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Four Daily Do's

Richard Lee Zuras

It starts like this: a man, thirty-two, a woman, thirty-one. Youngest kids in their families. Three of their four parents alive. His father recently dead. A slow, quiet, hospital coma. Then: a long, hot cross-country trip in a Jeep with no air-conditioning. Conception in her parent's house. Everyone's first grandchild. Newspapers, journals and magazines will be purchased, read, copied, clipped, and sent to the couple. The clippings will litter the house like table scraps.

Your baby eats what you do, so should you change what you eat? A guide to what you both need and why.

They arrive home. There are two stripes on the stick. The young couple begins to call one another mom and dad. At first he winces. At first she smiles. Phone calls are made. They are congratulated. For having sex, he reasons. Is it possible to be chastised in this situation? The scissors are retrieved from utility drawers. They are sharpened. Stamps and envelopes are stocked. Mail arrives daily. Some articles are read. Some are scanned, left on end-tables and sideboards. Many catch the late summer breezes and follow the uncharted path of flowing air.

The Four Daily Dos

- 1. Walk at least 15 to 20 minutes each day in a cool, shaded area, or indoors where it's air-conditioned.*
- 2. Drink eight to ten glasses of liquid, such as water, juice, milk, and other fluids without caffeine, carbonation, or artificial coloring.*

3. *Rest on your side for at least an hour in the morning and in the evening, and sleep on your side.*
4. *Eat five or six small meals throughout the day.*

Giddiness takes over. Is giddiness a disease? The couple strolls through the baby aisles in the local department stores. “I’ve never done this before,” he says. “You’ve never looked at baby clothes before?” she says. “No.” Was he allowed to look at baby clothes before? The other fathers stand around a sixty-five inch rear projection television, one section over, as if it were a Rodin. Or a Boticelli. Or a baby? The price tags are invisible to her. “This is cute,” she says. Isn’t all of it cute? “This is expensive,” he says. He flicks the price tags one by one. Thirty-two-fifty. Twenty-seven-even. Eighteen-ninety-nine. Fifty dollars. Flick. Flick. Flick. Flick. She places items over her shoulders. How do you try them on? He pulls out his wallet. Thumbs out his charge card. She pays the bills. He studies at the university. Isn’t she brave? He’ll take care of the baby while she works eight-to-five. Is he brave too? Isn’t everyone in the baby aisle brave?

Making Love During Pregnancy: How To Stay Close And Enjoy This Special Time Of Intimacy

Her breasts begin to swell. His urges swell in response. Her mind wanders. How could it not. “Your hair is thickening,” he says. “I hope it doesn’t fall out after,” she says. They need an OB/GYN. She has always gone to a nurse practitioner. They scan bios off the hospital’s website. “She’s just out of med school though,” he says. “All the women doctors are,” she says. “But I want a female doctor. That’s what I’m used to.” He’s always had a male doctor. Does everyone view a doctor’s office as a public restroom? Same sex only? They pick one. An older woman with other degrees as well.

“There is some blood in my underwear,” she says. The doctor says, “no sex.” “What about exercise?” she asks. “That’s fine,” the doctor says.

Healthy Choices For Two: Getting The Right Nutrition For You And Your Baby

The couple ceases to have sex. The bleeding continues. He goes to the university library, the public library. They research via the internet. She phones her doctor's nurse. "No exercise," the nurse says. "Let's try bedrest," he says. "Today's Friday. Bedrest for two and a half days," he says. Bedrest? Is this something to be concerned about? Can bedrest be anything but? "Probably implantation bleeding," he says. "After all these weeks?" she says. "It's just lingering," he says. She's always been prone to bruises. Why not bleeding? She trusts him and rests. She knows he's reading everything. When his father was dying he spent hours every day in the hospital's health library. "Wouldn't everyone," he said. His mother said he was like a sponge with information. "How could you not be under those conditions," he said. Most people aren't. His mother for instance. He'd draw up charts and define everything for her. He tried to explain to her that his father couldn't live. Too many complications. She couldn't absorb the information. How could she? It was her *husband* that was dying. It was only his *father* after all. "I've gone through that already," she said. "That was nothing compared to this." She couldn't make him understand. How could she? "His organs are going to fail one by one," he said. She held her husband's hand and spoke to him. Seven a.m. to ten p.m. every last day. His hands grew to twice their size. "Edema," he said. "Pitting edema."

Kids On Wheels: Bike Safety For Babies On Up

"You may have an Rh conflict," the doctor says. "Here's a pamphlet. Go give some more blood on level three." She has Rh positive blood. The baby's may be negative. Or was it the reverse? She tells her parents what matters is that they don't match. "How could your baby not match you?" her mom asks. "It's complicated," she says. She hangs up the phone. "How?"

she thinks.

The 7 Secrets Of Successful Parents

“The baby’s heart rate is too low,” the doctor says. The couple have been waiting in the waiting rooms for ninety-seven minutes. “What does that mean?” she asks. “Nature’s way of saying the fetus isn’t strong enough.” The husband stiffens his back and shoulders. He asks the question the doctor wants to hear: “Have you ever seen a fetus with that heart rate make it?” “No,” she says. She is positive. Her body language is positive. In the lobby the husband says, “She’s been practicing for less than a year. We’re switching doctors. It’s not a gender thing, we need experience. We have only male doctors to choose from.” “Let’s see the complications specialist,” she says.

Reality Check Mom-Tested Answers To Your Toughest Questions

The specialist isn’t taking on new patients. He’ll consult. He sends them to another ultrasound. “My fifth,” she says. They tell the technician what is going on. The lady says the heartbeat is fine. Her child’s was 10% lower. Don’t worry about it. She sees it all the time. “Will you be our doctor?” the husband asks. He’s serious. The specialist wonders why they’re seeing him. He refers them to the doctor with the most seniority. “He looks like Santa Claus,” she says. They download his picture off the website. “Everyone will give me gender shit about this,” she says. “Screw everyone,” he says.

Strange But True Pregnancy Tales

Her friends with babies tell her about episiotomies. No Tears. Ripping or crying. “How about the afterbirth?” she asks. “Better than an undetected twin,” says one. They tell her about mucus plugs. “Will I think I’ve peed in my bed?” she asks. They tell her to smell it. “Amniotic doesn’t smell like

urine. Urine resembles ammonia. Amniotic smells sweet.” She raises an eyebrow in protest.

Young At Art. Great Ways To Introduce Your Toddler To The Fun Of Paint, Crayons, And Collage

“You’re carrying too high,” says the doctor. “Is that a problem?” she asks. How could it not be? Would they point it out otherwise? “Why are the sonograms always sealed,” the husband asks. He asks the wife. He asks the doctor. “They’re our records aren’t they?” Even the walls and the stirrup table and the little stack of paper-thin blue dresses ignore him. He opens the next one. “It says you have cysts,” he tells the wife.

First Feelings. How Babies’ And Toddlers’ Emotions Develop—Age By Age

The wife wakes at two in the morning. Three in the morning. Four in the morning. “You can’t breathe,” he says. She can’t answer. “The baby is in my ribs,” she says later. He keeps an ice bag on the bed for her. She forces the baby down. She had a friend that used a cold coke can for a parlor trick. Moving the baby side to side for amusement. “This isn’t amusing,” she says. He knows it isn’t. He tells his friends about the trick. In one four week period, she gains fifteen pounds. “You’re fat,” her father says. “I’m hungry,” say says. The fetus is growing fast. “Let’s settle on a name,” he says. “I mean, a list of names.”

