lined the landscaping. Her vegetables growing more rapidly than ever. The tomatoes were the best. She loved her tomatoes.

“We may get to eat the tomatoes sometime next week,” she says, smile bigger than ever.

When we re-enter the house my wife's smile fades slightly as she gasps at the white goop in the middle of the hardwood floor. Happiness returns as she rushes to clean up the mess on hands and knees. "I'm such a klutz. I can't believe I left the bottle so close to the edge."

At dinner, my wife talks about her day, "...and Maggie just had to see what I was doing so I took her out of her playpen and brought her in the kitchen with me as I talked to Karen who just can't stop going on and on about her husband who still hasn't found a job since he got laid off last August and I do feel sorry for her but she has to stay positive and not gripe over things and I tried to explain that to her and..."

Her smile never fades. She is happy that her friends have problems so she can tell me all about them. She works in her garden and tells me about it. She tells me about things she saw on TV or read in her magazines.

She continues like this but the words don't even register with me anymore. They just sound like elevator music in the background. Maggie cries. I put down my fork and knife and walk over to her and lift her out of her Fisher-Price Ocean Wonders Aquarium Healthy Care highchair. I hold her close to my chest and press her forehead softly to mine. The crying stops.

"Oh baby, you are so good with her. I can never get her to stop once she starts. I just tune it out. The doctor says—"

I cut her off. "She's tired. I'll take her to bed."

My wife smiles. "I bet she's tired. Little Maggie had such a big day. She helped me in the kitchen and in the garden and..."

The background music continues as I head upstairs to Maggie's room. I place her on her sheets and she grabs my index finger with her small hand and grips it tight.

Maggie looks right at me wanting answers. *Why does Mommy talk so much?*

I say, "Because that's all she has, honey."

What do you have?

"Pretty much the same."

But you don't babble like Mommy does.

"Well, that's because Daddy isn't happy with what he has."

My wife wasn't always so easily satisfied. She used to have ambition—to want more. In high school, Briana took most leads in the drama club. She dreamed of being a movie actress.

"I could start in the indies. I'd even do nude scenes if they made sense in the script."

She figured if she started in independent movies it only be a matter of time before she would get an Oscar-winning role which would only lead to exclusive roles and the eventual director's chair.

"I'd even lend my celebrity status to charities and cameos in sit-coms."

She also had dreams of cheerleading, music, and traveling. Never a housewife. Never a house in the suburbs and book clubs. Never a smile over mediocrity.

It's all her fault that you are not happy, Daddy.

Once marriage got in Briana's head, it wouldn't get out. She convinced me we should get married because we deserved to be together. Because it was me and her against the world and we should team up. But once we got married, something changed

in her and she settled for what she had. She convinced me to take a job working for her uncle's company because it would secure a future for our wonderful family. We could buy a house. We could buy appliances. We could have kids and pets that were our own. Blah, blah, blah. How happy we would be.

She made you take the job, Daddy. She made you marry her, too.

“What can I do, Maggie?”

Wipe that fucking smile off her face.

She's right. If things weren't so perfect in my wife's perfect world, there would be no reason for her to smile.

“How long do you think that would take, Honey?”

If you do it right, Daddy, it would only take a few days.

With my wife sleeping and the sky pitch black, I rise from bed and head out to the garden. The only light shines from the half a moon. I go to work quickly, kicking whatever plants or vegetables come into my view. I smash all the tomatoes under my slippers and uproot the flowers by hand, and throw them against the wall. I don't stop until the garden, once immaculate, stands totally unrecognizable. I wash my slippers off with the hose and return to bed with my wife.

The next day at work, in the middle of an intense game of Minesweeper and only three mines left, my phone rings. I wanted to become video game designer one day, or at least come up with the story lines.

I say, “O'Donnell.”

My wife sounds like she's been crying. "My garden... it's ruined."

I say, "Yeah?"

"Someone destroyed my garden, Honey."

I carefully click on the box to the right of the number 3. Safe. Thank God. Two more to go. "Was it that cat of yours?"

I can hear her sobbing. "Butters wouldn't do that."

I can't decide which box to click. I'm pretty sure it's the one above the three but it may be the one to the left. I can't tell. "You'd be surprised at what cats are capable of these days."

She sighs.

I blow up. Game over. I should've trusted my instincts and took the box above. Damn it. "Probably some kids."

She says, "What do I do, Billy? I don't know what to do."

I say, "Don't do anything. You don't have to do anything."

"But I don't know what to *do*."

I open up a new field of Minesweeper—a new ninety-nine mines to find. "Take a bath. Read a book. Watch a movie."

"But what about my garden?"

The first mines are easy. I can usually find the first fifty or so without even really trying at all. "Just relax, honey. I'll take care of everything when I get home."

She says, "A nice warm bubble bath sounds nice."

She tells me to get back to work before the place goes under and tries to laugh. She sounds a little lost and I tell her goodbye.

