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UNSEEN AMERICA

by

JEFFREY JAMES SHUSTER
B.A. University of South Florida, 2005

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the Department of English
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
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2016

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ABSTRACT

Unseen America is a glimpse into the lives of what American society considers to be low status men. "Kumbaya" involves a Cub Scout dealing with the fallout from a neglectful father and an alcoholic mother. "Devil's Tower" is about an overweight boy trying to prove himself in front of his peers. In "True Patriots," we see two displaced working class men forced to come to terms with an America that doesn't belong to them anymore or need them anymore. "Zippo Heart" deals with a recently divorced young woman spurring on the advances of a loser coworker while dealing with her grief over September 11th. Finally, "Devil's Backbone" showcases two days in the life of Caleb Jacobson, a native of West Virginia who can't let go of his heritage even when it puts him in danger.

With *Unseen America*, I hoped to give light to men who are often seen as caricatures if they're even noticed at all. The stories wrestle with the questions of what it means to be a man in contemporary American society. Should a man do the right thing, and for what reasons: societal pressure or a tug of conscience? Does a man live for himself or does he devote himself to a higher ideal? Does he let others define who he is or does he live by his own code? Low status men wrestle with these questions every day, but it goes unseen.

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I would like to thank those who shared this journey with me. Darlin' Neal, thank you so much for your patience and guidance in directing my thesis, and for messing with me. Jamie Poissant, thank you for being a generous host and always answering my questions. Rita Ciresi and Stephanie Moss, thank you for encouraging me. Susan Hubbard, thank you for making me appreciate Rust Hills, an impossible task. Bethany Thanos, thank you for always listening. John King, thank you for weekly deadlines. Lou Mindar, thank you for creating Jeff Shuster Day. Eric Fershtman, thank you for being a free thinker. Sean Ironman and Madison Strake Bernath, thank you for accepting the positions of second and third Musketeer. Laurie Uttich and Russ Kesler, thank you for teaching me how to teach what can't be taught. Lisa Roney, thank you for sharing the secrets of memoir writing. Leslie Salas, thank you for always speaking your mind. Allie Pinkerton, thank you being fearless with your writing. Jenny Broom, thank you for putting up with my messy desk. Dianne Turgeon Richardson, thank you for calling me out. And a final thanks to anyone else I've forgotten. Thank you for making Orlando a home away from home.

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KUMBAYA

February 14th, 1983

8:24 PM

Elijah Stein's head is cracked open. His head lolls from side to side like that of a weathered stuffed animal. Red drops rain all over the gymnasium floor. It's my fault. I did this. I'm just another stupid kid whose roughhousing hurt another kid. This is the beginning of the end for my mother's short-lived vocation as Den Mother for the Den 6 division of the Linden Cub Scouts. I'm more terrified for Mom than for myself and more terrified for myself than Elijah. I wish Elijah would disappear. Mom is shaking. She isn't cut out for this. I brace for Elijah's brains to slip out of his skull.

Mom involves herself in my youth activities. She's probably making up for my absentee father, the trucker, big rigging it every week to Kalamazoo, Winnipeg, and Rapid City. He's a good

guy I guess, paying for the mortgage, the electric, the heat, the water, the groceries. No frills on that last one. When he is home, he isn't really home. The road takes a greater toll on him with each passing year, all those miles of asphalt and cheap motels becoming more familiar to him than Mom's widow's peak or our pineapple lamp that always hums the 60 watts when switched on. Dad mumbles about the Badlands, telling me how "It's a forsaken place not fit for people."

Mom makes up for Dad's absence at every soccer game, passing out ice water and orange slices at half-time. The other kids call her "Mrs. M." They appreciate how she knows each of their names and cheers us on while the other team creams us. Piano lessons are worse. She holds long conversations about Bach and Chopin with Ms. Rothgard, my piano teacher. Mom yells because Ms. Rothgard can't afford a new hearing aid. My transformation into a concert pianist is what she desires, but I lose interest when I bang the keys Doo-Dah Day.

September 9th 1982

3:06 PM

I'm going to be a big brother. Mom is expecting to have a baby girl. She's already named her Lucille. I arrive home after school to find her locked inside our bathroom, bawling like a kindergartener. As usual, Dad isn't around. I knock on the door and ask "Are you okay?" Her sobbing is interrupted by recitals of the Serenity Prayer. I figure Mom is swigging shots of Wild Turkey down her throat like she did when she was pregnant with me. I leave her alone, and descend to the wreck room to watch cartoons.

September 9th 1982

5:15 PM

I check on Mom around dinnertime, but she doesn't answer when I call out. I put my ear to the bathroom door, but I struggle to hear anything, even her breathing. I try to pick the lock with a steak knife, twisting the knob clockwise and counter clockwise. The door won't open. I call 911. The paramedics arrive. The one with the Popeye forearms yells "clear" before breaking the door down. There's blood on floor. Too much blood.

September 10th 1982

10:24 AM

The doctor says this sort of thing is common in late life pregnancies. Mom is forty-two. Doc tells her to stay on the pill so it won't happen again. Mom nods in compliance. My fists clench, but I won't let them loose today.

November 8th 1982

7:04 PM

Den 6s Den Mother announces that she's going back to school for massage therapy. None of the boys like her because she has a bug up her ass about uniform inspection. She used to do point checks on how complete each of our uniforms were. I was always missing something: the bear cap, the yellow neckerchief, the bronze neckerchief slide, the web belt. She once took off points because I wore white socks.

November 8th 1982

9:15 PM

I tell Mom about the vacancy and she's determined to volunteer. I regret saying anything. I don't want her to be Den Mother. She used to attend AA meetings at the church our pack meets at. Mom stopped going a couple of years ago. She said she was cured.

February 14th, 1983

6:42 PM

Half the den doesn't even bother showing up for the weekly meeting. The weatherman said there was a slight chance of a snowstorm tonight, two to four inches. A wind advisory is in effect. I didn't pay attention until I saw the snow flying sideways on the way over to the church. I'd never seen snow fly sideways before.

February 14th, 1983

6:53 PM

It's disgusting the way our Den Father reaches out to touch Mom's arm, right in front of me, smiling that goofy grin of his at every word she speaks. His name is Walter Disney, no relation

to Walt Disney. The boys all figure it's a prank his parents played on him. Mr. Disney and his wife are going through a "separation." Anthony Guiddi told us all about it. Anthony's knuckles are bruised black and red. I don't plan to ask him why.

"Disney's wife is having an affair with a fireman," Anthony says, his eyes glimpsing past me to see if our Den Father is in earshot. "Mr. Disney is staying with his aunt. Angie Davies says he drinks himself to sleep every night, says he chain smokes on his mom's porch in his underwear and no shirt."

"How would she know that?" I ask.

"She lives next door to his mom's. Says she can hear his mother yelling at him about the boozing."

Mr. Disney is a small man, five foot five with a baby face. I don't respect him, but have to pretend to because he's Den Father. He's handsy, grabbing my shoulder or patting my back, and I can smell the alcohol underneath his Old Spice. The same way I could smell it under Mom's perfume when she used to wake me up at four in the morning telling me I could be president someday. My skin prickles when I glance at Mr. Disney holding Mom's hand in his.

Dad never holds Mom's hand. He'll hug her sometimes, that arched shoulder hug that keeps her as far from him as possible.

Mr. Disney touches her wrist, pretending to admire the cheap watch Dad bought her for Christmas. I was with him that day at Bradlees, admiring the enormous Lego models of the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria on display. I imagined dropping them from the roof of the building and watching a kaleidoscope of plastic bricks unfurl on the concrete below.

February 14th, 1983

6:57 PM

Mr. Disney loses his cool when the Fire Marshall shows up. He yanks his hand from my mom while the Fire Marshall dusts the snow from his jacket. Wet clumps slop to the hardwood floor. His rubber boots squish and squeak.

The Den is getting a presentation on fire safety. This Fire Marshall is one of those no nonsense types, bull neck with crew cut. He and Mr. Disney lock eyes for a moment before Mr. Disney leaves to fetch the film projector. The Marshall scratches his chin before he shakes his head, eyes gazing upward as if to say "Why God? Why?" Mom reaches her hand out, and begins small talking him to death.

February 14, 1983

7:12 PM

The Fire Marshal keeps giving Mr. Disney a hard time about not having the projector ready. Mr. Disney isn't a natural when it comes to electronics. He explains to us with a hint of pride that he doesn't know how to program his VCR. His hands fumble with the film canister, trying to pry the lid free before it finally pops and spools of amber spill to the floor. Mom gets on her knees trying her best to reel the film back together. She yanks her hand back right before finishing, shaking it with pain before slipping a bleeding thumb into her mouth. I get up to check on her.

"You cut yourself?" I ask.

"It's not bad," Mom says gripping her thumb in her fist.

"It's a paper cut."

"Let me get you a Band-Aid," I say.

"I'll find one," she says. "You sit back down."

Mr. Disney finishes reeling the film back together before struggling to snap the reel into the projector. The Fire Marshal

grunts before stepping in to finish the job. The Den is treated to some filmstrip on fire safety starring Dick Van Dyke, learning tips on how many fire alarms we needed in a house and how dangerous smoking in bed can be.

February 14, 1983

7:49 PM

The Fire Marshall has each of us do a stop, drop and roll exercise. When it's Mr. Disney's turn, the Marshall criticizes his form.

"You'll never put out a fire out that way. You're flopping like a beached dolphin."

With that Mr. Disney lets out a barrage of slurs and cusses, calling the firefighters whores and home wreckers, saying how he wishes they'd all burn alive. The Marshall stomps over to Mr. Disney who then bolts from the church meeting room without his coat. The Marshall leaves soon after, saying the Scoutmasters would hear about this. He turns to address us before he goes.

"That man can't keep his house in order. A man has to keep his house in order and that's on him."

February 14, 1983

8:09 PM

Mom is alone. The men have abandoned her. She fidgets, and I can't tell if she's nervous or cold. Everything about the meeting room creeps under my skin: the aluminum folding chairs with their deflated pleather cushions, the cracked plaster walls, and the plaques with photos of old men I have never heard of.

It is ten past eight, and we have another fifty minutes to fill before parents show up to pick up their sons. Mom stands there trying to assess the situation, contemplating what to do as the troop descends into rowdiness. Anthony Guiddi twists the nipple of the boy sitting next him. Another boy snatches Elijah Stein's cap. There are worse things and Mom should just let us be, but she doesn't.

"Do any of you know who Valentine's Day is named after?" Mom asks with a half-smile. She's thinks she needs to teach us a lesson despite the fact that she's never taught a day in her life and despite the fact that we spend most of our free time in

school anyway. I pray that the other boys ignore her, but they quiet down, sizing up their new teacher.

Today is Valentine's Day, not that I or the other boys give two Baby Ruths about it. We did the card exchange at our various elementary schools. Some kids give out those heart shaped chocolates wrapped in gleaming tin foil of reds and violets. Others give out those chalky little hearts with dumb expressions like "BE TRUE" and "DREAM BIG." They taste like stale pfeffernüsse to me, but I never pass on sugar whatever its form.

February 14, 1983

8:11 PM

"Come on, boys," Mom says. "Who was Valentine's Day named after?"

The boys stare at her with stupefied looks on their faces. They don't care, but Mom is going to let them in on her little fact.

"St. Valentine. That's who. Can any of you tell me who he was?"

"He was a Saint," Anthony Guiddi says. The boys start to chuckle.

"Yes, but Patron Saint of what?"

"Greeting cards?" Elijah Stein asks. That gets a few laughs, but not from Anthony Guiddi. Anthony goes to Roselle Catholic, a private grammar school.

"Hey, Elijah," Anthony says, cracking the knuckles on his left hand. "Do the Heebz celebrate Valentine's Day, or do they piss on that like every other holiday?"

"Of course, they celebrate it," Gavin Jefferson says. "All those jew...lers making bags of money on diamonds and 24 Karats."

Elijah stands up and flings his Wolf Handbook in Gavin's direction. It bounces off Gavin's left knee and flies into Barry Rovnick's lap. Mom waves her hands in downward motion like she's trying halt a standing ovation, but the boys keep ignoring her.

"Knock it off, guys," I say.

"We were just fooling, Mrs. M," Anthony says, kissing the air and blowing it to Mom. "You know you're my Valentine."

The boys explode with laughter, rocking back and forth like a swaying field of midnight blue. I look over to Mom, teeth clenched, hands on hips, and she glances back with a grimace. I

turn my head in shame, but she's still my mother. It's still Valentine's Day.

Dad didn't get Mom anything for Valentine's Day. He said it was a holiday built on commercialization. Truth is Mom's hospital stay did a number on their bank account. My allowance got cut. We celebrated Christmas without a tree. And now when all my friends' mothers are getting fresh vases of cut roses and Whitman's Samplers, Mom has to treat it like any other day. But Dad could have bought her a card. A card costs nothing.

Mom tries rousing us with a song of "Kumbaya," but the collected groans and hisses drown out her attempts. The Scouts disperse and wander about the room. I also can't bring myself to sing "Kumbaya," a nightly staple of campfire circles from back when the three of us were part of the Happy Campers. Dad used to be so proud of his pop up, but now it just rusts away in the backyard, a haven for ants and roaches.

Kurt Lohrentson and some of the other boys stand by the windows. I walk over to peek at what's so fascinating. Snow blankets the parking lot outside. The prospect of a snow day is exciting, but then it dawns on me that we could be stuck here all night. I imagine parents trying to plow through mountains of

snow. I signal Mom to come over. She rubs her hands together as she scans the parking lot.

The lights flicker and shut off. I hear whispers and scurrying in the dark. Chairs clang. An elbow hits my shoulder, and I bite down to muffle the pain. The lights flicker on.

"We need to go to the gym," she says.

Our weekly meetings are held at Trinity United Methodist Church. The property used to house a small K-8 private school before lack of funds shut it down. The school has a gymnasium, complete with a hardwood basketball court.

I don't know what Mom is thinking. Maybe she figures the gym is a safe place, protection from the storm. She leads us down there, switching on the white-blue fluorescents that purr overhead. The smell of mildew becomes more pungent the closer we get. I remember hearing how the school got flooded over the summer, something about an old pipe bursting. The wind whistles and pounds the walls. A draft slaps my face. The hardwood court is worn and bumpy like the ribbon candy Nanny brings over each New Year's Eve. The other boys don't care. They scavenge for whatever sports equipment they can find: a whiffle bat, a deflated basketball, and a set of nine dodge balls still in good shape.

Most boys can't help, but put their hands around a good dodge ball. Grime coats them due to their almost adhesive surface. They bounce so easily, so softly. You can get hit with a dozen of them and still be left standing. But Dodgeball is game like no other, and my mother doesn't know how to referee.