Whole 9 Months: When Push Comes To Pull

“The baby is growing fast,” the old doctor says. “We’ll move up the date,” the husband says. “We’ll need to find out why,” the doctor says. Ultrasound is scheduled. “We’ve had almost every tech,” she says. He nods. Not this one. Stoneface he calls her afterwards. She staples the ultrasound

six times. Do they know he opened the last one? The doctor says, “The femurs aren’t within the normal range of length for the length of the fetus.” “What does that mean?” the husband asks. “Just what they wrote is all. What’s normal anyway?” he says.

A Mother’s Days: In Praise Of Being Lax

“The baby is breech,” the doctor says. The couple smiles. “What next?” they ask. “We’ll try a version,” he says. Or was it aversion? The doctor who does them is a woman. She gives it her all. “This baby’s stuck,” she says. Not for lack of her trying. “We should have used her,” the husband says. “Yes. That version hurt,” she says. “It looked it,” he said. Like turning an elephant around in a broom closet. C-Section the doctors say.

Is Your Child Ready For Kindergarten? 5 Questions You Should Ask Before Sending Him On—Or Holding Him Back

The anesthesiologist explains the choices. “Which would you do?” she asks. “Given my druthers,” he says, “the spinal block.” “Then do it,” she says. She’s brave. The husband waits. She’s gone. People in white coats and her in a blue hospital gown. Him in a room with a broken TV and a clock. Fifteen minutes go by. The head’s out before he gets in. He peers over the curtain. Holds her hand. “Didn’t feel a thing,” she says. That was easy, the Dr. says. Easy. “Now comes the rest,” she says. “Now comes the rest,” he says.

Dog Catcher Day: 1982

Nick Bertelson

1: Any Means Necessary

Sheriff McKenzie called me around six in the morning before the restaurant I lived above opened for the day. The rotary phone on the table beside my bed blared out half a ring before I wrestled with my blankets and knocked the receiver off its base so the damn thing didn't wake up Sammy. It tumbled to the floor, and I pulled on the cord like a fish stringer with a single bluegill at the end. It bounced across the carpet as I hoisted the receiver up to the bed.

"Yeah?" I answered, knowing McKenzie was on the other end.

"The Black Lab is in the park again," the sheriff said.

"What am I supposed to do about it?"

"Your job, asshole. Do whatever you can to get him," he growled, "at all costs." He never used that phrase before. My eyelids shot up, but he kept going as if it was no big deal. "I'm sick of picking up trash all over the park neighborhood. Last week he scattered the trash on 16th street down the entire block. The garbage men are scared to death of him."

I stopped listening.

"At all costs, huh?"

"I'll give you two hundred dollars," he said.

"Two fifty."

"I'll give you two hundred dollars."

"Any means necessary?"

"Any means necessary."

I stared through the doorway into the living room for a minute.

“Okay.”

I heard a click on the other end, and I dropped the phone down between the four pegs above the rotary dial and turned toward the window. It looked like a TV full of static.

The sheriff never said anything like that before.

2: Pupsicles

“What’s that?” Sammy asked, pointing at Merve’s thermos. She was sitting on Merve’s lap, resting on his hunting vest full of shotgun shells. He looked like a bank robber with dynamite strapped around his belly.

“What’s what?” Merve asked.

“That green thing up there.”

“My thermos,” Merve said. His voice was rough from the pack of cigarettes he smoked each day.

Sammy reached forward and grabbed the thermos off of the dashboard, her hands not big enough to wrap around the whole thing; she wrestled it to her lap with both hands as if she were trying to manhandle a flopping catfish. She unclipped the cup from the lid and started banging it on the side of the cylinder.

“Hey,” Merve said. “You’re going to dent the cup. C’mon.” Merve pulled the thermos from her hands.

“Daddy, can I hold onto the thermos?” Sammy asked. “It keeps my hands warm.”

“Ask Merve.”

“Okay,” Merve said. He didn’t wait for her to ask, just rolled the thing into her puffy winter coat with his leathery hands.

“Any means necessary? That’s really what he said?” Merve asked.

“Not around her.” I tilted my head toward Sammy. “Wait till I drop her off.”

I wheeled the truck through a right turn, blew past a stop sign, and Shadow barked in the back.

“Shadow!” I screamed. My fist pounded against the back window behind my head “Shut up!” She’d been barking all morning.

“Daddy, whose dog is that?”

It was the second time that week Merve and I found Mrs. Valier’s Labrador, Shadow, rummaging through the garbage near the nursing home.

“Mrs. Valier’s,” I said, “and no, we can’t keep him.”

“Why?!” Sammy asked.

“We go over this every time I bring a dog home. I can’t have pets in the apartment.”

Sammy sat with her arms folded, the hair on her head rubbing against Merve’s massive beard. She lost interest in the thermos since the dog started whimpering in the back. I always picked up Merve before I dropped off Sammy because he was her car-seat. I lost the old one a few months before and couldn’t afford a new one.

“No, noo,” Merve said to Sammy. He grabbed the thermos just before she put the spout to her mouth. She had unscrewed the lid and was going to take a sip. “You need seven years worth of hair on your chest to take of drink of that.”

“But I’m a girl. I don’t get hair on my chest.”

“Well then, you need it other places,” Merve said.

“Jesus Christ,” I mumbled. “You are a sick man.”

The truck bounced and the leather dog muzzles hanging in the back bobbed like punching bags.

“Wonder where her pups are?” Merve asked.

“Whose pups?” Sammy asked. “Daddy, are we getting puppies?”

“Probably froze last night,” I said.

“Who?” Sammy asked. “Daddy, the puppies didn’t freeze, did they?”

“No, something else. Nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

“Boy, her tits were raw,” Merve said.

“What froze daddy?” Sammy was grabbing my coat sleeve.

“Shadow!” I shouted. Her whining stopped.

“So you think they froze, huh?” Merve asked.

“Probably. We’re lucky she didn’t freeze. I left her in the back all night.”

Mmmm... Popsicles,” Merve said.

“Popsicles?” Sammy asked.

3: The First Baptist Church’s Worst Nightmare

Miss Setland stood outside in a short-sleeved blouse and a black dress, starched so stiff the wind couldn’t budge it. She watched my truck roll up into the parking lot with her hands on her hips and a bulldog frown. Her hair was dyed red with streaks of grey peeking through.

We pulled up to the stairs and I got out to walk Sammy to the door. I heard Merve’s door open and close, and I turned around to make sure he wasn’t trying anything stupid. He was.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Going with you.”

I turned around to see Miss Setland standing stern.

I looked back at Merve and tried to sound pleasant for the scarecrow on the steps staring at me.

“Get. In. The. Truck. Merve.”

“Daddy, c’mon.” Sammy’s hand pulled me toward the door.

I looked at Merve the way I might look at a serial rapist--the same way Setland always looked at me. His door opened and shut again, and the sound of Miss Setland’s voice screeched like a train brake strangling a rusty wheel. It made my neck tighten.

“You’re late again, Mr. Kent.”

“Yeah, I had to pick up Merve and....”