When I return home from work, my wife sits at the kitchen table, her head down, eyes closed. Maggie squirms around in her highchair, giggling, her hands and half her pudgy face covered in a beige, pudding-like substance. The stove remains scratched and there is now an oblong gray stain in the middle of the kitchen floor. The cat scratches the legs of my wife's chair. Magazines and coupons cover the table top. The dishes from my wife's breakfast remain in the sink.

I say, "Honey, I'm home." I try to sound just like the television shows because it sounds so funny to me.

My wife opens her eyes and jumps to her feet. She kisses me on the cheek and she smells like coffee with a hint of Jameson. She smiles and her eyeliner runs from her left eye. She mumbles something as she heads to the sink to wash her dishes.

I ask, "What?"

She brushes some sweat from her brow and starts to place the dishes in the dishwasher. "Your day, Baby. How was your day?"

I unbutton my top few buttons and sit down. "Today was an okay day. The boss left me alone for most of it and I found some cool new sites on the internet."

She mumbles something again. I take it as an "uh-huh," so I continue. "I thought about punching my boss in the face, but didn't feel like exerting the energy."

She stands up straight, brushes her hair out of her face, and forces a smile. "Me and Maggie enjoyed our day too."

She clears off the table—throwing out magazines and coupons alike. I grab a paper towel and wipe the crap off Maggie's face. My wife tells me about how she talked

to Mary Jo or Mary Jane or Mary something else and how she wasn't married yet and was struggling to find a career and still lived with her parents.

"I'm so happy we have a life together. We are married. We have a great house and a daughter and a beautiful garden. You have a successful job and are good at it—"

I interrupt, "I sit at a computer all day and go to websites where I can find out things like which celebrity I'm most like."

She laughs. It sounds forced, but she enjoys it and rubs my stomach. "Oh Billy, you are so funny."

She sits on my lap and puts her arms around the back of my head, and then kisses me on the lips. "I'm so happy we made it, Baby. We have everything we could have hoped for."

I kiss her back. "I'm so happy for you."

Later, I put Maggie in her crib. I spin the butterfly musical mobile above her and it belts out "Rock-a-bye Baby." She reaches for my finger, but I don't let her have it this time.

Mommy is still so happy, isn't she Daddy?

"Mommy is always happy. It's easy to be when happy when your goals are so average."

Mommy loves her stupid cat, Daddy.

"You're right, darling. Mommy loves her cat."

I give Maggie my finger and she holds on tight. I kiss her on the forehead. I remember I once wanted to visit every zoo in the world. *That* would be some goal.

I wake up early, my wife still asleep in the bed, put the cat in a cardboard box, and head to my used Toyota Camry sedan. The cat was my wife's idea. The thing is black, fat, furry, and lethargic. All day long it sits close to my wife and once in a while wags its tail.

The park isn't far from our house—maybe a mile and a half. I walk across the baseball field to what the kids in the neighborhood usually refer to as the “creek.” It is really a manmade drainage area, but to a kid, it was a creek. We used to catch salamanders and hide porno magazines there.

I hop down into the creek and put the cat on a sandy little shore near the small stream. I empty a can of Iams Weight-Control Chicken and Rice Cat Food Formula into a small Styrofoam bowl I brought along. The cat loves food and eats right away. I climb out, head to my car, and drive to work.

She calls me while I am in the middle of drawing pictures of my boss in crayon over the files he wants me to work on. I'm using the color goldenrod to illustrate the large dick growing out of his crimson red forehead. “O'Donnell.”

She says, “I can't seem to find Butters anywhere.”

I use cadet blue for the balls hanging from his chin. “What's Butters?”

She laughs. “Our cat. Don't be silly.”

Hot magenta for the pubes sprouting from his nostrils. “Oh, I'm sure that cat's around there somewhere.”

The vacuum runs in the background but she is silent.

I put my crayons down. “Did you leave the door open? Maybe he ran away.”

I think she snuffles before saying, “Hurry home, Baby.”

At home, I find my wife resting on the couch. Our baby rolls around on the floor playing with building blocks. At one time, architect seemed like a good dream for me. I would have loved to design sports stadiums. The stacks of dishes in the sink look as if they could touch the ceiling. Not only is the stain still on the kitchen floor, but it’s dirty as if it hasn’t been swept in weeks. As soon I walk in the room, my wife sits up and says, “Hi, honey.” She’s not wearing make-up today and she looks a few years older than usual. Her hair is tied up in a scrunchie and she wears only an old football jersey of mine and a pair of boxer shorts. But still she smiles.

I say, “The cat come back?”

She jumps to her feet. “Not yet.”

I sit down on the floor next to Maggie. “I thought your garden was ruined.”

She says, “Oh we’ll fix it this weekend.”

I pick up Maggie. “She’s tired. I’ll put her to bed.”