We have a good 40 minutes before the parents are due to show up. A makeshift Dodgeball game starts which consists of boys slamming each other in the head with grimy rubber. No points being recorded. No rules, just chaos.

Mom keeps glancing down at that cheap watch Dad gave her. Mom wanted a Seiko, like they showed on TV, but Dad bought her a rose-tinted Charter Club watch. Mom acted grateful, but it wasn't what she wanted. When I was eight years old, I asked for some G.I. Joe figures for my birthday. Dad got me some X-Troop figures instead. They became a permanent source of playground ridicule.

February 14th, 1983

8:16 PM

Dodge balls are kicked and flung far into the bleachers. Some of the braver boys climb the rusted seats, trying to

retrieve a ball or two. Gavin and Anthony start fighting over a rubber ball in the third row like it's the Hope Diamond. It slips from their fingers, tumbling and bouncing higher until it reaches Elijah Stein. His left foot kicks it up to his right knee, all with the grace of a FIFA player. My soccer team had lost a couple of games to Elijah's knee magic. I can never put up a defense against him.

I try to wrest the ball away from Elijah, but he's a master. I know he's in the Gifted and Talented program in his school. His mom bragged about it to my mom the other week, and Mom, in turn, talked up my skills as a piano player. But I don't have any skills as a piano player. I know I'm not gifted or talented. I've thought about the idea that I might have been a mistake, that my parents' marriage was a mistake. The world could keep on spinning just fine if I had never existed.

Elijah starts pulling more tricks with the dodge ball. His left hand twists behind his back before he launches it forward, slamming it hard with his left knee into the adjacent wall before it comes rolling back to his feet. He does this again and again, changing stances before scooping the ball up with his feet to try again. When his breath starts to flutter in gasps, his grip on the ball loosens and I snatch it away. I drop the

ball down and send it sailing toward the florescent lights right above us. The ball knocks a bulb clean out of its socket.

The bulb crashes down on Elijah's head, shards of opaque glass flying everywhere. One of the shards cuts Kurt Lohrentson's cheek, but no one will notice until later. We are all focused on Elijah as he staggers, crunching glass under his Reeboks. We ask if he's all right. He says his head hurts a little. His auburn hair turns darker as the blood slowly seeps through. I replay the last minute in my mind. I hope this is a dream, the kind you wake up from grateful that you didn't just crack some kid's head open.

Mom plows through us, turning ashen as her eyes fixate on Elijah. She steadies and composes herself. Her fingers fumble toward Elijah's wound, but her hand starts shaking and she pulls back, rubbing those same fingers through her mouse-brown hair.

"Gauze. We need gauze," Mom says before making off.

February 14th, 1983

8:35 PM

The minutes drag. Kurt has his yellow kerchief pressed against his bleeding cheek. Alex Hitchens points to Kurt.

"We should all gather up our ties," Alex says. "Elijah's gushing blood."

"That's not going to do any good," Gavin says. "He needs stitches." Elijah sways and stumbles before he loses his footing and collapses.

"He's going to die!" Alex yells. "Where is Mr. Disney?"

Anthony Guiddi and a couple of the other boys desert us. They don't even glance back.

"I'll go find my mom," I say to the others, but they ignore me.

February 14th, 1983

8:40 PM

I don't know my way around the church property. I duck my head into empty offices and classrooms, calling out for Mom each time I swing a door open. The parents will be here soon. My stomach knots up as I anticipate the reaction of Elijah Stein's folks. I peek out through the front entrance of the school to see if anyone's pulled into the parked yet. The lot is empty, but the lights are on in the church across from the school. One more place to check.

Snowflakes bite into me as I push through the cold, the wind tugging at my cap. I heave open the front door of Trinity United and slip inside. My shirt is soaked through. I observe my surroundings. The cross behind the altar is barebones, no Jesus to be found. A group of about five scouts are jumping over the pews, engaged in a game of tag. As I get closer, I see they are shooting wads of paper at each other. Their thumb and index fingers are outstretched, a rubber band fixed to both fingers. They are tearing sheets out of the missalettes, crumpling them into little balls to shoot at each other. Gavin Jefferson sends one flying past Anthony Guidi, right into the lit candles. The flames make quick work of the wad of paper, turning it to ash. Anthony Guiddi propels one of his wads to the candles, but he misses them by an inch.

"Have you seen my mom?" I ask.

"Nope," Anthony says, smirking. "Nice job you did on Elijah back there."

I don't respond. He's not wrong. I just need to find Mom. Anthony and Gavin continue to bombard the little flames. Another wad catches fire, landing on the burgundy carpet. A slow fire builds, but they're not paying attention. I keep my mouth shut.

If the church burns down, Anthony can share in the blame of this awful night. Gavin notices the fire.

"Holy shit," he says, scrambling to stamp it out, but his laces catch on fire, then his pants leg, and he does the stop, drop, and roll technique we learned from the Fire Marshall a couple hours earlier. I leave the scene, knowing I should help, but I don't want to. Anthony had this coming. I need to find my mom, get us out of there, and go home like nothing has happened.

February 14th, 1983

9:35 PM

By the time, I make it back to the gymnasium, some of the parents have arrived to pick up their kids. Mrs. McCormick had already scooped up Elijah and driven him to Rahway General. The Steins followed when they heard the news. The parents had trouble getting here on account of the snow. They're cussing out Mr. Disney, saying he should have cancelled the meeting.

February 14th, 1983

9:58 PM

Trinity United Methodist Church is on fire. We're all outside watching the flames lick the stained glass. I never found Mom. Fire sirens grow loud in the dark. What a mess Den 6 has made.

February 14th, 1983

10:07 PM

Mom was found by one of the firemen. She was hiding in the sacristy, strings of gauze forming a cat's cradle in her hands. She was mumbling the Serenity Prayer. Mom was never meant to be a mom. Maybe drunks shouldn't have kids. Maybe I can be prayed away.

Anthony's mother gets in my mom's face, nostrils flaring, lips contorted into a snarl.

"Even animals protect their young, but he wasn't one of yours. Would you have left your own son behind?"

I wonder if Mrs. Guiidi knows who cracked Elijah's head open. The truth will come out, but the boys must have kept their mouths shut.

Mom doesn't answer. She just looks away, trying not to meet Mrs. Guiidi's gaze.

"Anthony and his friends set fire to the chapel," I say, Anthony's mom taking a step back at the news. I've broken the no snitching rule. I have no honor. Anthony's mom yanks my collar, almost lifting me up.

"And you, you little shit. You probably killed that boy."

Mom grabs Mrs. Guiddi's wrist, squeezing until she let's go of my collar. Mrs. Guiddi squeals, grabbing her oversized purse before rushing off. Mom's eyes are transfixed on her until she disappears.

We walk to the car. I hold Mom's hand, palm to palm. We say nothing.

Mom and I get in the Winnebago, but we don't leave. The car has to warm up. The heat blasts cool at first, and I wince a bit from the sting. When the car finally begins to warm, I reach into the glove box and pull out the pink envelope. I hand the Valentine to my mom. She smiles and tugs at the gold seal. The frost on the windshield gradually breaks apart.

DEVIL'S TOWER

I

Tommy was the fat kid, a fact he was reminded of as he squeezed himself into another one-size-too-small desk. This was his second day of study hall at Hanover High, his new school in his new state of New Jersey. Would he be the fatty in his new school, just as he had been in his last school? A girl wearing too much mascara giggled with another girl who had a wire brace fastened to her mouth. Tommy fidgeted in his desk. Forty-five students crowded the study hall, all supervised by Mr. Colorkian, a buzzed cut ex-Navy Seal. Tommy's old middle school had, at most, fifteen students per class.

The bell rang and everything quieted down. The quiet made him melancholy these days. Tommy missed the wide-open spaces and green of Kansas. New Jersey was busier than what he was used to. These thick-bricked structures from another century held no

history for him. Hanover High seemed cold, even during Indian summer.

The students jarred him most of all. They spoke in slang he had never heard before, using words like "Yo" and "Doy." They dressed in clothes that his old principal never would have approved of, especially the girls. Tight jeans with holes in them. Low-cut shirts exposing their belly buttons. Some went without bras on. Tommy leered at them without realizing. He thought about the time he broke his arm falling out of his friend's tree house or reaching out to touch his great aunt's hand at her wake, anything to keep himself from getting an erection.

Tommy fetched a pencil and doodled on a sheet of loose-leaf. He liked drawing, fancied himself a caricaturist. He glanced at the girl with too much makeup on and started sketching her. He'd make her a princess. Maybe he'd show her the picture after, maybe not. About halfway through the picture, the girl slid a knuckled fist under her left cheek. Written in black marker on the top of her hand were the words "Don't stare!" It took a moment for him to realize the message was for him. Tommy scribbled over the portrait. He would ignore her in the future.

Ignoring the older boys wasn't an option. A fourteen-year-old freshman and the new kid in school, Tommy already had two strikes against him. Gym class was the worst. The coach made them play softball. Tommy got tagged on his way to first because he was a slow runner. His team gave him the nickname "Chubs" and before long it was spread around the school. People that Tommy had never even seen before were calling him by his new name. It followed him everywhere, even to second-period study hall.

"Yo, Chubs."

The voice came from a skinny, pimply-faced boy with glasses. Tommy tried ignoring the kid, but another "Hey, Chubs" got thrown at him. Talking was forbidden. A student could whisper, but anything more than that would send them straight to Vice Principal Strichner. No student had bothered to start a conversation with him since he had arrived. This is what made the whispering coming from the seat next to him all the more alarming.

"Hey, Chubs."

What if this boy made a ruckus? What if Mr. Colorkian sent this boy to the principal's office? What if this boy blamed Tommy and became Tommy's arch-rival for the next four years? High school could be a tolerable cage or a living nightmare.

"What?" Tommy whispered.

"They say a bunch of devil worshippers cut up a girl a few years back. Did they tell you about that, Chubs?" The skinny boy took a pencil off his desk and started digging the eraser end in his ear. Tommy wondered if the skinny boy had any friends, or if his cluster of pustules warded the other students off.

"My name's Tommy, not Chubs."

"Don't get your panties in a wad. We all get names."

"What do they call you?" Tommy asked.

"Like I'd tell you," the skinny boy said as he rolled his eyes before turning away. The skinny boy began to grind the pointy end of his geometry compass into the desk, defacing school property. Maybe he wasn't so bad.

"So what's your actual name?" Tommy asked.

"Spencer. Spencer Clem."

"So what about these...devil worshippers?"

"They carved up the prom queen a few years back. Carved her up like a Thanksgiving turkey," Spencer said, carving a new line of across his desk.

Tommy turned away, noticing Mr. Colorkian staring right at them.

"They cut her heart out and-"

"Mr. Clem! This is a study hall!" Mr. Colorkian yelled.
"Stop talking or I'll send you down to Mr. Strichner!
Comprende!"

Spencer straightened up and stared down at his desk.

"Needledick," whispered the girl wearing too much mascara. A couple of students laughed. Tommy thought she looked like Cleopatra. He stared a little too long and she shot him a dirty look. Spencer was now reading a worn paperback, a true crime book entitled *Daddy Dearest*. Tommy took out another sheet of loose leaf from his Trapper Keeper. A mockup of Mr. Colorkian filled the page. Tommy drew him as a gorilla beating his chest. The bell rang just as he was finishing. Spencer eyed Tommy's caricature.

"Nice," Spencer said. "Sit with me at lunch. I'll tell you more about Devil's Tower."

Tommy thought the story was bogus, but he was curious all the same.

II

Tommy braved the lunch line. He was tired of the brown sack lunches his mom always provided. The peanut butter he would

usually take a couple bites out of before tossing. The tuna fish he would toss altogether. Tuna stuffed in a locker for four hours was something he wanted nothing to do with. A part of him always felt guilty about throwing out his mother's lunches. The O'Grady's Potato Chips and Yankee Doodles Tommy had sneaked into his book bag wouldn't be enough to tide him over. Besides, it was Friday and that was pizza day. Even the lunch lady couldn't screw up pizza.

Five guys in letterman jackets cut in front of Tommy. Their leader was a burly guy with red hair. Jocks. Tommy was one of the last in line and now he had to deal with jocks cutting in front for seconds. Tommy finally approached the lunch lady. She wore a hair net over greying curls and had a mole on her chin.

"Where's the pizza?" Tommy asked as the lunch lady removed the empty pizza tray.

"Fresh out. Sorry. We've got sandwiches," the lunch lady said.

"What kind of sandwiches?" Tommy asked.

"Peanut butter and jelly...or tuna."

Tommy grabbed a peanut butter sandwich. It was the last one they had. He was still better off than the people behind him. Tommy paid his two dollars and change and made his way to the

tables. He hated this part the most. He never knew where to sit. All of these little groups, all packed together, all claiming different tables. His old school was too small to have groups. Here, the Lettermen sat with the Lettermen, the preps sat with the preps, the blacks sat with the blacks, and the geeks sat with the geeks. That's where Spencer was sitting, the nerd table. Tommy supposed it was better than a table for fat kids if there was such a thing. Spencer turned from the freckle-faced, curly-haired boy he was having a conversation with.

"Chubs! Over here," Spencer said, waving him over.

"Good to see you, Chubs."

"I told you not to call me that."

"Don't get your panties in a wad!" Spencer laughed, nudging the curly-haired boy next to him.

"That never gets old," the curly-haired boy said. He cleared his throat and put out his hand.

"Ralph."

"Tommy."

The two shook hands. Tommy had never seen a kid with so many freckles. They were all over his face and arms. The table felt sterile. Tommy struggled with the plastic wrap on his sandwich. Ralph popped open a Coke and began to guzzle. Tommy

took a bite out of his sandwich. Tommy tasted no grape in his jelly.

"You guys freshmen?" Tommy asked.

"Unfortunately," Ralph said as he popped a straw into his Orange Capri Sun. "Where you from, Tommy?"

"Kansas."

"Cans Ass," Spencer said. "Cans Assss."

"Yeah," Tommy said. "I've heard that one before."

"I was telling Chubs here about the girl that got all cut up," Spencer said.

"Which one was that?" Ralph asked.

"The one up at Devil's Tower," Spencer said.

"Oh yeah," Ralph said. "The homecoming queen."

"What's Devil's Tower" Tommy asked as he munched on some potato chips.

"That's the place all them devil worshippers used to hang out at," Spencer said.

"Yeah," Ralph said nodding his head. "My dad told me all about that place. Used to be part of a mansion owned by one of those rich families. Like the Van Assterbelts or something. Anyway, they had this son that was all messed up. Like some mutant freak or retard. They locked him up in an asylum

somewhere, had him declared dead so they could raise their normal kids in peace."