“Never mind,” she said, her hand up in a half-hail to an invisible Hitler. “I hate excuses.” She grabbed Sammy’s hand and yanked her inside away from the cold. I heard Shadow barking from the kennel behind me.

“Shadow! Goddamit!” I screamed toward the truck.

“Mr. Chandler!”

My testicles sucked into my stomach. My guts turned to dry ice. I swung around and saw the door still open. Twenty little preschoolers stood in the hallway with their scarves and coats and mittens half removed. They were frozen; their mouths open like fifty little black holes in outer space.

Miss Setland threw Sammy behind her and said, “If you ever use the lord’s name in vain again... and in a house of God, of all places! I should have you arrested... all the things you’ve put this poor little girl through....”

“Well, really...I was on the stoop,” I said.

She sucked the last part of her sentence back into her mouth, “What?”

“Nothing,” I said.

“What did you say to me?”

I grabbed the glass door as Setland opened her mouth for another rant. I pushed it closed, muffling the voice of the evangelical bitch. I walked back to my truck, a three-quarter-ton Silverado I had since ’72, with its long side view mirrors. Merve called it ‘The Elephant’ since it was primer grey and had two silver mirrors that stuck out like huge ears on both sides; the box kennels in the back sat flush with the top of the cab, completing the thick body of my elephant-mobile.

I huddled back inside with Merve and could feel the rust-eaten exhaust shaking through my seat.

“Why couldn’t I go up with you?” Merve asked.

“Are you fucking crazy? You try that shit everyday. All you want to do is piss her off.”

“That’s all I did when she was my teacher. Why stop now?”

I stared in the rearview at the four dog kennels, the net, a dozen dangling dog muzzles, log chains, and a few hundred feet of rope. In the cab of my truck there was a tranquilizer-dart gun resting near the stick shift against the cushioned seat and a .270 rifle behind the back rest. Merve’s Remington 16 gauge sat in the gun rack hanging over the back window.

I grabbed my temple with my right hand. “Jesus.”

Merve shifted and rested his left arm on the back of the bench seat so his gut was pointing at me. I looked up. The stocking hat on his head looked like a piece of river trash clinging to a hairy rock, his beard hair holding hands with the hair that jutted out from under his shirt collar. He let out a short burp, and I caught a wisp of whiskey.

“At all costs, huh?” Merve asked.

“That’s what the sheriff said.”

Merve pulled out a shell for the Remington from his hunting vest. “What’s this fall under?”

“I would say the all category.”

He shifted back, facing forward, silent and pondering the possibilities of today. I stared out the bug covered windshield with him toward the church where we dropped off Sammy.

“Sheriff never said that before,” he said.

Shadow started up again, but I was silent.

4: Ice

“Stop breathing,” I said. “You’re fogging up the windows.”

“You stop breathing,” Merve said. He took a long swig from his cup and shook his thermos. “Wait. Pull in the gas station here. My coffee is gone. I want some iced tea.”

“Merve, it’s fucking January. I can see my breath inside the truck for Christ’s sake. They’re not going to have any iced tea brewed.”

“Pull over.”

I pulled in and Merve got out with his thermos under his arm. I grabbed a wrinkled bag of Red Man chew and tore apart the flaps to see if there was any in it. There wasn’t. I pulled the handle on the door and threw my body into its armrest; the door squeaked open. I grabbed the truck’s ashtray filled with Merve’s old cigarettes. It was overflowing with bent butts

and ash that spilled to the floor whenever I hit a bump. Merve came walking out of the store, neither of his boots buckled by a single clip, and we both got in the truck, our doors slamming like two gunshots.

“They didn’t have any, did they?” I said, shifting out of neutral.

“No. I filled my thermos full of ice instead. That’s all I really wanted, God damn it, some ice.” He always chomped on ice because he wanted to quit smoking. He’d chew through a thermos full of ice by nine-o-clock each morning and then start smashing smoked butts into the ashtray by ten. We got onto the street, and he poured some Canadian Club from a marred flask he carried in the breast pocket of his trench coat. He had a full bottle under the seat that rolled back and forth through every turn.

We headed down to the main drag where all the high-schoolers cruised at night, Merve chomping, me driving. It wasn’t long until we crossed over the river. The park was on our left, so I slowed the truck, and our heads ducked down between the dashboard and the ceiling of the truck like two suspicious soldiers in a sentry box. This was Lab territory.

5: Rita and Her Barking Alarm Clock

Spotting the Black Lab in the snow was like seeing a light in the dark, only the opposite. He always came around for a few days, and I’d go chase him with my tranquilizer gun from the bed of my truck while Merve smoked and worked the wheel.

Merve was thinking about cigarettes. I could tell by the way he was chomping.

Through a mouth full of ice he said, “He’s going to do what he does every time.”

“Yeah, but this time the river is frozen over.”

“Shit,” he crunched.” I never even thought about it.”

I pointed to my head and said, “Leave the brainwork to me.”

Some of the park residents peeked through curtains.

“I don’t know why we didn’t kill the son of a bitch last year,” Merve said. “He hasn’t done nothing but piss people off.”

“People would be all over our ass for killing that dog.”

“Who?”

“Well, McKenzie for one, but he’s sick of the son of a bitch. Now we have a license to kill,” I said. It stopped snowing, but the lawns were white. The snowplows had come through and left dirty piles of snow along the road making them look like shit covered sheets.

“Here.” I took a sharp right onto an off-street and pulled up next to a yellow house with white trim. “You get out,” I said. “Go talk to Rita.”

“Why? She don’t know shit about the Black Lab.”

“She knows everything that’s going on.” And she did. She owned three police scanners and a C.B. radio her son programmed so she could listen to the cops’ conversations. That was all she did, her and her little Shitzu.

Merve made a few noises, leaving without his thermos. I took a swig straight from it, something he never did, and it was stronger than usual that morning, colder too, cold enough to hurt my teeth and make my ears rumble.

Merve knocked, and Rita swung open the door holding Mable, the Shitzu who sounded like a digital alarm clock and had a poof of hair above her brow, a tiara made of fur. Rita had a different hairdo for Mable every day. Rita’s hairstyle never changed, and it was the same color of white as her furry alarm clock. I laughed when I pictured Rita letting that dog out to shit in the winter. She always had trouble finding it in the snow since it blended in so well, unless the dog left little piles of shit like bread crumbs so Rita could just follow them out.

I watched the two talk for a while. Rita nodded a lot and smiled with a mouth that never stopped moving. Mable’s mouth opened every second to keep up with Rita’s, but with the windows up I couldn’t hear either one of them. Merve sort of stood there, and I imagined him cussing me in his head and wanting a cigarette. I took another swig straight from the ther-

mos. It was cold in my mouth and warm in my stomach. This was payback for Merve's preschool scene. Merve rubbed his eyes with a slow hand. Rita's mouth maintained its speed, and the whiskey made me feel like a warm spot in a cold lake.

Rita set the dog down in the snow. It disappeared in the white and became a shadow with a dangling pink tongue. Merve sidled up the sidewalk as Rita kept talking. Mable followed Merve to the truck, barking. The door creaked open.

"Yeah, sure thing, Rita," Merve said.

"...and don't forget about me when your tomatoes are ripe this summer," she said from her cement stoop outside her door. "C'mere Mable!"

"It's ten below zero," Merve said, slamming the door shut. "And that stupid bitch is thinking about tomatoes." My motor revved and drowned out Mable's yelps.