She attempts to protest, but just smiles instead. “Okay, honey.”

Upstairs I hold Maggie in my arms. I rock her back and forth. Her ceiling is bare. I should put up glow-in-the-dark stars and planets like I had when I was young. I loved looking at them before I fell asleep. Maybe Maggie will travel to space someday.

“That woman is impenetrable, Maggie.”

I think she is faking it, Daddy. She’s vulnerable just like the rest of us.

“I don’t think she’s sincerely happy either, honey. But she’s a fighter.”

I think we should leave this place, Daddy.

“You and me, darling?”

Tomorrow morning. Let’s leave her be. See if she can smile all alone.

“I love you, Maggie.”

I love you too, Daddy.

The next morning, I get up early again. It’s getting easier and easier for me to wake up fully energized when the sun comes up, even without an alarm. My wife is sound asleep. She’s even snoring. I’ve never heard her snore before.

After a quick shower, I dress, then take Maggie out to my Toyota Camry and put her in the car seat. She smiles at me and I have to smile back.

I carry Maggie in her car seat in to work. Everyone tells me how adorable she is and how she has my eyes. I tell them that she’s daddy’s little girl and they all laugh.

I place Maggie on my desk so she can get a good view of the computer screen. She giggles and shakes her rattle.

“Let’s see who you would match up with in the celebrity world.”

That sounds like a lot of fun, Daddy.

I enter all the information in for her, assuming how she would answer for each. She considers a shopping spree a good time out, thinks milk is gross, has less than \$10 in her wallet, etc. As I fill this out for her, my phone rings.

“O’Donnell.”

My wife is hysterical. “It’s Maggie... I don’t know where...she isn’t in her crib... I don’t know how I...” I don’t answer her right away. I let her continue. “She

wasn't in her crib... I've looked all over the house... I went outside and looked in the yard... she's not here... I... I called the police..."

I say, "You called the police?"

She says, "Yes and they asked where you were and I told them you were at work and they told me to call you and see if you knew where she was and—"

I say, "Maggie's fine. She's here with me."

The line is silent. I don't even hear my wife breath.

I say, "She wanted to come to work with me today."

"She's with you? She's all right?"

I put out my finger for Maggie to grab on to and she does. "She's having fun with her Daddy."

I can't see her, but I know she is not smiling. "Why didn't you tell... she's okay? Everything thing is okay? I don't know why you would... she's okay?"

"Everything is fine."

"I thought I was a bad mother. I thought I was going to die."

"You're not a bad mother. Maggie's fine. She's always fine."

She breathes a little heavier. "Why didn't you tell me that you were taking her? Why..."

Maggie grabs my middle finger now with her other tiny hand. "She's Daddy's assistant today. Isn't that right, Maggie?"

We got her good, Daddy.

My wife says, "I'm going to work on fixing my garden today, I think."

I tell her, "Love you too, honey. See you later."

After I hang up the phone and pick up Maggie. “Guess what, honey? Your match is Mel Gibson.”

Maggie and I enjoy our day at the office, surfing the net and having the co-workers treat us like celebrities. While in the middle of teaching Maggie how to play Solitaire, my wife enters my office. She wears an old red bathrobe over sweatpants and one of my old, torn T-Shirts, her make-up slovenly. Her hair is ragged, like a bad wig. She does not smile. She doesn't even appear to have teeth.

She says, “I want you and Maggie to come home.”

I say, “Maggie and I have a lot of work to do, honey. What is it?”

She walks over to my cubicle and sits on the floor next to my chair. “I miss my cat and I can't fix my garden.”

I get out of my chair and help my wife into it. Maggie and I wink at each other in our minds.

We got her.

I say, “Honey, it's okay.”

She says, “I'm not happy, Baby. I'm not happy at all.”

I embrace her and hold her closely. Our hearts beat in unison. I kiss her on the cheek and she smells as if she hadn't showered in days and I don't care. “Let's get out of here, Bree.”

I help her to her feet and put my left arm around her shoulders. I pick up Maggie, car seat and all, and tuck her under my right arm. My family and I walk together down the hall to the elevator. Some people wave to us, others shake their heads.

The boss asks me, “Where you going there, Kiddo?”

I tell him, “I quit, Dickhole.”

He laughs and tells me, “Good one, O’Donnell.”

I have a family.

One the way home, my wife rests her head on my shoulder. My daughter plays with her rattle in the back seat. I drive and know that I am smiling wider than I ever have before.

Briana says, “I don’t want to clean the house anymore.”

I tell her, “I don’t want to work at my fucking job anymore.”

She sits up and looks at me. “Can we leave this place?”

I say, “We can sell the house and get an RV.”

She smiles at that and it doesn’t bother me. It makes me feel good and reminds me why I married this woman. I married her because I love her. I married her because we are the same person in two different bodies. It’s us against the world. Maggie shakes her rattle and coos. I drive my family home.

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