"Bullshit," Spencer said.

"It's true. Anyway, the freak breaks out of the insane asylum, makes his way back to the house. The freak has this scythe you see. In the morning, when one of the maids is walking the dog, he--"

"Horseshit," Spencer said. "I've heard this horseshit story before."

"Hey, that freak is still out there in those woods," Ralph said. "My dad tells me--"

"Your dad pulled that story out of his ass," Spencer said, as he dug the end of his fork into his right ear.

Ralph glared at Spencer and said, "Don't talk about my dad like that! At least I have a dad."

"Least I'm not a momma's boy," Spencer said. "You can't go anywhere without checking twice with your mommy."

Ralph turned away from Spencer, who was jabbing the fork deeper into his ear.

"So, why do they call the place Devil's Tower?" Tommy asked.

"I don't know," Ralph said. "I guess because all that remains of the place is a tower. They tore the mansion down years ago."

"You girls talking 'bout Devil's Tower?"

The voice came from a tall, gaunt boy wearing a worn T-shirt with the words Van Halen on it. His eyes were baggy and bloodshot. Greasy black hair fell down his back.

"Meet me under the bleachers at three, and I'll tell you the secret of Devil's Tower."

The bell rang signaling lunch was over. The gaunt boy looked down at Tommy's tray and snatched up the Yankee Doodles before Tommy had time to react.

"Thanks for the Ring Dings," the gaunt boy said as he disappeared into a crowd of bustling students.

"Who was that jerk?" Tommy asked.

"He's cool," Spencer said. "Just meet us by the bleachers."

III

Tommy wanted to go home, play Atari, and forget about all that Devil's Tower business. He missed his friends back home and hated his new school. He may have been the fat kid back at his

old school, but at least he wasn't just another face in the crowd.

Tommy resented the move, but his family didn't have much of a choice. They could barely manage to stay afloat after his dad was fired. Then his mom announced she was pregnant. Word spread through the family. An uncle back east decided to help. He was vice president of a paper clip company and offered Tommy's dad a packaging manager position. They left soon after. Tommy didn't bother saying goodbye to his friends. He hated goodbyes.

All of the kids back in Mound Ridge had known each other since as far back as Tommy could remember. Tommy's oldest memory was that of his first day of kindergarten. He didn't want to leave his mother and was sobbing like most four-year-olds do on their first day of school. The crying stopped when he recognized a girl by the name of Tara Noles. Where Tommy had known her from, he couldn't recall, but her presence had relaxed him enough to leave his mother's side. No matter where Tommy had gone in Mound Ridge, he always saw the same familiar faces. Even if he hadn't known the people personally, he had known of them. It was different here. He knew no one and no one knew him, except for Spencer Clem. Beggars can't be choosers.

Tommy walked toward the football field, his shoulder aching from the load in his backpack. Cheerleaders were practicing, a mixture of pretty blondes and brunettes decked out in the school's colors of red and black. The jocks were all running laps except for the one with red hair. The coach was hollering at Red over a bad play. Tommy just kept walking. When he came upon the bleachers, Spencer and Ralph were waiting for him.

"C'mon, Chubs. You can make it!" Spencer yelled as Tommy climbed the bleachers.

"Hefty! Hefty! Hefty! Wimpy! Wimpy! Wimpy!" they yelled in unison as if they had been rehearsing it all day long.

"Should I leave?" Tommy asked, heaving as he slung his book bag off his shoulder.

"We're just kidding with you, Chubs," Spencer said.

"My name's Tommy. So who are we meeting anyway?" Tommy asked.

"Mark Hollingshead," Spencer said.

They were silent for a moment as if the name held great significance. Tommy was growing impatient. He was still sweating from his climb up.

"And?" Tommy asked.

"Tell him, Spencer," Ralph said.

"All right, but don't go blabbing this to anybody. He knows the secret of Devil's Tower."

"What are you girls babbling about?" asked Mark as he climbed the bleachers.

After Mark made it to the top, he pulled out a cigarette and lit up. He exhaled, blowing smoke in their faces. Tommy coughed. He figured Mark for an older student, a couple years their senior at least.

"Can I have a cigarette?" Ralph asked.

"Piss off!" Mark said.

Spencer was awestruck. Mark stared back at Spencer.

"What's up, Needledick?"

"Nothing much, Mark. Just been practicing with my drums. I'm getting pretty good."

"Whatever."

"So. Are you guys looking for a drummer?"

"Maybe. Who wants to know?"

"I'm getting really good."

"Needledick! We've been over this."

Mark adjusted his cigarette and turned toward Tommy.

"What are you looking at?" Mark asked.

"What's the name of your band?" Tommy asked.

"Our Name Is," Mark said.

Mark took another puff of his cigarette. Everyone was silent. Tommy broke the silence.

"The name of your band is?"

Ralph laughed as Spencer put his hand on his forehead. Mark blew smoke in Tommy's face before he spoke.

"Our Name Is. That's the name of the band," Mark said.

"Who's this fat boy? You don't sound like you're from around here. You sound like a hick."

"His name's Tommy," Ralph said. "He's from Kansas."

"Get a clue," Mark said.

"Hey, he's new," Ralph said. "Cut him some slack."

"What the hell did I come here for?" Mark asked.

"You were going to tell us the secret of Devil's Tower," Tommy said.

"Right," Mark said. He flicked his cigarette towards Tommy's head. Tommy ducked before it could hit him. Mark smirked. "I'm going to perform the ritual. They say if you walk around Devil's Tower six times during the midnight hour, Satan himself appears. I'll make a deal with him. My soul for fame, fortune, and all the pussy I can handle. Why don't you girls

come down there with me? I'm sure he'll make deals with you too."

"That sounds like a bunch of mumbo-jumbo voodoo horseshit to me," Spencer said.

"It's not," Mark said. "If you're too much of a pussy, don't come tonight."

"I'll go," Spencer said. "What about you, Ralph?"

"You bet," Ralph said.

"Okay," Mark said. "I'll meet you girls back here around eleven. Wear black."

"Why black?"

"For cover. You may need to hide."

"From who?"

Mark didn't answer. He just gave Tommy the eye before leaving.

"You coming back here tonight, Tommy?" Ralph asked.

"Sure," Tommy said, trying his best not to sound hesitant.

IV

Tommy dressed as black as he could. He had a pair of black sweat pants, but he didn't own any black shirts. The closest

thing was a navy blue sweatshirt his parents got him while visiting the aerospace museum in Georgia. He remembered touching the moon rock provided by NASA. He thought of all those planes from WWII. The museum even had a German triplane from WWI, the kind the "Red Baron" flew. Tommy wished he could be back in the museum on that day.

Tommy wanted to be a pilot. He knew the Air Force would never take him, not in the shape he was in. His dad had been an Air Traffic Controller. Then, the strike happened, and the strike failed. The President fired them all. Tommy's dad couldn't get hired after the strike. So, the move.

With any luck, his parents wouldn't be checking in on him until the morning. They were so preoccupied with the pregnancy that Tommy had become invisible to them. Still, Tommy had stuffed his bed so it would look like he was sleeping. Always worked in the movies.

Going out with those guys was probably a bad idea. He could stay at home, in bed, safe under the covers, but he would still be the fat kid come Monday morning. If he could take a risk and see that tower, maybe for one moment he wouldn't be the fat kid. Spencer was kind of a jerk, but he was the first kid to actually talk to him at that school. Plus, Ralph would be going with them

and Tommy felt comfortable around him. Tommy tested out his orange Wonder Light, a flashlight his aunt had given him. He flashed the Wonder Light a couple of times at the Crazy Climber poster on his wall. The Wonder Light was flat and could clip to his waistband, one less thing to hold onto unless the lamp started to drag his pants down. A queasy feeling developed in Tommy's gut as he contemplated slipping out his bedroom window. Sure, he was on the first floor, but fitting through proved problematic. The windowsill dug into his flabby belly while Tommy heaved and squeezed. Panic set in. Visions of firemen chainsawing through his house flashed in Tommy's head. Tommy heaved and squeezed some more and finally slid through, flopping on the soft grass outside.

The full moon gleamed above him, and the smell of fresh cut grass was in the air. His dad had been out mowing the front lawn before sundown. A tickling sensation started up in Tommy's nostrils. Tommy dashed away making it halfway down the block before letting out a honking sneeze. He still wasn't used to his new allergies.

Tommy arrived at the bleachers around ten to eleven, but he saw no sign of the others. Had they bailed? Was it all just talk? Tommy's hesitation turned to frustration. He knew the

tower story was horseshit, but he wanted to find out for himself, wanted a story to write to his friends back home, maybe impress a girl with someday. Tommy didn't want to be the fat kid who played Atari.

Tommy sat in the first row, his eyes darting about to see if anyone was coming. A couple of lights to the north of the football field were still on, burning a celestial blue. Stale menthol lingered in the air. Still, the football field was oddly pleasant when stripped of yelling coaches and sweat-drenched kneepads. Tommy could sit there all night.

"Over here, genius."

Mark's voice was coming from behind him. Tommy peeled around the bleachers to see Spencer and Mark crouched on the ground. Mark was smoking a cigarette. He was still wearing his black Van Halen shirt along with his black jeans. Spencer was dressed similarly, except his black shirt had The General Lee from The Dukes of Hazard on it. He held a yellow boat light in left hand.

"Nice lamp," Tommy said. "Much better than mine."

"Yeah, but you don't need to carry yours," Spencer said pointing the Wonder Lamp fastened to Tommy's waist.

"Yeah. My great aunt got it for me," Tommy said. "It's made in France."

"All the way from Gay Paree," Mark said blowing puffs of menthol in the air.

"We'd better get going," Spencer said.

"Shouldn't we wait for Ralph?" Tommy asked.

"Ralph ain't coming. Said his grandmother was sick," Spencer said. Tommy cringed inside. He had a habit of warding off those he liked best and being stuck with those he liked least.

"Chicken shit," Mark said. "Follow me, girls."

Mark led them down a few suburban streets before heading into a woodland area. Thick oak trees with branches full of green leaves, shielded them from the moonlight. Eventually, they made their way through the woods and onto the side of Route 9. Tommy was still a bit jarred by the roads of New Jersey. Houses, fast food restaurants, and gas stations were lined up on both sides. This was a far cry from the wheat fields he was used to seeing back home. Tommy saw a 7-11. He was half tempted to suggest they stop in for a Slurpee, but kept his mouth shut. Cars went whizzing past, honking occasionally because Spencer was walking too close to the road. Walking on the side of Route

9 in the middle of the night. What if a cop saw them? What if he got arrested? What would he tell his parents?

"You all right there, Chubs?" Spencer asked.

"Stop calling me that," Tommy said.

"Why don't you call him Fatboy instead," Mark said. "What do you say, Fatboy?"

Tommy knew it was useless to throw back an insult. When you're the fat kid, you have no ammo. Those words always stung a little more each time he heard them.

"Whatever," Spencer said. "Say Mark, got any good Devil's Tower stories?"

"Yeah, I got one. A few years ago, these drunk, preppie assholes from NYU came down here on a dare. Their fraternity told them all to take piss on Devil's Tower. They made one of the new guys do it. He went right up the gate and whipped it out. Soon as he pisses on the gate, lightning comes out the sky and hits the tower. The electricity travelled up his pee stream and his wiener exploded into a thousand pieces. He died instantly," Mark said.

"That didn't happen," Tommy said.

"It was in all the papers, Fatboy. You go ahead and try it if you don't believe me. See what happens when you disrespect the devil," Mark said.

They kept walking until Mark turned right onto a dusty, dirt road that faded away into darkness. Spencer shined his boat light down the street, but all it lit up was more road. Tommy turned on his Wonder Light. Dense overgrowth surrounded them left and right. Mark stopped, looked to his left and walked right into the forest, seeming to disappear into the trees. Spencer did the same and so did Tommy, finally noticing a thin trail. The trail merged into a clearing filled with tufts of knee high grass and weeds. Tommy's breath cut short as he made out a tall structure in the distance like a fang pushing up through the earth. It was Devil's Tower, the playground for Satanists and mutant children.

"Race ya!" Spencer yelled as he rushed in the direction of the tower.

"Idiot," said Mark. He followed Spencer, walking fast, but not running.

Tommy was hesitant. The tower, the weedy field, the full moon in a starless sky. Still, he didn't want to remain behind alone in the field. He was also curious. Did Devil's Tower live

up to its name? Tommy pressed forward, his Wonder Light shining his way through the tangles of weeds that kept gripping his ankles.

"C'mon, Chubs! Move your ass!" cried Spencer, who had made it to the base of the tower.

Tommy's feet waded through the tall blades. The closer he got to the tower, the more he wanted to turn back. The tower was a strange site, like something out of the dark ages. The kind of place kings would send their wives to be beheaded. He imagined a torture chamber inside, with some guy in a black hood waiting for fresh victims.

Devil's Tower was made of stone. Jagged rocks of various sizes had been hewn together, producing a collage of grays and whites. The tower had little open slits for windows, the kind seen on medieval castles. The clock stood out most of all. It was fixed on the fourth floor, the hands stuck at three o'clock. The sixth floor had the largest window, except this one was covered by some kind of wooden door. It reminded Tommy of the kind that the farms back home had. A gate stood locked at the base of the tower, no doubt to keep the likes of Mark Holingshead out.

Tommy was still panting from his run. It didn't take much for him to lose his breath. Mark was taking another drag from a cigarette. He turned to Tommy.

"'Bout time you got here. You go around first," Mark said.

"You're the one that wanted to come out here, you go around," Tommy said.

"Listen, you pudgy little bastard. You can go home for all I care," Mark said. "If you're staying, you go first. Six times."

Spencer got in front of Mark, trying to get his attention.

"I can go first."

Mark shoved Spencer aside.

"I didn't ask you. I'm telling him. What's your name again?"

"Tommy."

"Well, Tommy, you get to decide. You going to be a man tonight or do you want to head on back to mommy and daddy?"

"Why should Tommy go first?" Spencer asked.

"Because he doesn't want to," Mark said leaning over Tommy. "Do you, Fatboy?"

Tommy thought about it for a second, pondering every scenario. Mark was right about Tommy being afraid. It wasn't as

if Tommy really believed the devil would appear if he walked around the tower six times, but something told him not to go. Was it the same kind of instinct that pulls a man back from jumping out of an airplane or climbing Mount Everest? If he didn't go around the tower, they'd be calling him chicken shit for the rest of the year. He would end up being lower on the social totem pole than Spencer.

"Six times. Left or right?" Tommy asked.

"Go around the left side," Mark said.