"What'd she say?"

"What do you mean, 'What'd she say?'" She talked for ten minutes and didn't say a thing.

"She had to have said something. Did you even ask her about the dog?"

"Yeah I asked her; she said the thing got into her garbage like the bastard always does."

"Did she say what was in her garbage?"

"I don't know—some box of movies or something. They were her ex-husbands."

"There you go," I said.

"Where I go?"

6: The Black Lab's Hobby

That bastard could string out a heap of trash that made a city block look like the floor of a frat house after a long weekend. I don't know if he ate the trash or if it was a hobby of his, but he always did it and was good at what he did.

“Keep your eyes open for movies,” I said. “They’ll be everywhere.”

We were going fifteen in thirty five, looking in the deep ditches on both sides of the road for pieces of cassettes and black tape.

“There,” Merve said, “in the ditch. What’s that?”

I wheeled the truck to the side of the road and turned on my hazards. Merve squeaked the door open and jumped into the ditch.

“God damn it!” I heard him say as his whole body disappeared below the white embankment. I sat up against the steering wheel to watch him slide down on his side into the bottom of the ditch. “Son of a bitching ditch,” he said.

I laughed a little, but not loud enough so Merve could hear me. “So what is it?” I asked.

Merve grabbed the black VHS and held it up to his face, then pushed it back with his arm extended. “Anal Annie and the Backdoor Housewives,” he said.

I turned and looked out the windshield, resting my arm on the steering wheel, then looked back down in the ditch at Merve who stood still, staring at the black box and nodding his head.

“Good pick,” he said. He looked down the ditch at what remained of Anal Annie. The tape was strewn about in the snow like a thirty-foot long dead snake shining in the sun. There was another VHS up ahead. Merve’s feet crunched up to the box and examined it like the other.

“Oh, Bat Pussy!”

“Jesus Christ, Merve, you don’t have to yell.” I looked at the houses on the other side of the ditch as I drove on the shoulder of the road with the passenger door open.

“This is a classic.” He turned it over in his hand and lifted the flap over the reels. “Shit, there’s nothing wrong with it either, a few bite marks, but it looks pretty good to me.” He opened up his jacket and slipped it inside.

“Come on,” I said. “I’m getting cold.”

Merve scurried up the side of the bank.

“The tape goes around the corner up there,” he said, pointing around a turn on the right that looped around some old apartments. We were on the edge of town where the soccer field sat across from the high-school football field. I turned the truck to the right and drove past the apartments to some storage sheds, following the broken bits of black cassette and strings of tape around the storage units. It sat in the white snow, obvious but in no particular direction, just scattered as if the Lab drug the box here taking a tape out every now and then and ripping it to shreds whenever he felt like it.

“Let me out,” Merve said as I pulled up to the sheds. Tapes were everywhere, and I knew he wanted to scope out any that might play in his VCR.

I opened my door too and started looking at the tapes; none were really fit to watch or even read for that matter. They were torn to shreds. Merve picked one up.

“What’s that one?” I asked.

“Boy Meats Boy,” he said. “M-E-A-T.”

“Have you seen that one?” I asked.

“Can’t say that I have.”

7: City Workers

I walked around to the far end of the storage lot. Black shards of plastic and snow crunched under my steps. The Lab had strung out a river of porn into the field that bordered the city limits of the town, and there, in the middle of the field, was a speck of black sitting on the horizon. Against the white sky it looked the way the pieces of black plastic did against the snow. I waited with my breath visible in the air, shooting out of my nostrils.

“Hey, Kent,” Merve said. “The new Big Busty!”

“Shut up,” I yelled. I waited to see if the black speck in the field started to move. It was only a pile of porn for all I knew, but I wasn’t taking chances.

“What is it?” Merve asked.

I turned around, “Merve, shut the fuck up for a second, will you?” I spun back around and put my hand over my eyes. “I’m not losing my cut because you’re too cheap to buy your own porn.” I could hear Merve crunching up behind me.

“That’s him,” he said. He started running back to the truck.

“How do you know?” I asked, but I forgot who I was talking to right when I said it. Merve had the best sight out of anyone I knew. The two strangest things about him were his sight and his ability to play volleyball so well, and like everything else Merve did, he wore boots to play. But he was good.

“Trust me,” he said. “Where’s the dart gun?”

“Fuck that dart gun. Remember what happened last time?” I said. I shot the Black Lab once with our CO₂ tranquilizer rifle in the back right leg. It didn’t faze him. He just didn’t use that leg and still ran as fast as usual. “It’s different now. Any means necessary,” I said, grabbing the door and pulling it shut. I shifted out of neutral, straight into second, driving past the sheds onto a road next to the field.

Shadow had been asleep in the back for an hour. It warmed up to about thirty degrees, and there was some hay in the kennel for her to keep warm. She woke back up once we started bouncing down the road, though. Whines came in the cab as the motor revved louder; we got closer and closer to the Lab, not yet close enough for it to hear the motor and start running. Merve took out his thermos and poured some of his mix into his cup, the cab rumbling and bouncing as the tires fell into holes, but he kept pouring like a flight attendant through turbulence.

Merve emptied the cup into his mouth with a single tilt back of his head, crunching on the last little pieces, and then took a pack of Camels from the inside of his trench coat, stuck one in his mouth, and set the end on fire. The black speck on the horizon moved. He was sitting down near his pile of porn, tearing up the tapes, but now that we were approaching, his head shot up. He stood up and turned to bolt to the river as my truck

smoked down the road. We tore into the snow bank between the road and the field.

I could see Merve out of the corner of my eye, his cigarette sticking out from his bearded face, filling the truck with smoke. He was slipping shells out from his vest and sliding them into the 16 gauge. He rolled his window down, and the smell of smoke was gone with the first sound of the rushing air.

I stared at Merve as he rolled over with his knees on the bench seat so he could stick his head out of the window. I ass was pointing toward me with the top inch or so of his butt-crack poking out from his jeans, a hairy coin slot on a gumball machine.

“Merve, what the hell are you doing?”

“All you got to do is pull up alongside him,” he shouted. He worked his gut through the window, and the jostling truck made his body sway from side to side. He blocked out the light like a grunting eclipse. Every time we hit a bump his shoulders banged against the cab’s ceiling.

He made it out and was sitting in the window with his left shoulder tucked under the top of the door. He hoisted the gun to his right shoulder. He was a big black bear smoking a cigarette and holding a shotgun with most of his body sitting out in the wind. His legs were going crazy in the cab.

“Hold my legs!” he shouted.

Neither of my hands left the wheel.

He wedged his shoulder tighter in between the handle on the ceiling and the top of the door frame. He didn’t have a free hand to hold onto the cab so every time we bounced he let out a nervous curse, but his gut was wedged tight in the window so I wasn’t too worried. The motor worked hard; the tires flung snow everywhere and with the wind blowing past the window I couldn’t hear anything except Shadow barking in her box from the back. Merve poked his head back in the cab.

“Who owns this field?” he asked.

“I don’t know. We’re with the city, remember?”