Tommy expected to find something out of the ordinary in the back of the tower, but it was the same grassy field leading away into a far-off forest. Tommy's watch read a quarter to midnight. Then he saw the light, bright and beaming from somewhere in the field. It was enough to send him running, his flashlight slipping off his belt as he scurried. Tommy turned his head to keep an eye on the light. The light was now moving and he heard the plowing down of grass and weeds. Then he bumped into something, something that soon grabbed hold of him. Tommy screamed and struggled before finally looking up at the jock who had cut in front of him at lunch time, the one with the red hair.

The jock was wearing his letterman jacket, black and red in accordance with the school colors. Even his hair was a dark red and his eyes were as black as charcoal. He smiled a toothy smile. Tommy felt more hands grab onto his arms from behind. The red-headed jock released his hold. Tommy struggled to break free to no avail. The hands pulled him forward.

"Don't leave me alone next time," the red-headed jock said. "This one almost got away."

They loosened their grip on Tommy once they made it to the front of the tower. Mark was nursing a bloody nose with his fingers. A brown Chevette and a white Mustang Cobra were parked behind him, their high beams burned Tommy's eyes. Two more jocks were holding onto Spencer, both wearing the same jackets as the one with red hair. They flung Spencer down onto the grass next to Tommy. Tommy counted nine jocks in all. The red-headed one turned to Mark Holingshead.

"You promised us three," he said. "I only count two. What happened?"

"Needledick damn near broke my nose," Mark said.

"You didn't answer my question."

"The third one chickened out. Look Shaun, the damn freshmen know what goes on up here."

Tommy knew that name. Shaun McNeil. He was pretty sure Shaun was captain of the football team. What did Shaun want with him?

"I'll deal with them all in due time. Here."

Shaun flung a bill towards Mark. Mark's hands fumbled before he grasped it.

"Ten?" Mark asked. "You said twenty."

"You get twenty when you bring me three," Shaun said. "Now get the fuck out of here."

Mark rushed off using Spencer's boat lamp to lead the way. Tommy strained to breathe, strained to keep his hands steady as he began piecing two and two together. He had heard tales about a high school in Wichita where the seniors burned freshman boys with a branding iron. What would they do to him? Beat him up? Strip him naked? These thoughts raced in his mind as his breathing became more labored. One of the jocks opened the trunk of the brown Chevette. Shaun was now looking right at him, grinning that toothy smile of his.

"Listen up, you freshman bitches," Shaun said. "You have been granted the right of initiation. Refuse this right and we will do everything in our power to make your lives a living hell until we leave Hanover High. Do you understand?"

Spencer nodded up and down like one of those plastic ducks bobbing for water. Tommy nodded once.

"Smart boys," Shaun said. "Better to take your licks now and get it over with."

A jock opened the trunk of the brown Chevette and withdrew a paddle made of polished wood, the kind found at sporting goods stores. The jock handed it over to Shaun.

"You have two choices: the paddle or the tower? Okay, Chubs. We'll start with you. You can take a couple of licks from this paddle or you can go up to the top floor of this tower. What will it be?"

"Devil's Tower," Tommy answered.

"No!" Spencer swung his head around and gaped opened mouth at Tommy. The rest were quiet for a moment before Shaun spoke up.

"He's made his decision. Listen kid, you're going to have to shine that flashlight of yours through each window on each floor so we know you're not just waiting it out."

The jocks continued to pin Tommy down as Shaun addressed Spencer.

"How about you Spencer Clem? The paddle or the tower?"

"The paddle!" Spencer yelled.

"You're smarter than your friend," Shaun said. "On your stomach."

Each jock proceeded to beat Spencer's butt. Tommy struggled to open the gate. Spencer annoyed him, but even Spencer didn't deserve such cruelty. Spencer cried a little louder with each paddle until it was Shaun's turn. Shaun took his time with Spencer, seeming to relish every moment. He had probably expected to do this to two other boys that night. Shaun got his second lick in, but threw in another one as soon as Spencer tried to get to his feet.

"What was that for?" Spencer asked.

"That was for bloodying Mark's nose," Shaun said. "Now run on home, you little bitch."

Spencer hobbled off out of Tommy's line of vision. One of the jocks made his way over to the gate and fiddled with the lock. Before long, the gate swung open, creaking like something off of a sound effects record.

"Into the tower," Shaun said. Tommy's legs felt like lead as he made his way inside. They locked the gate as soon he passed the entrance.

"Hey, what about my flashlight?" Tommy asked. Shaun waltzed over to the gate and tossed something orange at Tommy. The

object bounced off of the bars and fell a couple of inches away from the gate. It was his Wonder Light. Tommy dragged it through the gate and inspected for damage. He saw the other jocks getting into the brown Chevette and white Cobra.

"Hey!" Tommy yelled. "You said you'd let me out after I made it to the top floor."

"We don't care!" Shaun yelled back. "Good night!"

Shaun got into the driver's seat of the white Cobra and a moment later, the two cars drove away. Eventually, the only sounds left came from the crickets and the occasional whisper of wind. Maybe a caretaker was coming. Tommy yelled for help, but no one was around. The wooden door on the sixth floor! Most of the windows on the tower were too small for Tommy to slip out of, but that one might be large enough. Better to do in daylight. The idea of fumbling around in the dark did not appeal to him. Tommy also couldn't shake the feeling that he was not alone. Maybe it was nerves. Anyone would be a little afraid about spending the night in a haunted tower whether they believed in devils or not.

But Tommy couldn't wait until morning. He had to get home before sunrise. His parents would know he was missing. What about the stress his disappearance would put on the baby? Tommy

had only been thinking about himself, and didn't take into account the toll this might take on his family. His dad would press charges, but it would do no good. The locals could ostracize his family. The whole town could know about the excursions up to Devil's Tower. Maybe that's why nobody was around.

Tommy turned his Wonder Light on. He had to tap it a couple of times, before a dim light shined from it. A stone staircase stood in front of him. Pieces were missing from the first few steps, no doubt chipped away by those looking for a souvenir. Tommy wanted something to take with him, proof that he had been there if he ever managed to get out.

The second floor contained a broken stool with the legs splintered off in front of it. A giant heart was scrawled on the wall with the words Maggie Loves JJ inside. The third floor had no furniture whatsoever. The floorboards creaked as he made his way over to one of the slit windows. He shone his Wonder Light down into the field. Weeds and grass waved in the breeze. For a brief instant, he thought he saw a figure in the field below. He shined his flashlight back in the same spot. Was it his imagination? The story Ralph had told him was still floating around in his head.

The fourth floor was the one with the clock in it. Tommy checked his own watch. It was a quarter after two. Steel rods and rusty gears lay about the floor. The boards continued to creek as he ambled over to the steps. Old places like this were always ready to bust at the seams. His parents used to drag him out to old buildings of historical significance on their family vacations. There was this one Civil War fort in Alabama. Tommy's dad had to keep himself hunched over just to make it from room to room. People couldn't have been very tall back in those days.

On the fifth floor, graffiti was plastered all over the walls. Pentagrams and devil caricatures were etched on the walls. Some were of demons of the classic pitchfork and horns variety. Some looked like deformed people. The drawings were crude like something an 8-year-old would create. He wanted to find something to take with him, proof that he had been there if he ever managed to get out. An altar draped in a black tablecloth was set up on the wall behind him. A porcelain figurine of a pink gargoyle sat in the middle of the altar like the porcelain animals Tommy's mom collected from boxes of Red Rose Tea. He shoved it in his pocket. Above the altar hung an upside-down crucifix. Who would have gone to this much trouble?

Shaun McNeil and his gang? Why was this the only floor without any windows? Why was this the only floor with graffiti?

The Wonder Light began to dim until the light went out completely. He tapped and tapped, but it wouldn't work. Then Tommy heard creaking floorboards coming from the floor below him.

"Hello....Hello. Who else is in here?"

The creaking stopped. Tommy frantically tapped his flashlight. Light began to shine out again. He didn't know if those boards creaked because the tower was settling or if someone or something was down there. Could be rats? Tommy decided not to wait around and find out. He quickly climbed the stairs up to the sixth floor, but before he made it to top step, he tripped, falling flat on his face. The Wonder Light went flying, flickering off before Tommy heard it thud and crack against something. Pain shot through his lips to his nose his forehead. He opened his eyes, but couldn't see anything. Tommy started fumbling around in the dark and then the creaking started up again.

The floor buckled beneath him. It was his weight. Tommy was too fat for Devil's Tower. The floor tilted under Tommy's feet before a violent shift knocked him into a nearby wall. The

boards could give away in an instant and Tommy scrambled to find something to grab onto. The floor shifted again and it wasn't stopping. Tommy had had enough humiliating experiences on playground seesaws to know this was it for him if he didn't move. He scrambled for higher ground, hands fumbling in dark until they hit hard wood. A splinter dug into Tommy's right index finger, the pain almost forcing his hands back. His balance returned and Tommy felt out again in the dark. He had found his escape. His hands dug through the rotting wood. Splinters stabbed his palms until the shutters gave way. Moonlight blasted through and Tommy was relieved to find that the opening big enough even for him.

Getting out was one thing. Getting down was another. Tommy was never good at supporting his own weight. Chin-ups were impossible. Fortunately, he remembered seeing ledges affixed on the outside of each floor. They may not have been wide, but they were better than nothing. Tommy did his best to slip down to each ledge, but when he made it to the third, one of the shutters became unhinged, hitting Tommy's left shoulder. Pain reverberated all over, and his balance went with it. He fell off the tower and landed straight on his butt.

Tommy tried to get up, but he couldn't move his legs. Numbness enveloped his thighs. They wouldn't budge. Would they be fitting him for a wheelchair? Would he become a living cautionary tale for the consequences of hazing?

Tommy lay on the grass, contemplating his new fate. He blamed Mark Holingshead and wished he had gotten a chance to deck him before getting locked in the tower. A loud crash came from inside leading to a succession of crashes. Ceilings were collapsing on each other. If anything, Tommy would be known as the fat kid who destroyed Devil's Tower.

The numbness in his thighs started to fade away and he managed to move them a little more each time. He kept on doing this until he managed to lift his left leg an inch off the ground. He must have hit his tailbone. Tommy rose, his legs struggling as he regained his footing. He walked forward, refusing to look back at the tower. He remembered a story from the Bible that one of his Christian friends back home had told him, something about a man's wife who looked behind her when she shouldn't have.

But would he see anything? Tommy whisked himself around and faced Devil's Tower. Nothing. No ghosts peeking out of windows.

No devils or mutant freaks running around. Devil's Tower was a scam.

"Hey, Satan! I'm right here! Come on!"

Tommy walked up to the gate, unzipped his pants, and urinated on it. Not even a rumble of thunder. Tommy zipped his pants back up and pulled out the porcelain devil from his front pocket, chucking it through the gate before making his way back.

He walked into the woods and along that narrow path that lead to Route 9. Tommy had a good sense of direction, but even he got lost trying to navigate all those neighborhoods. Once he located Hanover High, the rest was easy. He sneaked back in his bedroom window just before dawn.

Spencer and Ralph kept plugging Tommy for details the following Monday.

"Did you shine the light through each of the windows?" Spencer asked, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Sure did. All the jocks cheered when I did it. They even let me ride in the front seat on the way home."

Spencer patted Tommy on the back, but Tommy didn't care about impressing Spencer or anyone else. He could care less what Spencer Clem, Mark Holingshead or Shaun McNeil thought. Even the name-calling didn't faze him anymore. His mother gave birth to a

baby girl, and Tommy made a resolution to look out for her as best he could for as long as he could. He had survived Devil's Tower. He could handle what came next.

TRUE PATRIOTS

I

I needed full time. I needed those bonuses. Hot dog stands don't come cheap. It was already the middle of May. I had to make an impression on Ron Harris, boss of the press line to put in a good word for me in time for the July financials. That's when Sunline Press would decide who moved up and who stayed where they were. So I went out when Ron invited the guys to Coyotes, hung close to him like he was my best friend, trying to kiss up without seeming like I was. We drank a few beers. Ron started on about his wife. The rest of the guys cleared out upon hearing her name, Maxine. I stayed.

"She doesn't understand nothing," Ron said. "I tell her I'm going out to meet my old high school girlfriend. She says she's fine with that. I meet my old flame. Nothing happens. I get home well before midnight, and the wife starts laying into me."

"She's got you on a curfew?" I asked, taking a gamble on Ron's reaction. He hissed laughter before dunking the last of his onion petals into that congealed orange crap that tastes like rancid Thousand Island dressing. A gob of the stuff clung

to his mustache before he licked it clean. I took another sip of my beer, trying to make the glass last. I was getting a reputation as a lightweight. I was saving money and couldn't piss away my paycheck on Bud every night.

Ron was going through a classic midlife crisis. I bet his testosterone levels were sinking. Ron had interviewed for a position at a lottery ticket printing plant up in Michigan, but lost out to a much younger candidate. I suspect it had more to do with Ron's computer illiteracy than anything else. He'd had a fit when upper management replaced the prepress department with that auto station. The idea that machines would replace us all one day worried Ron to no end.

"Rumor going around financials are good. Should be official next month. When that happens, I'll push for your full time."

"Thanks." I took another sip of beer. I hated working at SunLine Press, but the job market sucked since the economy went to shit. SunLine started out as a newspaper publisher. They edited and printed local papers for five counties, including the local Lovebug Tribune. When the housing bubble burst, most of the local businesses pulled their advertising. The company stayed afloat by being the lowest bidder on any print job available. We now printed newspapers from all over the state,

many of them in foreign languages like Ukrainian, Mandarin, and Spanish, a lot of Spanish. We're the main supplier to all of the Miami papers.

I was saving up for a hot dog wagon, hoping to move out of my parents' place one day. I figured people still eat hot dogs even in shitty economies. Even if others look down on the hot dog wagon man, he's still his own boss, makes his own hours, and sets his own prices. I figured it was a start anyway. The Chipotle CEO started out small.

"You aren't listening to me," Ron said. "Are you?"

"I'm sorry I drifted off there."

"Drifted off?" he asked. "Am I boring you, son?"

"Just thinking about the state of the world. The conflict in the Ukraine."

"Shit. We've got plenty of those Ruskies over here. I'll take them any day over those damned Mexicans. Say, why don't you come on out to the Patriot's Lodge this Sunday. It'll be at 7:00 at the old public library building over on Azalea."

"It's a shame they had to close the library," I said. I used to be a Palmetto Library regular when I was in grade school. They held book reading contests every summer. I won

first place one year. They gave me a Speak & Spell, the first and last time I'd ever won anything.

"What do we need libraries for when we got the Internet?" Ron asked. I just shrugged. The only thing Ron used the Internet for was pirating songs and watching those Iraq contractors get their heads chopped off. He tried showing me one of those videos on his cell, but I turned my head when I knew what was about to happen. I can still hear the poor bastard screaming.

I tried searching for the Patriots Lodge when I got home, but the only place I found with that name was a garden and art gallery in Olympia, Washington. Olympia sounded nice. I was sure they ate hot dogs out there, but what kind? Sabrets, Hebrew Nationals, those Puka Dogs they got out in Hawaii. Maybe I could sell Puka Dogs out in Olympia, Washington.

When I arrived at the Patriot's Lodge on Sunday evening, I saw a midnight blue sign that read "True Patriots" draped over where Palmetto Public Library used to be. Next to "True Patriots" was an illustration of one of those forked tongued rattlers in a coil, the kind you see on those "Don't Tread on Me" flags. I could make out tents striped in red, white, and blue sprawled on the lawn behind the library, like the ones planted in front of Wal-Mart right before the Fourth of July. I

signed my name and gave my address to an old man sitting behind a fiber wood table. He had overindulged on the Brylcreem.

I sometimes wonder what these old farts did for a living before they retired. Was this guy an encyclopedia salesman? Did he work on an assembly line, pasting the cream between Oreo cookies? I imagine they were just handing out the jobs back in his day with yearly raises and a gold watch for retirement. Did he want to grow up to be an astronaut or a cowboy? I wanted to be a pilot, flying the F-14 Tomcat, but my first trip to the eye doctor shattered that ambition. The doctor told me one of my eyes is shaped like an egg. I was fitted with glasses and have been stuck with them ever since. People think you're smart when you wear glasses. I'm not that smart.

Inside, I brushed through the circus of retirees in cheap polyester, businessmen in grey pinstripes, and good ol' boys in blue jeans and black T-shirts. The walls that separated the children's department and young adult area had been torn down making the once modest building feel like a pavilion. Several framed paintings lined the walls to my right and to my left. I saw one of President George Washington standing in awe before a floating angel. The angel held old glory in his left hand and an unsheathed sword in his right.

"What do you think?" asked an old man decked out in camouflage pants and sunglasses. He clutched a hand-carved cane in his left hand. A bronze bald eagle adorned the staff.

"It's inspiring," I said, trying to make out the gentleman's eyes through the tint. "I see the huddled masses yearning to live free," I said, pointing to the crowd gathered under Washington's feet.

"What?" he asked, resting his hand on the bronze eagle. "It's Americans fighting off the Chicoms. The Devil is hiding in there. Do you see him?"

"Kind of like Where's Waldo."

"Where's what now?" he asked, a frown slinking down his jaw.

"Never mind."

"Well there's one thing you'd better not never mind," the camouflaged man said as he pointed up to the ceiling. "God is watching you."

The man limped away, cane in hand. I turned my head back toward the painting, trying to spot the Prince of Lies. What I saw behind the painting distracted me. The True Patriots had not bothered to paint over a faded mural of smiling dolphins swimming in the Gulf of Mexico.

I frowned at the now defiled children's section trying to spot Ron in the room. They used to have a "Read to the Dogs" program once a month, trying to get us kids over the fear of reading before actual people by having us read to dogs. Rescue dogs trained to lead the blind, tame enough for children, lined up in front of the puppet theater to listen. I read *Stone Soup* to a Boxer named Rixy.

No women joined us in the Patriot's Lodge. I felt like I had entered an imitation Freemasons meeting or some such. Would initiations or hazing follow? Would the camouflage cripple take a wiz on me?

Ron sat up front amidst rows of fold out chairs. Big Tom and Talbert were with him, two homegrown Florida crackers who worked at our press. I had been getting along fine the first day on the job, making small talk, until I told them I was considering taking a Taekwondo class. They started in on how "martial arts is for fags." Big Tom and Talbert liked guns, showed me pics of themselves brandishing their glocks and rifles like proud papas pulling out the baby pictures.

"Jim, you made it," Ron said, smiling wide enough to show his terribly nicotine-stained teeth.

"You ever been to one of these before?" Big Tom asked. His breath smelled like beef jerky and Jim Beam.

"No."

"It will blow your mind."

The sound of a microphone spiking startled me. One of the gray pinstripes, a husky man with a scalp that gleamed under the fluorescent lights, stood behind an old podium with an effigy of a bald eagle clutching Old Glory in front. We said the Pledge of Allegiance, hands over hearts before we sat down. The speaker adjusted the microphone and it spiked again as he opened his mouth.

"First off, I'd like to welcome anyone visiting us for the first time. Stand up and let everyone take a good look at you."

I didn't like the idea of anyone taking a good look at me. Ron motioned for me to stand up. I worried that I'd have to testify my love for Alexander Hamilton.

"What's your name, son?" the man at the podium asked, a Cheshire smile curling his lips.

"Jim. Jim Hodgekiss."

"Welcome to The True Patriots, Jim Hodgekiss!"

Everyone clapped and cheered like I had just received a lifetime achievement award. The man at the podium resumed.

"My name is Alan McNichol. We at The True Patriots come out to communities such as yours to give you the information that's kept from you by the state-controlled media. Our challenge has two aspects. One is divine: the patriot's path has to be a challenge due to the will of Providence. Another is fundamental, in that America is so damaged that we are called to fix her. And I stand here to testify that for every one hundred progressives there will be one hundred thousand patriots shouting the cry of the righteous: Take it back! Take it back! Take it back!"

The room erupted into a roar of "Take it back!"

Alan McNichol waved his hand and the crowd quieted.

A projector screen descended in front of the podium and an hour of slickly made propaganda ensued. The video detailed the groundwork laid out for the North American Union, and how millions of Mexican immigrants will flood into the United States in an effort finally to reclaim New Mexico, Arizona, and other lost Mexican territories.

Ron, Big Tom, and the rest sat in silence, drinking every word flowing from the talking heads. What a bunch of lemmings. As for the "documentary," I couldn't tell if what they were saying was half-truth and half conspiracy or if it was all just

a modern day snake oil routine. I wondered what their credentials were. Were they members of some think-tank?

I had met Ben Franklin in this room. My mom dropped me off at the library one Saturday afternoon when they had a Ben Franklin impersonator doing a one-man show for the kids. We learned about the whole kite experiment with the key. The impersonator demonstrated a lightning rod for us. Each one of us received a tiny shock if we put our hands near it. The library staff removed my friend, Peyton, because he kept trying to grab the damned thing. Peyton had almost burned down his parents' house a couple months earlier when he plugged a severed wire into an live outlet. I wondered where he was now, in prison somewhere or in a room with men like these. I began to fantasize about burning SunLine Press to the ground when the credits rolled on *NAU Holocaust*.

After the movie, a line of suckers formed in the tent out back to buy copies of the DVD and its companion book, *NAU Holocaust Confidential*. Ron gazed at his copy of *NAU Holocaust Confidential*, itchy fingers wanting to dogear the pages. What else had he read since grade school?

I shouldn't have gone to the meeting. Was full-time status a carrot Ron dangled before guys like me to get them to show up

to this cult? I was a fraud pretending to be open-minded to becoming narrow-minded. Ron bought a copy of each. When Ron started spitting out racial epithets about Mexicans, I decided I'd had enough with the brown nosing, bonuses or no bonuses. I told them I had to use the bathroom and got the hell out of there. Those men in the suits think they can manipulate cast offs like Ron, build an army of discontent, but they'll lose control of them one day. Everyone will suffer on then, including the men in gray pinstripes.

II

Ron invited me to a Memorial Day service being held at the Patriot's Lodge, but I told him I had a family situation going on. I couldn't think of anything better to say. His mouth twitched before he said, "That's okay. It's probably not for a left coaster like you anyway." So much for the full-time. July would hit and I'd be passed by.

I had to dip into my savings for car insurance, new tires, a new air filter. It's like that *Metric* song, the line about driving to work so I can pay for my car. My credit sucked. Visa increased my interest. I needed those bonuses. The hot dog wagon

dream was withering away. I was then surprised when Ron asked for my help after my shift ended the following Friday.

Turned out two houses in Ron's neighborhood had been broken into over the Memorial Day weekend. One of them had been a home invasion. Some old lady had screamed that some Hispanics had smashed right through her front door.

"I got to set up some flood lights on my property," Ron said. "My brother is in the Palmetto Neighborhood Watch, says that's the best way to deter criminals. That and a pit-bull."

My parents lived in a gated community so we never worried about break-ins. Ron needed an extra set of hands, said he was no good at setting up heavy equipment due to a slipped disc. He offered to pay me twenty bucks. I told him I'd do it for nothing. I should have taken the twenty.

When I arrived, Ron was rolling out a wheelbarrow filled with cables, floodlights, and daisy chain cords. Peyton would think it was Christmas. Ron's street was dark, the kind of dark that swallows up high beams. A thin man in a grease monkey uniform carefully unfolded a set of wires.

"This is Jim," Ron said like we were old friends. "Jim, this is my brother, Seymour."

"How they hanging?" Seymour asked.

"Low and to the left," I said. Ron giggled. Seymour spit.

"A lot of break-ins lately?" I asked.

"Yeah, we've got a bad element around here," Seymour said.

"The old lady said it was spics," Ron said.

"There was a home invasion couple nights back," Seymour said. "Too many neighborhoods around here without any street lamps. Too many vacant lots. The county won't spring for street lights."

"Are the flood lights legal?" I asked.

"On streets like this? Absolutely," Seymour said, bending back a prong. "You have to protect your property. Leave your lights on. Scares them off."

We set up the lamps. Ron's extensions were duct taped in several spots. I worried that plugging those lights in would start a wild fire, but they turned on without any sparks. Ron lit up a cigarette, offering one to Seymour and myself. We both refused.

"There's a drop house not far from here," Seymour said, rubbing his chin stubble. "They got a dozen families crammed in there."

"How do you know?" I asked, glancing over at Ron who was flicking ashes.

"I'm in the neighborhood watch," Seymour said. "I get reports. I'm going to comb the neighborhood while I'm here."

"Can I tag along?" Ron asked like a kid brother would.

"Why not."

"How 'bout it, Jim?" Ron asked. "Perform some civic duty?" I figured there was no harm. Seymour drove a lime green Kia Sol, a sensible car for someone who brushed with danger every time he patrols the mean streets of Lovebug, FL.

"Jim, you just moved back here, right?" Seymour asked.

"Yeah," I said, hypnotized by the succession of hibiscus clusters, beige houses, and empty lots.

Most of the houses had foreclosure signs out front due to the housing bust. How many had been broken into? What had the former residents left behind? Where did they go? These homes were easy pickings for squatters and thieves.

"Still living with your parents, Jim," Seymour asked.

"What?" I asked.

"Ron filled me in," Seymour said.

"Yeah, I'm still living at my folk's," I said, half expecting some pearls of wisdom to follow, but Seymour surprised me.

"Don't feel bad," Seymour said. "The economy's been in the toilet since the crash."

Seymour was the first person to show any amount of sympathy to my plight. I was the black sheep in my family, the one who didn't live up to expectations.

"Hey, at least you're not married," Seymour said. "Don't ever get married."

"Damn straight," Ron said. The two of them laughed. I was trying to figure out the joke when Seymour gasped and slammed on the brakes, jolting us forward, our seatbelts tightening their grip around us.

"What the hell?" I asked.

"Fucking rabbit," Seymour said. "Move!" Seymour honked the horn until it leaped away.

"I've hit two of them in the past month," Seymour said. "I should have animal control on my speed dial."

Seymour continued to drive. We finally came upon a basic two bedroom with a patchy lawn. Attached to their mailbox was a tin "Beware of dog!" sign.

"They've got a guard dog," I said as Seymour stopped in front.

"Yeah, right," Seymour fumbled around in his glove box. He shined a light on the sign. The caricature of a barking Doberman made me uneasy. "If you put up a "beware of dog" sign, people tend to stay away."

"989," I whispered absently.

"That's right," Seymour said flashing the light on the peeling 989 stickers. "989 Sycamore Ave."

"So what happens if we see some suspicious activity?" I ask.

"We report it," Seymour said. "We're the eyes and ears of the police. But that's all we are."

"Doesn't sound very effective," Ron said.

"Yeah, well you can't go all Charles Bronson just because you feel like it. There's a tip line," Seymour said, handing me a brochure.

"Who owns this house?" I asked.

"Someone like me, who wanted to be a big shot during the real estate boom. When they couldn't flip their property, they started renting it out to anyone desperate enough for a roof. No one's more desperate than an illegal. These houses get crammed with day laborers."

"I bet the two spics who home invaded came from this house," Ron said.

"Could be. ICE got involved with another drop house around here last year," Seymour said. "Deported some Mexicans, but more will always come. Florida is a hot spot because of the farms."

The porch light switched on and Seymour drove us away. I thought I heard the muffled barking of a Doberman in the distance.

III

I had my last beer with Ron the following Friday at Coyotes.

"Big Tom wants to go driving tomorrow. I told him about that drop house on Sycamore my brother showed us," Ron said as he slurped his beer.

"No, Ron," I said. "It's a bad idea."

"We leave after my shift," Ron said. "Tom's driving."

"The house is being watched. Just leave it alone."

Ron narrowed his eyes before sighing.

"You're one of them, aren't you?"

"Who?"

"A looney leftist."

"No."

"You vote for Barry Obama, son?"

"What difference does it make?"

"We're being invaded! You think every wetback from every hellhole in this world is going come over and become a good old-fashioned American. They're going to suck this country dry. They've been sucking it dry. We have to hit them hard. Send them back south of the border."

Ron talked like we were at war. Maybe we are, but not with day laborers. Half of the country is living in poverty, but those in the bottom half fight amongst themselves.

"Ron. Listen, they're...they're just trying to survive. Like you and me. Just trying to get to the next day. I don't think they want to be here. They were probably sold on the endless opportunity here in America just like we were. I know you hate your life, but it's not so bad."

"They're not supposed to be here," Ron said. "They're breaking into houses."

"Then join the Watch like your brother."

"It won't do any good."

Ron threw down some bills and walked out. I was out of ideas.

I didn't sleep that night. I kept imagining what would happen the next day: Ron and Big Tom and the rest of the crew paying a visit to that drop house, setting it on fire with Molotov cocktails. Or maybe they'd light it up with their gun collection. I wished I knew the phone number of Ron's brother. Maybe he could talk some sense into him. I looked him up in the white pages online. Seymour Harris. Dozens of names popped up and none of them lived in Lovebug, FL. I learned that there was a Seymour Harris that owned an architectural firm and a Seymour Harris that was a world famous Harvard economist.

I looked through the brochure. The tip line was for non-emergencies reporting of suspicious activities. Crimes in progress were for 911. I didn't know which Ron's posse fell into. What if they cancelled? What if Ron denied ever having said anything to me? I could get fired or worse. But if I caught them in the act...