8: Merve's Mishap

The Lab was about four car lengths ahead of us, and with the white ground I couldn't tell where the ditches were in the field; it all blended together. Before, when we'd track down the Black Lab, we'd follow him to the river where he climbed the dike and swam across to the other side. We'd be stranded on the dike with a dart gun as accurate as a Daisy BB gun at a carnival game, and the lab would walk across the field on the opposite side into the woods. The river was frozen over, though. Granted, I wasn't going to drive the truck through the water, but I could at least run across the river now if I had to. And I didn't have to pluck him off with that stupid dart gun. I had a model .270 that could drop him at over two-hundred yards.

I was hoping I wouldn't have to cross the river. If I could get Merve close enough he could drop him with the Remington and be done with it. But as soon as I started passing up alongside the dog, I saw it coming—a ditch up ahead, dug by a farmer leading to a drainage pipe in the side of the big dike. The shadow of the little ditch's opposite side grew darker as I approached.

I whipped the wheel hard and looked over into the passenger's seat, but all I saw was Merve's boots in the air as he fell out of the window. I heard my gnarling engine and the shotgun go off once outside. Shadow yelped. The truck skidded to a stop sideways, flinging snow everywhere. I had no time to mess around. I pulled out the .270, opened the door, and left the truck running.

The Lab was half-way up the dike as I ripped the case off and threw it in the snow. I grabbed a box of bullets from the floorboard and looked to Merve. He was face up on the snow having a staring contest with sky.

"You okay?" I shouted.

"Yeah," he said without moving.

"You shoot yourself again?"

"Naw. Just fell out your fucking truck!"

It wasn't the first time.

9: The Ghost Parking Lot

The snow was loose on the dike, the brome grass dead and hard to pull on without it ripping out of the ground. In spots the snow was thigh-deep. I made it to the top and looked down. The frozen creek sat forty feet below, and the dike was covered in cars, old rusty ones with busted out headlights and no windshields—all had fallen victim to farmers with loaded guns and bored kids with rocks. The newest car down there was probably manufactured before I was born.

They were in three lines spanning down the dike for half a mile. The first two rows had the headlights pointing in the same direction, all toward me with each grill smiling, and the bottom row, the one closest to the river, sat end to end, as if parallel parked along the frozen creek. A few cars had trees growing out of the glassless windows, and there were animal nests made of dead grass and river logs sitting in the weathered seats. Every car was buried in snow up to the wheel wells.

Since the dike was in an L shape, the row closest to me sat perpendicular to the ground, headlights pointing to the sky. Snow piled up on the hoods and the hardtops of the others sitting closer to the creek on flatter ground. I don't think many people knew the cars were out there. People wanted to see these cars about as bad as they wanted to see old folks sitting outside a nursing home.

I couldn't spot him from the top of the bank. I started walking with my feet sideways so I wouldn't slip, but everything was covered in snow and slick since the brome was still standing, just dead and brown. I made it a few feet down to the first line of cars with their empty headlight sockets staring at the sky. Others sat with the trunks yawning.

I stumbled through an opening in the first line of cars where Whitey Mitchum, a fat metal scrapper with a gambling problem, had come out with his wrecker to salvage a body or two. I made it to the second row of cars and rested on the taillight of a '57 Bel Air, four-door, big boxy thing, with a baby elm for an antenna. I had the .270 slung over my shoulder.

“Merve!” I shouted.

I only heard the wind blowing across the bottoms. The creek was even frozen silent. I grabbed the back window frame with my left hand. There were bullet holes along all four doors. I kept my eyes down on the creek because the Lab would be crossing it. He was taking his time, hiding under a car body. I used the side of the Bel Air for support as I made my way downward. The dike was still pretty steep, and the snow was deep enough to bury my feet. I tried the front door of the Bel Air to see if it opened so I could use it for support, but the handle was rusted stiff. I used the butt of the .270 to break away a few shards of glass from the windshield and wrapped my arm around the frame separating the windshield from the passenger window. I took the rifle off my shoulder, resting the stock against my knee. I tripped the safety, pulled the bolt back, and slid a round into place.

I worked the trigger with my right hand, and with my left arm still wrapped around the frame, I used my left hand to grab the barrel. I didn't need to be accurate. I wanted to fire a shot and scare the son of a bitch out. I shot out the headlight of a '51 Chrysler. The glass fell to the snow, and the shot echoed down the middle of the two embankments for a ways, making a soft crack like a dumpster lid snapping shut in a heavy wind. I repeated the whole thing, hitting the ice a couple of times and watching the water shoot from under it. Little geysers bubbled up then died.

On both sides of me a parking lot full of ghost cars sat side by side like unaligned piano keys or crooked teeth. I got up into the passenger window of the Bel Air, my knees propped atop the door where the glass used to sit, and I rested the gun on the roof, letting a shot out that hit the side of a '48 Plymouth. Then I turned around with my shins on the car's snow-covered upholstery, reloaded, and shot a '52 Ford Sedan.

The Lab was under the Sedan, because when the shot hit he darted out to the creek so fast he slipped and fell on his side, cracking the ice. It made the noise of a falling tree, and he started yelping. His left paw broke the surface, and the water gushed out of the hole. The creek was four feet deep, but the ice was only a half foot thick at most.

His paw was in to where the leg bent, and once he got it out, the other paw went under. Water shot out both holes the way it had when I shot it. He shifted his weight to the left paw to pull out the right one, and both paws went under. With that, his whole body plopped into the water, and it rushed hard over the ice, pinning him up like he was a piece of trash. I didn't get a shot off—hadn't even reloaded, just watched him whimper and bark as the water rushed up and wetted his coat so it glistened leather-like.

10: The Disappearing Act

The snow gave way as soon as I stepped off the window to stand up and get a clean shot on the Lab. I was in an awkward position with my legs in the car's cab and no free hand to really aim, because my left arm was still wrapped around the frame, I wasn't expecting to fall so I couldn't hold on. The avalanche ripped me from my rusty anchor and pulled the .270 from my hand, which I rode like a skinny sled, feet first, until it hit the door of a convertible sitting parallel with the creek. There was a snow drift along the door of the car, and unlike the gun, I gathered enough momentum to ramp off the drift, flying over the side door, the busted out windshield frame, and the steering wheel. I watched them whiz underneath me as I clipped the edge of the bench seat and fell onto the ice like the Lab had, but there wasn't a cracking noise—more of a thud and the thunder of rushing water. Both my legs broke the surface of the ice. I scurried up to grab hold of the passenger door of the convertible.

I got my legs out of the water, and they were numb as hell. I looked downstream to where the Lab had fallen in, but there was nothing, just a wet hole in the ice with a few tracks around it.

No more Black Lab, which was good, but without the body, no more money, which was bad.

11: Car Climbing

Merve took his time. I called his name for fifteen minutes, and, after waiting another fifteen minutes for him to run back and get some rope, I was about ready to chew my legs off.

“About damn time,” I said.

“I had trouble finding some rope,” he said. There was a cigarette between his lips.

“At least you had time to light a cigarette.”

“Priorities.”

“You’re a fuck. You know that?”

“Jesus, I’m joking. You want me to throw this rope down or not? I could leave your ass here to freeze.” The cigarette bobbed up and down as he spoke.

“Just throw it down. This is serious. My legs are numb, God damn it.”

He dropped the bundle of rope to the snow, stepped on the end, and threw the bundle down to me. It unraveled in the air, and it landed a few feet from me. Merve took his end in both hands, wrapping it around his arm a few times. I tied the rope around my right wrist and kept my left hand free to navigate over the car bodies. With the .270 over my shoulder, Merve started hoisting me up foot by foot, stopping every now and then whenever I hollered at him about my legs cramping. I made it to the last line of cars, the line sitting against the embankment with their tops facing me, the empty headlights pointing toward Merve.