Ron's shift ended at 10 PM. I staked out 989 Sycamore Ave. I drove out there arriving on the scene at about 9:30. I heard laughter and accordions playing inside. Love songs to senoritas.

White towels hung drying on a line tied between two Florida Palms. They swayed in the summer breeze.

Around 10:30, the high beams of a yellow hummer came barreling down the road. Big Tom was at the wheel. He dug his wheels into the front lawn of the drop house, kicking up grass before finally putting it in park. The car doors swung open and out popped the three of them. Big Tom was carrying a pipe in his right hand. Talbart carried a black leather satchel. I worried about what was inside. Ron pulled out a cigarette, his hand shaking as he put it into his mouth. Everything slowed down for a moment and became clear. I had to get over there. Talk to them.

Ron dropped his cigarette as he saw me ambling toward them.

"Jim, what the hell are you doing here?"

My hands were held up like I was walking toward some cops. My cell phone was in my right hand.

"I don't know what you're planning to do. I don't want to know what you're planning to do. Just leave."

"Mind your fucking business," Big Tom said waving his pipe as he stomped toward me. I kept walking.

"Ron, you made me a party to this by telling me. Just leave. No one's done anything. You can just leave. You can just-

"

As soon as I got within striking distance, the pipe came down on my head. Cracked glasses fell to the ground. I followed.

"Jesus, Jim," Ron said as he sat beside me. Big Tom and Talbert ran back in the Hummer and sped away.

"Jesus, Jim," Ron said again as I tried to open my eyes, my forehead wet from blood. "I'm going to have to call 911, Jim." I wanted to scream out "No." I don't have health insurance because I don't have full time. I can't afford a hospital stay. My vision began to clear. A crowd of Latin Americans surrounded us. A young woman handed Ron a clean towel. He nodded and smiled a little in appreciation.

ZIPPO HEART

I

You glance down at your watch as you wait in the mostly full parking lot of the Juniper Shopping Center. It's a pink Swatch Watch, a Confirmation present you received from your father when you were eight years old, back when all you cared about was being a dutiful daughter, before the days of sneaking Crème De Menthe from his liquor cabinet. You've got about ten minutes before your shift starts at Plenty-O-Books, another would-be Barnes & Noble big chain bookstore. You try to make the best of those ten minutes, try to extend them out before your shift begins, before you don that Plenty-O-Books apron, the smell of orange blossoms and water lilies fighting the good fight with Joe Camel.

And just for security, you have your American flag lapel pin, a tribute to those who lost their lives when the towers collapsed, a reminder to everyone that you care, but you don't. You could have been the wife of an enlisted man, but you opted to leave him, go back to your parents, find a stupid job while

you attend community college. Rhett wasn't worth the effort anymore. A uniform and a war wouldn't change that.

`Soon you'll be making nice with every slobbering townee that comes into your field of view. You take another drag of menthol, your eyes darting to the rearview mirror to make sure your boss is nowhere in sight. People don't give you anti-smoking lectures anymore. They get in your face and tell you to put it out.

You pull the door to the store open and are greeted with Kenny G's "The Moment" playing on the loudspeaker. You sigh, knowing you're five easy listening songs away from Stevie Wonder's "Superstition," and even that's a cover. Your tolerance for the job is breaking down, but you still love being surrounded by books. You're a voracious reader, often referring to yourself as "bookish and boring." Bookish and boring never keeps the boys away, not the ones you want at least.

You've never considered yourself much to look at: high forehead, gap between your two front teeth, sloped shoulders, and fingernails bitten down to bleeding nubs. Men are drawn to you despite these flaws. You walk past a middle-aged guy with hair plugs and a high school preppie with his girlfriend. Both turn their heads as you make your way to the back. You feel

their eyes on you. You quicken your pace to the receiving room so you can clock in. You do your best to line up your timecard, but the time stamps a crooked red as usual.

The worst are the creepy old men with their canes and their wheelchairs, liver-spotted leopards preying on you with each word that slides from their tongues. They're what got you thrown off of the information desk. You have a knack for book hunting, satisfying eager customers with your expertise. On the day you turned in your application, a customer in front of you couldn't remember the name of the latest Dan Brown thriller. You volunteered *Deception Point* to the elation of the customer and the old lady working behind the desk. Her name was Gladys, and she recommended you to the hiring manager. You got the job, but you weren't on for more than a day before the first dirty old man came in asking for the latest issue of *Penthouse*. He had pepper grey hair that shot out in thick tufts and a boxed beard. Oblong glasses hung off his nose and he wore a Hawaiian shirt. His hands tugged at the plastic wrap.

"Sir, you can't unwrap that here. You have to pay for it up front."

"Have you ever thought about being a stripper? I bet you'd make loads at it."

He was the first of many. They would always look at your chest. You got reprimanded a few times on how you dressed, management telling you that were attracting the wrong kind of attention. Too tight-fitting. Too low-cut. You have cleavage and mid-drifts and the shame that's supposed to go with them. But you don't feel shame, you feel sorry for your old maid manager who could never get an old pervert to give her a second glance.

II

You check the time. It is a quarter past six. You've rung up about eight hundred twelve dollars and seventy-six cents worth of reading material the past couple of hours: copies of *Self Matters* by Dr. Phil with his grinning, chrome-domed, mustached reassurance, various Atkins diet books with their clinical authenticity, and a *Left Behind* box set, one or two volumes shy of the Second Coming. Someone has even managed to buy one of the store's oft-promoted book lights. "Never have to worry about reading in the dark again." As if that had ever been a problem for you, growing up reading copious amounts of books under the covers with your dad's police light, illuminating the

words of Judy Blume, E.B. White, and S.E. Hinton way past your bedtime.

You've now finished about two and half hours of your penance, two and a half hours of cashing out customers and trying to con them into purchasing a Plenty-O-Books Discount Card. The powers that be recently upped the cost of the discount card from \$5 to \$10, making them that much harder to sell. They save ten percent on each order so if a customer spends at least a hundred dollars, they get the card for free, but they still refuse the discount card, even when they spent well over a hundred. They still think you're trying to cheat them, and maybe you are.

An old lady with cotton candy for hair comes up to purchase a copy of the prayer book *Secrets of the Vine*, paying for the \$8.52 with three ones and pile of pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters. She's a purse counter of the worst kind, holding up the line, and you page for back up that you know will never come. She lets out an audible fart before grabbing her bag, and you do your best to hold your breath. You hustle to get through the chain after she leaves.

Scott walks in the door. He's the store's "Hardback Specialist," the guy in charge of making sure all of the new Tom

Clancy and Danielle Steel releases get placed on the floor every Super Tuesday. Scott is a classic ineffectual, nice guy, perfect for customer service and little else. His pudgy face is always beading sweat and his hairline recedes a little more each day unless that's your imagination. You've managed to avoid him your last two shifts, but he spots you and there's no getting away from the register.

"Hi, Evey!" Scott yells before waddling over. He calls you Evey, his nickname for Evelyn, your name, you're great grandmother's name. Your relatives say you're just like her, a holy terror, whatever that means. No one has ever called you Evey before in your life. Your teeth click and grind each time you hear it.

"You working tonight?" you ask. You hadn't seen Scott's name on the night shift schedule. You always check the schedule to see if Scott's working so you can plan accordingly.

"Yeah. Gladys went home sick. Something about some bad grouper."

"Oh."

"How are you?"

"Okay."

"Just okay?" Scott's smile morphs into a concerned frown. You fidget a little, trying to come up with a reason you're not beaming with contentment for being given another day on this good earth.

"Well, I've got finals coming up. I've also got a paper I need to finish up on the Monkey King."

"Who?"

"It's for my World Lit class. It's Chinese literature."

You've gone back to school, taking some prerequisites for Early Childhood Education. You love your World Literature 2 class most of all, all those discussions on *Candide* and *Faust*. You've done your best to keep up with all the talk on picaresque storytelling and existential heroes.

"Is the Monkey King anything like that *Crouching Tiger* movie?"

"Crouching what?"

"That *Crouching Tiger* movie. The one starring that Chinese actor...Chew Young Fat. I think that's his name."

The conversation is tiring, the way Scott clings to every word from your mouth, the way he can never take a hint, the way he isn't really nice. Everything about Scott rings false, from

his forced laugh to every "mam" and "sir" he throws at each customer.

You tend to cuss a lot around Scott in an effort to shock him. "Fuck," you would say or "I hate this fucking store." Scott winces each time you drop an f-bomb, making you laugh a little on the inside.

Scott is wearing an army green polo with black khakis, his apron washed and ironed. Scott is also a mouth breather and you get the sniff of spearmint with each breath he takes. You haven't cleaned your apron since your first day on the job and haven't made plans to. You think about your breath and begin to fumble around in the front pouch for a pack of Peppermint Lifesavers like a mama kangaroo searching for her young. You find lost receipts and old customer complaint cards that you stole out of the fishbowl before your boss got to them. There are no Lifesavers to be found much to your disappointment. You grit your teeth before forming what you hope is a coy smile, tilting your head ever so slightly down while still meeting Scott's eyes.

"Do you have any mints or gum?"

"Yeah, I've got some Chiclets," Scott says as he pads out a couple into your palm. You pop them in your mouth, peppermint

flooding your taste buds. "A friend of mine visited Belize once, said those little native children kept selling him individually wrapped Chiclets for a quarter each."

"A quarter for one Chiclet? That's some mark up."

"You're telling me. I wonder where they get the gum from. Does the Chiclet Corporation sell individually wrapped Chiclets or do the natives prep them each themselves?"

"It's a mystery all right," you say, thinking you shouldn't keep engaging Scott in casual conversation. Scott had asked you out a couple weeks back. You were somewhat interested until Scott called you at your parents' house as soon as you got off work. Eventually the conversation had devolved into being about his mother's recipe for tuna salad and that had shutdown any hope Scott had of a potential date. You blew him off, saying you were busy with finals and papers. You know that you'll have to let him down gently. Maybe tell him that you just got out of a bad marriage and that you're not looking to date anyone.

"So read any good books lately?" Scott asks. "Besides the *Monkey King*." You know you could recommend any title to him from *Self Matters* to *Finnegans Wake* and that he'll lap it up praising your great taste in books.

"I'm reading *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," you say.

"I bet it's a good one," Scott says, adding nothing of note after. You would call him an empty suit if you could imagine him wearing anything other than a Polo.

"My ex-husband recommended it to me," you say. This is a lie. Your ex doesn't read, doesn't do anything other than smoke pot and play Tony Hawk on his Playstation. Rhett had promised to take care of you, pay for your school, be a good provider. He worked in animal retrieval up in Boston. They sent Rhett out one day to root out a nest of raccoons in this old lady's attic and things went horribly wrong. The raccoon mother took a chunk out of his arm. He was stuck the hospital for days, fighting an infection with tetanus. Then came rabies shots in succession during a two-month period. The medical bills were obscene.

You got a job working at UPS. Your paycheck wasn't enough to keep up with the creditors. They'd call all hours of the day and still found your number after Rhett had switched phone companies. You called it quits on the marriage a few months later, wanting to move back in with your parents, finish school, and be done with men for a while.

Scott kind of shuts down whenever you talk about your ex. You like to make up stories about Rhett, about how spontaneous he was.

"Rhett was just telling me how he'd flown to Cancun over the weekend," you say. Rhett didn't actually have a pilot's license. The two of you had driven to Vegas once.

"Well, I still think it's good that you two didn't have any kids," Scott says.

"Yeah," you say, hating the fake sympathy everyone gives you over the divorce. You don't tell him that you had to declare bankruptcy last month and that Rhett is shacking up with a divorced mother of two.

Mom is disappointed in you. She wanted grandkids and it was your job to give them to her. You don't want children. There's never been a woman you saw with children that wouldn't be better off without children. You see it every day in the store: heifers sporting little brats by their side, girls chewing their pigtails and little boys knocking book displays asunder.

Your manager comes into view, an obese woman named Natalie. Natalie doesn't have children. She has cats and their urine is her perfume.

"Scott, you were supposed to relieve Gladys five minutes ago," Natalie says as Scott snaps to and scuttles off toward the Information Desk in the center of the store. Four rows of bargain books and cheap toys now separate you and Scott. He

looks back at you when he makes it over, stumbling on that first step before settling into the circle that is the Info Desk.

"Dressing more sensibly today," Natalie says, eyeing your grey cardigan. "That's what we like to see."

Natalie's Jello belly ripples through her cheap t-shirt as she pants out a laugh. You wonder what keeps her from toppling over, wonder if she should invest in a girdle. You imagine Natalie in one of those dresses like the kind the women wore in the old west complete with a steel bustle.

"Can I get my break now, Natalie?" you ask, startling her.

"Fine," Natalie says exhaling a sigh. "Don't let me catch you smoking out front again."

III

You knock a Camel back a few feet from the entrance, lighting it with a match you got from a matchbook from Whiskey Saigon back in Boston. The book is inlaid with the silver lining of a W over an S. You inhale more menthol relief down your throat. You wonder if anyone would care when you got lung cancer or if they'd just figure it's your own fault for not heeding the Surgeon General's warning. Maybe you're destined for

breast cancer instead or you could get mashed to fleshy chunks by a big rig. You'd receive a closed casket funeral with crowds of family members choosing the wrong hymns to sing because they knew you so well when you were alive. Mendelssohn. It's always been Mendelssohn. They'd probably sing that "My God is an Awesome God" song.

"Can I bum one of those?"

You jolt out of your musings to see a guy with two piercings studding his lower lip: one a hoop and the other a stud. You lock sockets with him, but turn away first. You shake the box of Camels and a lung dart rises to the surface.

"Thanks," he says, flashing his zippo before a flame rips free. The flame gleams against the gold of the lighter, illuminating Betty Page in bondage gear.

"Nice Zippo," you say as he takes a drag. "Looks like one of those Olivia paintings."

"I see you snuck a look at your dad's *Playboys*," he says as he exhales.

"Guilty," you say, hoping you're not blushing, wondering why you would be blushing. He's older than you are by ten maybe fifteen years. He reminds you of one of those Manchester punks

from the 70s, the kind that spit on their audience as they played defiant guitars. A regular Sid Vicious.

"Reading your dad's *Playboys*, smoking on the job."

You notice a soul patch under his chin. Normally, that would bug you. Normally.

"I guess I'm a regular rebel," you say, noticing a hint of cannabis in the air. The smell reminds you of Rhett.

"I somehow doubt that," he says before cocking his head behind him. Two women in the parking lot are running in your direction. Their high heels click on the asphalt. They almost bump into you before standing to both his right and to his left. Long layers of raven locks cover their left eyes. They're both older, but doing their best to punk themselves up. Both of them are wearing too much turquoise eyeliner, but not enough to distract from their crow's feet.