“Give me a minute,” I said.

Merve stopped pulling and took a long drag on his cigarette then threw the butt away.

“She’s a bitch, ain’t she?”

I bent down and rubbed my knees with my feet at awkward angles so I wouldn’t slip. I wanted to find the empty spot I came down through, but it was too far to walk with my legs the way they were. I found a crushed Volk-

swagen van sitting cockeyed. I used the empty window frames like rungs on a ladder, but it was slow-going.

I untied the rope from my wrist as the wind let up a little. The drifts in the fields still blew like sand dunes.

“You’re going to have to help me down to the truck,” I said.

“Just hold on to me,” Merve said. I wrapped my arm around his shoulders. He smelled like cigarettes, whiskey, and B.O.

“You smell like shit,” I said.

He laughed, “I can still leave your ass if that’s what you want.”

We were making our way down the dike over the bowing brome that sat heavy with snow, and I realized the truck wasn’t running.

“You turn the truck off?” I asked.

Merve looked up. “No.”

“Probably just died,” I said.

12: Like a Bloody Turd

We crossed the small ditch that had caused Merve to fly from my window. My legs had as much give as two chopsticks. Merve went ahead and put his head inside the cab to pop the hood. It clanged up a few inches, and he waddled to the front and undid the safety latch above the grill. I made it to the truck, closing the door behind me as I sat in the driver’s seat rubbing my knees back to life.

“Sometimes you can just mess around with battery cables!” I shouted.

“What?!” He poked around the corner of the raised hood and looked at me.

The man could spot the pecker on a buck flea but he couldn’t hear a damn thing.

“Mess with the cables on the battery. Twist them around on the terminals a little!”

I heard him fiddling with the cables as the wind shook the hood. I thought it might fall onto Merve’s head, but it didn’t.

“Okay. Try it now,” Merve said.

I turned the key. It clicked like the battery had juice but didn’t turn over.

“Nothing,” I said. I sat back massaging my thighs and bobbing my legs up and down so I wouldn’t lose circulation. Merve was standing to the side of the hood, his beard blowing to the side. “There’s a wire brush in the back,” I hollered. “Unhook the cables and brush them off.”

“Wait, I found it!” Merve shouted. He was turned toward the hood. “Hold on.” He dove under the hood for a few seconds. “Try it now!”

I turned the key forward again, and the engine came to life, scaring a few birds out of the field ditch. I got out and walked to the front of the truck where Merve stood twisting the battery cables from the side so they didn’t get pinched by the hood when he closed it.

Merve was on the driver’s side messing with the cables, and I was standing near the middle of the radiator. I bent down, resting my left hand on the grill so I could bend my leg and get to my ankle. My head was close to the grill. I felt the heat from the engine.

“What was wrong?” I asked, but as soon as I did I heard the hood slam shut, and all of the pain went out of my legs into my left hand resting above the grill. I tried to scream but nothing came out. I just opened my mouth like the preschoolers when they heard me swearing. I was too paralyzed to even stand up. A little bloody turd plopped into the snow below the truck. It was my still-gloved thumb that miraculously trickled down like a marble in a game of Ker-Plunk through the maze of electrical wiring between the block, the battery, and the radiator with all its hoses.

“What?” Merve asked. “What is...? Oh shit!”

We both looked to the grill where my blood was running down the chrome, gushing out and making the Chevy symbol an island in a sea of red.

Merve ran to the cab. “Fuck, Kent. Jesus, I’m sorry,” he said, repeating the phrase over and over. “Fuck, Kent. Jesus, I’m sorry. I’m really sorry.”

“Shut the fuck up and open the hood you bastard.” My thumb-less hand was pinched under the hood, a mouse in a mousetrap.

The hood popped up. Merve came to the front of the truck and fumbled with the latch.

“Shit,” Merve said, looking up at me, “I can’t get to the latch your hand’s in the way.”

“I figured that!” I said. “What the fuck do you want me to do about it?”

“Okay, okay, it might take me a minute.”

Merve worked around my hand, trying to finagle the latch. He got the latch undone and ran back to the cab only to come back a few seconds later with an old roll of duct tape from the glove box. I held up my shaking hand, blood pumping out with each of my heartbeats forming a puddle in the snow. Merve wrapped it in an oil rag, keeping pressure on it with his right hand and holding the roll of duct tape with the left.

“Does your thumb hurt?” he asked.

“I wouldn’t know. It’s in the snow.”

“I mean your hand. Does your *hand* hurt?”

“Yeah,” I said, “it hurts.”

He ripped a long strip away from the rest of the roll, wrapping the oil rag tight around my glove as blood dripped down my hand. Merve wrapped up my hand tighter and tighter until I had a mummy head for a hand, and the blood stopped dripping.

“You got to keep a lot of pressure on it. Keep it above your heart too.”

“What are you, a doctor?” I asked.

“I saw it on TV. RICE. Rest, Ice, Compression, Elevation.”

“Jesus Christ.”

“Where’s your thumb? We got to get it on ice.”

“Did you see that on TV too?”

“No, my uncle lost his pointer finger in a combine. Doctor said he could have sewn it back on if he’d have got it on ice,” Merve laughed. “It

went through the combine and shot out the back, though, so there wasn't nothing to put on ice by the time it was all over."

"I think it's under the truck," I said.

Merve went to the cab again, throwing the duct tape in the middle of the seat and grabbing his thermos. He unscrewed the lid and drank what was left in it, and I got in the cab to sit down in the passenger seat. Merve jumped in with his thermos full of snow.

"Where is it?" I asked.

"It's in there," he said, plopping the snow-filled thermos into the cup holder on the middle of the floorboard behind the shifter. There was a speck of my blood sitting near the rim of the thermos. I reached under the seat to grab the glass bottle of Canadian Club and stuck it between my knees so I could screw off the cap with my right hand, the one with the privilege of still having a thumb on it.

13: I Need My Thumb Sewed Back On

Merve shook the shifter back and forth until it finally budged into reverse. Once we were out of the field, back on the snow-covered road running past the storage sheds with the porn still scattered around it, Merve put it in fifth and went seventy-five all the way into town. Four stop lights sat on the main drag, and all of them were red of course. We sat in the cab looking around at the parked cars on Main Street and the people walking all bundled up with their breaths shooting out from the slits between their scarves and hats. We didn't have much to talk about.

"It hurt?" Merve asked.

"Yep."

The gears were grinding as Merve downshifted through the parking lot and parked in a handicap spot while a woman came out waving her arms.

"You can't park there," she said. "That's a handicap spot."

"I need my thumb sewed back on."

“Well, you’ll have to move your truck.”

“Merve, move my truck,” I said. I walked past her, through the automatic doors without looking back. Merve was twenty feet behind me gathering things from the inside of my truck as the woman yelled at him.

I went up to the waiting room window and rested my mummy-head hand on some pieces of laminated paper taped to the counter.

“How do I get to the emergency room?” I said to the front desk woman.

“One moment, sir” she said. She wheeled her desk chair away from me and put a piece of paper in a filing cabinet then wheeled back and looked up at me smiling. “I’m sorry, what did you say?”