Heavy earrings stretch out their lobes. One set features red horns and the other crescent moons. You imagine holes you could pass your pinky through, a disgusting deformity they'll never be rid of. You'd thought about doing it yourself once. The one donning the red horns smiles with studded lips before entwining her black tipped fingers with the man's, gently

tugging him away from you. The cannabis smell is stronger on them and it assaults your nostrils. The two girls must be baked.

He takes a drag before passing the cigarette to the one with the red horns. She takes a puff, coughing a little before sticking her tongue out. She lets the butt fall to ground. Two sparks jump out before she crushes the fag with the heel of her Doc Martins. The three of them walk away, heading into the store. You wait a minute before going in yourself and relieving Natalie. *Goodnight Moon* plays over the loudspeaker.

"I guess it's a full moon tonight," Natalie says, pointing over to the three punkers that had just walked in the store. You take another look at the girls. They're dressed like prostitutes. Their high heels click on the linoleum. The prostitutes walk with a wobble like they're drunk or pretending to be drunk. Sid Vicious reaches in the rubber ball bin and picks out what looks like a pink marble, launching it at one of the girls. She pumps it back, leaving the other girl to play monkey in the middle. Customers aren't supposed to play with those rubber balls. The ball bin was another genius move by corporate.

The three of them start playing around with the talking Osborne family bobble heads. A plastic Ozzy with his sunglasses

and flat expression screams out "I'm taking something for my bleeping shakes." They bleeped out Ozzie's F bombs, making them safe to sell in retail outlets all over America. You imagine one of the prostitutes is going to slip Ozzie into her purse.

An old man donning a pair of sunglasses and a Bass Pro Shops hat walks up to the register. He is holding a copy of the Qur'an spelled Koran.

"Look at it. Now I want you to tell me where in there it says it's okay for them to done what they did."

9-11 was just three months ago. Your middle school history teacher had once told the class about the day Kennedy had been shot, and how everyone remembered where they were and what they were doing on that fateful day in Dallas. You remember 9-11. Mom had rung you up that Tuesday morning. You had worked the late shift the night before.

"A plane flew into the Twin Towers. And then another plane flew into them."

You watched the feeds on CNN and Fox News, the bodies jumping out of windows eighty stories high, Ashley Banfield getting too close to the collapsing towers, Bill O'Reilly raging at a pacifist before cutting his mic. Every channel on cable was

showing it. That was your Kennedy moment, preserved by the 24/7 news channels.

The old man keeps talking.

"Now if I ran the fed, what I would do is, I'd drop a nuke on Mecca. If that didn't work, I'd drop another on Kabul and Istanbul and I'd keep dropping them until they learned."

"Pops, you going to buy that? Some of us have places to be," says a muscly man in a tank top behind him.

"I'm not buying this," he says.

Tensions are still high. Someone had posted a flyer near the women's bathroom for a class on Islam. It was found torn to shreds the next day. You felt the collected hatred for the Muslims that day in September, you wanted the armed forces to turn the Middle East into a sheet of glass, but your cooler head prevailed a couple of days later and you didn't care anymore. You just wanted to get the visage of those people jumping from hot windows out of your head.

Plenty-O-Books had a prominent display featuring American flags, patriotic coloring books, and those state quarter coin folders that you never managed to fill. Brandished above the display was a sign that read, 9-11 Never Forget. Natalie said

that corporate wasted no time ordering truckloads of American flags the day the towers had been hit.

Rhett kept talking about enlisting, doing his duty. He said he had friends in the military, said they'd recruit anybody, that they were gearing up for World War III. Rhett bought a fake rubber penis to store some clean urine in. You squeezed them to let the piss out. Rhett said they'd fool the army doctors. That or the army doctors look the other way. They came in three styles: White, Black, and Latino. Rhett bought a white one, but returned it, thought it was a little too pale. He thought the Latino dick would do the trick. He'd heard he can do all the heroin he wants once he's in. You knew the military wouldn't make a man out of him even if he got in. You knew you'd be taking care of him for the rest of your life. So you left him.

IV

A woman with two twin daughters with matching pig tails shows up at the register. She's buying *Where's Waldo* books. You notice the thin line of a mustache gracing her upper lip. You have an aunt who always waxed hers. You used to tear the strip

off for her when she babysat you. She yelped each time like a wounded puppy.

"You have to do something about those freaks in the back," the mother says before her voice lowers to a whisper. "They're talking about oral sex. Some of us have children with us."

Embarrassed for the mother and for her girls, you decide to call the Info Desk. Scott is busy straightening the craft books table. He jumps at the ready as soon as you finish dialing.

"Hello, Plenty-O-Books here to answer all of your book needs," Scott says. "Would you like to place a pre-order for *The Lovely Bones*."

"No," you say. "It's me, Evelyn."

"Oh right. You were going to tell me all about *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*."

"You have to do something about those freaks in the back."

"Freaks? What are you talking about."

"The ones who are talking about oral sex."

Scott's head darts around before he leaves the info desk disappearing into the stacks behind him. You can just hear Scott saying something to the three of them, but you can't make out the words.

There is all sorts of merchandise stacked near your register: *Burt's Bees* lip balm canisters, stacks of tissues with fancy flowers or Peanuts characters, but it's the fancy candies from Europe that beg your attention, those *Cavendish & Harvey* tins of sugar candy flavored sour cherry, orange, and other flavors. The lemon drops are your favorite. On occasion, you've stolen a canister and today is one such occasion. You edge the stack of candy tins ever so closer to you before nudging the top one off so it clanks on the floor behind the register. The tin gets dented so you take it upon yourself to inspect the damage. You peel the gold foil wrapper off the top and pop a lemon drop into your mouth. Sparks of flavor singe your tongue. You sigh with relief before catching the three punkers planting themselves by the *Thomas the Tank Engine* playset in the children's department. One of them launches a boxcar at the other. You call the info desk again.

"What did you say to them?"

"Say to who?" Scott asks.

"The punkers in the kid's department."

"Oh, I haven't gotten around to it yet. Some guy came up here asking for a book on how to win the lottery. I found him one and he tells me how he had given the winning numbers to the

clerk at the Circle K, but that the clerk had given him the wrong numbers on purpose. The guy kept going on about how the lottery was fixed."

"Maybe it is. Did he buy the book?"

"No, I don't remember ringing that one up. I bet he snuck out with it. Lord knows he could have."

Scott is right about that. Plenty-O-Books has cameras installed near the entrance, but they're replicas, fakes. Anyone can steal what they want if they're clever enough. The store has no security. It's another cost cutting measure from Alabama. There was the *Yu-gi-oh* playing card disaster. They're the biggest craze since *Pokemon*. Every 10 year-old boy in the county is on the hunt for those cards and naturally Plenty-O-Books wants to keep them happy.

The higher-ups insisted on putting the glass case full of collectable cards up near the info desk instead of near the registers where it had always been. You had objected during the monthly meeting, saying it would invite theft if the cashiers couldn't keep an eye on that case. They ignored your warnings and moved the case up to the Info Desk. Three days later the case was found broken into at the end of the evening shift. Someone had sawed through the lock. Scott was on the info desk

that night, but said he had been busy with a Dean Koontz display and hadn't seen anything. Over \$600 dollars' worth of cards were stolen. You wonder if Scott had been telling the truth or if Scott was just too much of a wuss to do anything about the thief just like he's not doing anything about the punkers.

"Scott, are you going to step up and do anything about those punks or do I have to?"

"Okay. Okay."

Scott removes himself from the desk. He has a goofy grin on his face and is acting all friendly to the punks. Your phone rings as soon as he gets back to the desk.

"Hey, I just talked to them. They're going to kick out of here in a few. They're going to catch that *Harry Potter* movie. Have you seen it?"

"No"

"Maybe we could catch it--"

"I don't want to. Why didn't you kick them out?"

Scott doesn't answer. He just hangs up the phone.

The punks continue to act rowdy. One of the girls hurls a train engine at Sid Vicious. F-bombs start flying from their mouths and Scott hangs his head in shame for a brief moment before disappearing into the stacks behind him.

They said everything changed after 9-11, everyone acting like it was Pearl Harbor, the defining moment for the new century, for your generation. Everyone puts on the fake face of patriotism. Enlisting because you want a free ride. Selling plastic American flags made in China. The world is still filled with assholes like the kind who fly planes into office buildings or mess around with their whore girlfriends in children's departments.

Scott reemerges a moment later, walks toward you, but you shoot him your disappointment. You're tired of it all. Scott turns around and then you hear him yelling at the punkers. You look over. He's all red in the face with his chest puffed out.

"I'm not being paid enough to deal with this," Scott says.

"I'm not being paid enough either," Sid Vicious says.

"Leave the store."

"What are you going to do if I don't, son?" Sid Vicious asks standing straight and getting in Scott's face.

"I'll call the police."

Sid Vicious just laughs at Scott until Scott removes his Plenty-O-Books apron.

"Do you want to take this outside?"

"Sure."

You could swear you see Scott gulp, but the four of them do leave. You are beside yourself. You think about calling the cops, but hesitate. Flashes of fist swing through the store window, highlighted each time a car rolls by. The girls break it up and Scott returns inside. His nose is bleeding and his eye has a shine to it.

"I think I'm going to faint," he says, crumpling to the floor. You page your boss to the front of the store.

IV

"What the hell happened here?" Natalie says as you cradle Scott's head in your arms.

"Those punkers," you say.

"What happened? Who started it?" Natalie asks again as she dabs Scott's nose with some restroom towels.

"They were cussing in the children's department, talking about oral sex. They wouldn't leave. They just planted themselves down at that Thomas the Tank Engine play set."

"Jesus Christ," Natalie says. She goes over to your phone, calling 911. Scott moans.

"Let's get him in the back," Natalie says. "Get some ice on that."

"Hey, I have something for you," he says as you try to help him stand. He hands you a white box. You open the box to find a chrome Zippo lighter resting on cotton. The lighter is engraved with a heart.

The sirens are coming closer now. You smile. You say, "I'm still not your girlfriend," and Scott keeps grinning up at you.

DEVIL' S BACKBONE

I see the paw prints in the mud. I've lived in Appalachia my whole life and never once did I see a black bear cross my property, but I see them now. A group of them pass through here at least once a month. I'm sorry. They're called a sleuth, a sleuth of bears. They're not supposed to be hard to deal with. As long as they're fed, they keep to themselves. But I know they haven't been getting fed these days. This place is poisoned. The air. The water. You can taste it on your tongue, the bitterness of metal. The coal kills us all one way or another.

This country once swelled with life. The streams overflowed with crawdads and mussels. When I was a child, I used to pick berries, all kinds: blackberries, gooseberries, wild blueberries, and my favorite, dewberries. The prickly sweet assaulted my tongue every time I shoved a handful in my mouth. Momma rarely got a chance to make a cobbler due to my sticky fingers. That's all gone now. Nothing grows anymore. We let the devil in here long ago.

The creeks are now filled with that coal slop, the remnants of Massey's refining. Swirls of pink and green in a slushy, chemical stew. They've ripped off the mountaintops, blasted the hell out of them for the treasure within. They have fancy machines now, machines that have made the coal miners obsolete. The mountain is blown apart. Where there was green, there's now gray. Birds don't sing here anymore. Every day the forest gets quieter and the blasting gets louder.

Big Coal wants me dead. Being 68 with a bad heart, they're bound to get their wish sooner rather than later. I know it's the sooner they're counting on, the sooner being Massey Energy and their willing slaves in the hollers down below. They violate the mountain and piss on our ancestors. I hate them all. They want my 82 acres; more specifically, they want what's underneath: six figures worth of pure obsidian gold.

I have to get down to Ameagle, a rotting carcass of a town. I'll be driving down the mountain just as I've been every day since Massey's goons cracked my wife's headstone in two. I found a note saying "Get out!" shoved between the two halves. They smashed my grandfather's tombstone too, but that didn't bother me none as he was mean as a preacher on New Year's Day.

I also have to load my pick up with 5 gallon bottles of distilled relief. Massey ruined my wells with that coal slop that seeps into the streams and into the soil. The local yokels let this happen. They're my kin, selling out their heritage for slave wages. Massey rules the roost. It's the only real employer any of these sad sacks ever have a hope of working for. Some of them had spine until the union was shattered. No more strikes. No more benefits. Just scraps.

I need to get in and out of town before nightfall. Massey's goons trespass at night. I drive on down the mountain and see lonely bulldozers and that pit where they dump their poison. The pit is supposed to keep the coal slop tucked away, but like I said before, the slop gets everywhere. But that stuff ain't water. If that damn breaks and there's a flood, you'd better get out of its way. That coal slop will tear you apart. It's happened before in Tennessee. But the country doesn't know about what happens in the hollers of Tennessee or West Virginia. Just like they didn't know about what went on in that manure plant out in Waco until half the town got torched. I still read the paper. Death by coal slop or exploding cow shit. I don't know which I'd prefer.

I have few friends left in Ameagle. I used to play checkers at Rob Hedgecock's barbershop every Tuesday, but he cleared out after the air became toxic. Massey has labeled me and other property owners like me traitors to the community, says we're keeping hiring at bay and gumming up the works of progress. You wouldn't know it by the daily rain of flyrock over my property. One boulder came within two feet of my cabin once. I play Russian Roulette every day I stay on my property.

They have my package at the post office, a big white box with PRIORITY MAIL brandished in red letters, heavy like a bag of bricks, but we manage to slide it into the bed of the pick-up. Part of me thinks I should open the package, make sure they spelled her name right.

I step into the local supply store, the Supply Hut, a light gray stucco structure with a neon sign that blinks S-U-P-P-L-Y H-U-T in pink light except that it always misses the T. They're having a half off sale on hunting and fishing gear. I'm half tempted to browse through the lures, but I know I'm not going fishing anytime soon. I notice the vents in the ceiling, the spots of coal dust clustering around them. It gets in everywhere. Aaron Bowles is stocking bright yellow boxes of rat poison into a pyramid display and he's the man I need to get my

water from. Aaron's a good kid, inherited the shop from his papa. Never married though. Had a high school sweetheart that moved on after she went to college. Aaron's pushing 40 now.

"Town having rat trouble?" I ask. Aaron turns around. He's looked better. Bags are gathered under his red veined eyes and he's lost more hair. I bet it's due to stress not that he'll ever admit to it. I suspect the store isn't doing so hot. He sports a big smile and I appreciate the fact that he's glad to see me.

"How you doing, Mr. Jacobson?"

"Not bad for an old fella. Rat trouble?"

"What?"

Aaron glances around before noticing his display of D-con rat poison.