“Where’s the emergency room? I need my thumb sewed back on.”

“Excuse me?”

Merve walked in. “They want the truck moved.”

“I need my thumb sewed back on,” I said to no one in particular.

“What should I do about the truck?”

“Move the fucking thing!”

“Sir, this is a hospital!” the woman said. “You can’t talk like that.”

“I’m sorry, listen, my thumb is out in the truck, and I need it sewed back to my hand.”

“The truck?” she asked.

“My thumb is...”

Merve came back in.

“Here’s the thumb,” he said. The thermos clanged down on the counter, and some snow fell onto the laminated papers. “I moved your truck.”

The nurse stared at the thermos convinced it wasn’t a thumb. She looked at me. “Why are you all wet?”

“I fell in a creek. That’s not the point, okay? Listen to me. Get me to the emergency room.”

She picked up a phone and punched a few numbers. “What do I say?” she asked, her hand covering the receiver.

“I need my thumb sewed back on.”

She nodded and looked down at her desk waiting for someone to answer. “Is Dr. Flemming available?” she asked. “There’s a man here that needs his thumb sewed back on... Uh-huh... Sure, okay.” She looked at my duct tape ball and hung up the phone. Some blood had started soaking through. “Dr. Flemming is in the emergency room right now, but it won’t be long. We’ll have a nurse come get you in a moment to take you to the waiting room in the E.R.”

“Okay.”

“Do you have your insurance card available?”

I reached into my pocket with my right hand, threw my wallet onto the counter, and said, “It’s in there. I’d get it for you but...” I pointed to the ball of duct tape.

She grabbed my wallet. I turned around while she took out some cancelled credit cards and old receipts. Merve came back in through the door carrying a bunch of old clothes I kept stuffed behind the seat of my truck.

“What the hell are you doing?” I asked.

“Clothes.”

“For what?”

“Your stay.”

“My stay where?”

“Here.”

“Merve, all they’re going to do is sew my thumb back on.”

“Where are you going to stay?”

“My God damn apartment!”

14: Free Scrubs

A nurse took me to a green room. Every time I’d been to the hospital the walls were white, but these were green for some reason. There was a boxy bed in the middle of the room that the nurse made me stretch out

on. Stethoscopes and eye-checkers clung to the walls. Nothing moved. The lights hummed. Merve and I had been in the E.R. waiting room for ten minutes taking pulls off of the Canadian Club, making sure to hide the bottle whenever anyone walked by.

“I have your information here, Kent...,” the nurse said.

I interrupted her, “I need my thumb sewed back on, and I should probably get out of these jeans before my legs freeze off.”

I was bombed from the whiskey.

“Okay, can you stand up?”

“Where’s my thumb?” I asked.

“Nurses in the operating room are cleaning it right now, sir. We have to take a couple of X-rays of your hand first. We need to get you out of those wet clothes. It’s going to be a little while, but everything will be fine. I assure you.”

“Fair enough, just don’t mess with my thumb.”

“They’re just cleaning it, and making some adjustments so we can reattach it.”

I wasn’t listening to what she was saying so I went along with it. She thought I was delirious from the blood loss, but really I was tanked.

A nurse helped me take my shirt off while another started unwrapping the huge ball of tape around my hand. A third nurse came in as another undid my pants.

“Does this surgery come with a happy ending?” I asked.

The nurses were too busy to pay attention.

“You can lay back down,” one said. They slipped a pair of scrubs on me; more and more nurses poured into the room, hooking up I.V.’s, leaving, coming back, sticking needles in my arms, putting things on my chest, messing with monitors, others were at my feet wrapping me up in blankets... I wasn’t even that cold.

“We have to get you warm to increase blood flow. It makes the surgery go smoother.”

“We have to give you a tetanus shot. It may hurt a little.”

“This is an I.V. we’re starting you on antibiotics.”

A man parted the sea of scrub-wearing nurses. “Hello,” he said. “My name is Dr. Flemming. How are you feeling?”

“Great. How’s my thumb?”

“Uh...” the doctor looked around at the nurses; they were too busy to look back. “I assume it’s just fine.” He shook his head a little and took a stethoscope off his neck. He had a line of questions for me, and I answered ‘no’ to all of them, including, “Have you drank any alcohol in the last 48 hours?”

I wasn’t going to let a little Canadian Club get in the way of me being reunited with my thumb.

15: Fry Cook Sympathy (Five Hours Later)

My apartment sat above a burger joint called *Jo’s Place*. It was right along the highway, so it was always full of truckers from all over the U.S. The smell of tenderloins was so strong in the place that every night up in my little rented home I would dream about greasy food all night. I’d be in the dipper basket they always threw the French fries in like some deep sea diver in one of those shark cages they film sharks from, but instead of sharks swimming everywhere, there’d be fries larger than me sizzling to a crisp. Then I’d wake up in the middle of the night wishing the place was open.

The entire time they put me under I dreamt of Jo’s food while two doctors sat over my thumb for three hours like two Neanderthals huddling over a fire, or so I guessed. Like I said, I was too busy riding on French fries down a river of ketchup to know what was going on in the O.R. The doctors wanted me to stay over night so they could monitor me, but besides being groggy and a little hung over, I didn’t feel too bad. And there was no way I was going to eat hospital food over the food I’d been dreaming about for three hours while they put my thumb back in its place.

I didn't want to see Jo though because I knew all he'd want was rent money. It didn't matter if I just had my thumb sewed back on. He was going to bitch like a vegetarian to a butcher.

"Just drop me off out front of the restaurant," I told the hospital's chauffer.

"Okay."

I didn't give a shit about Jo...let him bitch. I wanted greasy food. I opened the truck's door and stepped into the snow. The chauffer got out as if I needed help and sort of awkwardly helped me by grabbing my good arm and walking with me for a few steps.

"I got it from here, buddy," I said.

"Okay," he said. "Here you go." He handed me a sack full of my wet clothes.

"Am I supposed to tip you or something?" I asked.

"No," he laughed. "The hospital takes care of it."

"Good. It'd probably take me two years to dig out my wallet."

I cursed the bell for dinging as I opened the door because no one was in the place except Jo and a high school-aged waitress who was watching a TV that hung in the corner of the dining room. She didn't turn around, but Jo didn't have anything better to do than listen to that stupid bell and watch for whoever came in.

Jo's huge head poked around the corner. "Kent!" he said. "Rent's due!"

"Yeah," I said. "It might be a few days. I got in an accident today."

He was banging around in the kitchen, wearing his apron covered in splotches of grease that reminded me of the liver spots on his head.

"What happened?" I heard the clicking of the stove's dial as he tried to fire it up.

"Merve cut my thumb off."

He turned around. I stood near the door and held up my bandaged hand.

"Next week'll work," he said, turning back to the stove.

Prick.

16: Alone, Eating

I was the only costumer in the dining room. It was still early. The crowd didn't come until six-thirty. I was eating a tenderloin sandwich with a patty as big as a boogie-board. I cut off the edges of the patty so it fit under the bun so I could pick it up with my good hand. It was the first time I'd been alone all day. Well, I guess there was the high school waitress sitting with her mouth open and her head tilted back staring at the TV, but she didn't count.

My thumb had been alone longer than I had that day.