"Oh right. Not me, personally. Whole town is full of the bastards."

"Really?"

"Yeah, big ones at that. Some of those rats are the size of small dogs."

Aaron moves his hands out wide for emphasis. I don't know that I buy his rat story, but I humor him all the same. I need that water.

"That poison work?" I ask.

"Oh yeah. This shit will kill anything."

"Will it kill bears?"

"Bears?" Aaron asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I got brown bears on my property. Keep finding their prints everywhere. Heard them a few times, shuffling about as I sleep."

"We've got bear spray. Half-off," Aaron says pointing over to the hunting supply sale. I walk over and pick up a red and white canister of Counter Assault. A picture of an angry Grizzly stares back at me.

"Works like a charm if you can get up close enough," Aaron says. I smirk at this.

"Great. Add two of them canisters on to my order."

"Right. Your water-Oh shit." Aaron's eyes grow wide as he looks past me. I turn around to see two disheveled bums grinning gumless smiles behind the store window. They're adorned in tattered flannel and denim. One of them has his hair tucked under a Houston Oilers cap, the other has a clipper cut with patches of bald scalp shining through. The two of them stand there, looking straight through me. A spike of fear goose bumps

my skin. It leaves me as soon as they shuffle away from the glass and out of view.

"They look like something the cat drug in that the dog wouldn't eat," I say.

"Fucking vampires," Aaron whispers under his breath.

"What's with the swearing?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Jacobson. It's those meth heads. There's more and more of them every day. Look, Mr. Jacobson. I'll get you your water. I'll do a couple more orders for you, but that's it. You've got to get the hell out of here."

"I'm not leaving. I'm a caretaker."

"You can't stay. They ran Angie Vaught off last week. She told me they undersold her, but she took the deal anyway. They're stirring things up in town, those Massey miners. Too many people getting laid off and they're looking for someone to blame."

And of course it's people like me who are responsible, but I know better. Miners aren't getting work because of the machines Massey uses. They keep improving, making miners less essential. But they'll blame us homesteaders and rile up the desperate to terrorize us.

"I'm not leaving," I say again.

"Just think about it. Retire someplace nice. Forget about this place. I plan to."

Aaron always talks about leaving Ameagle, but he can't afford to. He can't sell because no one will buy the buildings in this town. Unlike Aaron, I could retire comfortably. But then a month or two would go by before I decided to send a bullet through my rib cage. A man needs a purpose in life and mine is to those bodies in the ground, ten generations of Jacobsons. It ends with me, but I have a responsibility as long as I'm alive.

After loading the water up, I stop in O'Keefe's for a cold pilsner. I need to get the taste of coal out of my mouth. The bar is set up right next to a Payday Loans. O'Keefe's is a seedy mess with sawdust on the floor and fiber wood stools. Clancy Brothers blare from hidden speakers. The smell of week old sweat and stale tobacco always lingers here. I see the framed painting of Don Blankenship, double chin and flakey mustache intact. Their messiah: the native boy done good, the entrepreneur, the job creator. I've heard the story before and I interfere with that story every day I refuse to sell.

The bartender squints at me. It's Bob Utterback, a little grayer with an extra chin.

"I'll have a Devil's Backbone," I say.

"Go to hell, tree hugger," Bob says.

"What's the problem, Bob?"

"I don't need your business."

"It's my land."

"And it's my bar, so fuck off."

I'm about to turn around, head on out of there, but I feel a hand on my shoulder. It comes from a young guy dressed like a sissified lumberjack: red flannel shirt, denim jeans, gravel boots. His sandy beard is neatly trimmed.

"I'd like to buy this man a drink," the lumberjack says like his wife just had a baby.

"He's not welcome in my bar," Bob says as he's fixing one of the taps.

"Maybe President Grant will change your mind," the lumberjack says as a pulls out a perfectly crisp 50 dollar bill. Bob nods and grasps the fifty, stuffing the bill in his shirt pocket. The lumberjack ushers me over to the booth before heading back to the bar. He returns with two Devil's Backbones and passes one to me.

"It's on me," he says before taking a long gulp of his pilsner.

"You're generous, son."

"Just call me Landon," he says with a wink like we're old friends. I don't say my name. I get up. Sitting down with this guy is a mistake. "I know who you are, Caleb Jacobson."

I settle back in and take a swig of Devil's Backbone, but I still taste the coal. Landon keeps trying to catch my eye. I look back hard into his baby blues, but he squints them before flashing a perfect set of pearls at me. I've never seen anyone around here with a smile like that.

"What do you want?" I ask. Landon leans back, hands behind his neck as his elbows stretch out.

"I want to know why you're sticking around this place. You could be in Florida right now."

"Not interested," I say, imagining being stretched out on a recliner in Boca Raton, dressed in mismatched polyester.

"Get yourself a nice condo," he says turning his gaze to the ceiling. "Trips to the beach."

"I hate the beach," I say. Last time I was in the ocean, jellyfish stung me across the belly. It felt like a razor had sliced through me.

"What about your wife?"

"Widowed, but I got a feeling you know that."

"That's right. Pancreatic cancer," he says clasping both of his palms to his cheeks. "I'm sorry about that."

I grip the bottle tightly, wondering if my old hands can shatter it. Yes, my wife is dead like a lot of the women around here. The cancer comes from the toxins in the air not that any doctor has confirmed this. Many women around here have died from pancreatic cancer. I think of Angie and I feel the weight of my Smith & Wesson, concealed under my jacket. Landon folds his hands. His nails are perfectly filed. These aren't the hands of a working man, too milky white and baby soft.

"What's with the get up?" I ask, seeing if I can catch him off guard. I down what's left of my pilsner.

"Huh?"

"Your lumberjack look. You don't seem like the kind of fellow who ever had to do a day of heavy lifting."

"Women love it. I even bought myself a Chevy Silverado."

"You should smear some coal dust on those cheeks, give you the authentic look."

Landon motions for the barkeep to bring a couple more pilsners over.

"I was sorry to learn about your son. Fallujah was nasty business."

I told Jarod not to enlist. The 9/11 fever got to him and I couldn't shake any sense into him after that. He had a full scholarship to Concord that he gave up. He died honorably, protecting his brothers over in Iraq, but he still died. He's buried over in Arlington now. It's a nice grave. Better than my wife's, but at least she's close to home. I think about the headstone in the back of my truck.

"Stop talking about my family."

"Just calm down. It's like I said, I care about the people in this community."

I take another sip of Pilsner. This is the first time I've met one of them in town. Massey used to send them up to my property. First, it was some slick asshole in a three-piece and a five-dollar tan. Then it was some blonde with long legs and a plastic face. The last guy they sent was wearing flannel like this asshole, spouting Bible quotes at me about talents and investing and what happens to those who bury their money. He was a regular Jimmy Swaggart. They wanted me to sell. They were all hired by Massey. I tip my bottle over. Pilsner spills over the edge onto Landon's neatly pressed denim.

"Aw. Now why did you have to do that? I thought you and I were going to be friends."

"Thanks for the beer." I get up to leave.

"Why are you staying there, Caleb? Your wife wanted to leave years ago."

I want to land my knuckles on Landon's perfect pearls, send them flying in all directions, but I figure that would just send me to jail. Massey would get what they wanted. Turn me into the bad guy. Assault charge with the bartender as witness.

"I'm a caretaker," I say throwing a twenty on the table before leaving.

I make it over to my Ford pick up. Empty five-gallon jugs are strewn about the black top. The bed of the truck is filled with water. They surround my truck, young men dressed in garb similar to Landon's, but their flannel and denim were purchased at Wal-Mart and Goodwill. I guess that they're miners, let go or on the company payroll. They want me out.

"Have a safe trip, Mr. Jacobson," one of them says before they all peel out. I notice a crack in the windshield spreading tendrils in four directions. The tires are flat, most likely slashed beyond repair. I open the gate. Water floods out and I sigh in relief because my package is still there. Waterlogged, but still there.

I walk back to the Supply Hut, hoping Aaron can help out. His neon sign has been torn down and shattered, completely wrecked. I see Aaron bent over with a broom and a dustpan. He looks straight at me.

"I wish they'd just burn the place down," he says as he stuffs broken glass into a pail. "I could collect the insurance money."

"What would you do with it?"

"Take a trip to Branson," Aaron says as he picks up a shard. "They've got a Shanghai Circus over there."

"All the way from China?"

"So I hear."

"I need to use your phone."

We call AAA for a tow. My package gets stowed in the back of his silver Ford Lightning. Aaron doesn't care to drive me back to my place after dusk, spooked by those bear stories I was telling him. He offers to put me up for the night. We drive through brittle country until we reach a dirt clearing. Inside the clearing is a lawn shed on wheels.

"Here we are," Aaron says with a beaming smile.

"Where's your house?" I ask.

"This is it," Aaron says hopping out of the truck, dangling his keys in his right hand.

"You're living in a shack," I say. Aaron scrunches his face in response.

"Reverse mortgaged the house. The joke was on the bank in the end."

"But this?"

"Best decision I ever made," Aaron says, hand outstretched like he was a Lord of the Manor. "Built the whole thing myself."

The outside resembles a clubhouse a father might make for his daughter's eighth birthday. Aaron's home is tailored for solitary living. You could perch yourself on your tiny stool on your tiny porch watching the sun set while you smoke your corn cob pipe. Solar panels fastened to the roof must take of the electric. A cherry red paint job compliments the house.

"Sure you've got enough room for me," I say as stoop under the entrance. "I don't want to impose."

"It's no bother," Aaron says, ducking his head down as he comes through the door. "I've got a guest bed."

The inside isn't painted, just finished wood. Aaron lifts up a cushion from a built-in couch by the window sill.

"This is a foldout bed."

"Where do you sleep?"

"Up there," Aaron says pointing to a bed in a tiny loft above his tiny kitchen. I'd go crazy sleeping up there. The loft reminds me of a coffin.

"I need to take a leak," I say.

"Great! Let me show you the toilet." Aaron starts going through a demonstration of how the composting toilet works. He's a regular Mr. Popeil, but I can't follow his instructions concerning the spreading of sawdust and the cranking of the handle. Frankly, I'd prefer a good old-fashioned outhouse.

"What do you do with the compost?" I ask as I take whiff of a potpourri jar labeled "Winter Spice."

"I've been using to grow some tomato plants. No luck so far."

"Nothing grows here." I clasp the lid on the potpourri jar. I smell a hint of licorice in the air. Coal slurry must be leaking into the creek behind the house. Aaron grabs the jar from me, unfastens the lid.

Aaron fixes us some dinner, some chili concoction he makes from various canned goods. He says he bought one of those can cookbooks. I think that might be a better alternative to the

rations I feed myself. No one sells real groceries in Ameagle anymore.

"Do you like living by yourself?" I ask him as I shove a spoonful of Chili into my mouth. It's not half bad, but too fresh either.

"I'm good company," he says. "How about you? Do you like living alone?"

"No," I say. "I don't feel safe here anymore. Massey will run me off one of these days."

"Then leave," he says, blowing the steam off his spoon.

"My wife's buried here. So is my papa and mama and dozens of other relations. I'm their caretaker. I have a responsibility."

"Yeah, I suppose you are. Massey pushed 200 graves over the high wall once they bought Jerry Lockhart's land. They told him they'd relocate the graves."

"They lied," I say all of a sudden not feeling very hungry, but I don't want to be a poor guest so I keep on eating. After dinner, Aaron tunes into the local NPR station. Jazz music fills the room.

"Coltrane," Arron says wagging his index finger to the beats as he goes back into the kitchen. He returns with two bottles of pale ale and hands me one. Aaron unfolds today's Register-Herald, pulling out the Sports section before handing the rest of the paper to me.

"I'll let you do the Crossword, but save the Sudoku for me," he says smiling. Aaron's a good kid. He deserves better than what he's got, but maybe this is enough for him.

We pile in Aaron's pick-up in the morning. I worry that he's losing business by driving me up during store hours, but he tells me he'll be back in time to open. We fill my water jugs up with a hose outside of his store, not the freshest but better than what I have up there.

We pause on our way up the mountain. In the distance, I see them, a mama and her cubs, crossing the road. They don't notice us. We lay back until they're out of sight before continuing the drive. I'll never spray a bear. If one of them wants to eat me, so be it.

"I read somewhere that if a bear eats you, you'll be reincarnated as a wise man," I say.

Aaron drops me off with the jugs and my package. Says he'll come back for me when the mechanic calls him. I see a litter of cigarette butts scattered near the front of my cabin. Will they come again tonight? My cabin is reinforced, I have my sawed off.

I cut open the waterlogged package with a rusty X-Acto knife. Bubblewrap pops as I cut it free. The headstone is flat and lacquered black like obsidian. JACOBSON is engraved at the top with the expression Love Survives carved in cursive underneath. Angela's name is on the left. Mine will be on the right. Flyrock rumbles in the distance. I heave the stone onto my dolly and drag it to the family plot.

What will the night bring? I brought the two broken halves of my wife's headstone in here with me. I think about my wife, six feet down. Is she still there? I fantasize about smashing Landon's face with one of the halves, see if he still smiles after that. The half with my wife's name on it is heavy in my hand. I could do some real damage. Do men like Landon hold anything sacred? I try to get to sleep.

I sleep with a bulletproof vest on. My windows are boarded up twice over. Sunlight hasn't pierced through the cabin in

months. I bolstered the door with eight inches of solid oak. I'm locked up tight as a drum.

I dream about digging up Angie's grave. My shovel lifts up pile after pile until I hit something solid, but then the earth shifts. It starts to crumble beneath my feet. I struggle to climb out, but clefts of dirt and grass pull out in my fists and I descend into the abyss.

The knocking wakes me from the nightmare. It's about a quarter to two and I know better than to answer that door. Knock. Knock. Knock. I'm bundled up under a pile of blankets. Angie liked to make quilts. She was a real artist. She learned from her father.

The knocking turns to banging. Bang. Bang. Bang. Massey's goons trying to get in. My sawed off is at the ready. I think back to the quilts. Angie told stories through them. She told our story through the one covering me now.

Bang. Bang. Bang. The door will hold out. It's reinforced oak. I think of the embroidered images on the quilt. Each square represents a time in our life: the Moonlite Drive-in where we met, our Honeymoon in Niagara Falls, Jarod's homerun that took the Bulldogs to state, Jarod leaving for Iraq.

The banging stops. All I hear is the wind whispering outside. It coos me back to sleep.

I open the door and go outside to inspect the damage. The dawn sun blinds me, but my eyes adjust. Claw marks are everywhere. I rub my fingers over the deep impressions, stopping before I hit a nest of splinters. And then I see the black bears in the distance, about twenty of them.

APPENDIX: READING LIST

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