I sat the sandwich down with my right hand, then dipped a bundle of fries in the ketchup with the same hand of course, lifted up the sandwich, and repeated it all over until the plate was covered in only a couple of streaks of ketchup and the lettuce I'd asked the waitress not to put on my sandwich. My hand hurt once my empty stomach was taken care of.

A light was on outside the door, and Jo's neon sign flashed above the entrance. It was supposed to snow again later. A ceiling fan spun above me, making the ripped plastic bracelet with my name on it wiggle on the table. I still had my green scrubs on and was sure my ass crack was showing, but like I said, the place was empty.

17: The End, I Guess

Merve brought Sammy home in my truck. I told him to take her to his house after he picked her up from preschool because I didn't want her to see me up at the hospital lying in a bed hung over from the Canadian Club and anesthesia. Before one of his girlfriends picked him up Merve told me of his bout with Miss Setland and how she wasn't interested in taking home any of the movies we'd found that day.

"I was only being charitable," he said. "I mean, I'm probably not going to watch Boy Meats Boy, to tell you the truth."

Sammy and I walked up the stairs to my apartment.

“Daddy,” she said. “What happened to your thumb? Merve wouldn’t tell.”

“That’s because it was his fault.”

I opened the door and took off my coat and hung it on the wall. There was a washer and dryer in the back, and I put my dank clothes from earlier into the washer without starting it. I sat down on the couch that had been in the place when we moved in, and Sammy went into her room with her Barbie backpack still over her puffy coat. The TV was on because it was never turned off, and there was a commercial with a brown Dachshund eating from a bowl of food with an older woman and a couple of kids over the dog’s shoulder smiling and petting it because the right dog food brings happiness to the whole family. I un-muted the sound and started flipping through channels when a knock came at the door.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“Sheriff McKenzie.”

“Fuck,” I said to myself as I stood up. He wasn’t going to pay my ass without a dead or sedated dog. Maybe when he saw me in the scrubs he’d at least pay for my hospital bill.

Another knock came.

“Yeah,” I said. “One second.”

I opened the door, gave McKenzie a thumbs-up and opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

“Here you go,” he said, sticking something in my hand and turning around to walk back down the steps. He apparently didn’t want to talk. I looked down at what I’d grabbed and saw it was an envelope. I lifted up the un-pasted flap and pulled out a check for two-hundred dollars.

“Nice work,” he said, as his foot stepped from the last step to the gravel below. “I was on my way back from the county courthouse, and thought I might stop by—see if you got him.”

It was snowing and I didn't have any shoes on, but I started walking down the stairs not knowing what was going on, not stupid enough to question the two-hundred dollars in my hand.

"You find it?" I said "The dog, I mean?" My feet were cold.

McKenzie looked at me strange. "Yeah...?" he said. It was more of a question than a response. "In the back of your truck...?"

I looked at the kennels in the back of my truck where Shadow had been all day and tried not to say anything once I saw the holes from where Merve had shot off his Remington when he fell out of the truck.

"Oh," I said, still staring at the kennels. "Yeah. The...uh, back of the truck, there."

McKenzie was standing at the driver's side of his patrol car with the door open and his body almost in, looking up at me as I stood halfway up the staircase.

"Everybody down at the station thought he was a boy. Guess not, huh?" he said. He chuckled and climbed inside his car, slamming the door before I said anything. I heard the wind blowing between the wooden steps underneath me.

"Yeah, guess not," I said to no one, forcing out a laugh the way a guy might force out a cough to get a chicken bone out of his throat. I watched the patrol car as it pulled out onto the highway through the sideways-falling snow, waving my blood-blotched-bandaged-up hand without realizing it, even after the taillights had long disappeared.

I walked back inside, staring at the envelope in my hand, and found Sammy holding to phone up to her ear.

"What are you doing?" I asked

"It's Merve," she said. She took the receiver away from her face and handed it to me; I put the envelope on the table.

"Yeah?" I asked, putting the phone up to my ear.

"Kent?"

"What?"

"There is trash all over Main Street."

The End of *Stick Man and Hat Head*: The Comic Drawn Almost Daily During Mr. Ryan’s Sixth Grade Science Class Period 4

Shellie Zacharia

Stick Man is really cool even though he’s sort of quiet and only a stick figure (*Ha ha to Mrs. Garcia the art teacher who says, “Sam, stick figures need clothes.”*). Usually Stick Man’s arms are down. Sometimes he is trying to make a point, and then his stick arms stick (*Ha!*) straight out to the sides, or straight up in the air in a V like he is a cheerleader (*Mindi, who sits in front of Sam, is a cheerleader. She’s nice! She plays piano!*).

Hat Head is Stick Man’s arch enemy. Hat Head is not cool. He’s a jerk (*just like Henry in the second row*). He looks very much like Stick Man, except Hat Head wears a hat, which is actually a rectangle topped by a small square. Usually the comic is about Stick Man and Hat Head fighting with swords or doing somersaults and backflips like ninjas or doing karate chops that mean karate chops because one stick arm is up and one is down and there’s a messy “Ha-yah!!!” with three exclamation points in a word balloon (*“Neatness counts,” Mrs. Denny always says with a sigh during essay time*). Sometimes Stick Man and Hat Head fence with foils too, and then they shout things like, “Touche!” and “Epee!” and other terms learned at the Elite Fencing Academy on Archer Road on Thursday afternoons.

One day (*while Mr. Ryan talks about igneous rocks*) Stick Man is in another fencing duel with Hat Head when Mindi turns around and smiles. When she turns back, Stick Man knocks Hat Head’s hat to the ground with his foil. Without his hat, Hat Head’s head falls off. It rolls and tumbles (*The idea for a*

flip book is born). Stick Man says, “Ha! Ha! Ha!” and Hat Head’s head says, “Argh” and Hat Head’s head closes its eyes into x’s and sticks out its oval tongue. Stick Man knows Hat Head will try to return with his head glued back on because Hat Head always returns for more ass-kicking. But Stick Man is ready. When Hat Head creeps back, stick arms struggling to hold his head on, Stick Man gives him a WHACK! CLONK! And with one big kick to the stick solar plexus, THUMP, Hat Head’s head and body fly off the page. Out of the picture. “That’s the real end of you,” Stick Man says. Mindi turns around and asks for a pencil. Stick Man raises his arms in a V for victory.

Into the River

Molly Maslin Arbogast

Nora wakes up gagging and coughing a strangled scream. She throws off the covers, disentangling her feet from the sheet, and sits up on the edge of her bed, panting and bathed in sweat. The same dream again. *She swims streamlined, like a dolphin, twisting and slicing through the water, radiating bliss.* After a moment, she takes in her surroundings. Sunlight peeks in around the shades. *Descending deeper, then flipping upward, she finds her legs tangled in the watersheds.* Paul is in the shower. Celia's alarm blares angry rap music from down the hall. *Struggling to break free of the weeds, she feels the temperature climbing. She claws at her legs, to no avail. The cool green waters turn from rust to red. The river is coming to a boil.* Shaking off the dream, Nora goes to the window and looks down to the river. Its surface ripples with the undercurrent. She bows her forehead to the windowpane and catches her breath.

Moments later Nora scrambles to get breakfast on the table so that she can get her family out of the house. There is weighty silence as she and Paul eat side by side at the kitchen table, him reading the newspaper, her gazing out the picture window to the blossoming trees along the river, the tip of their dock thrusting out from the shore. It was that dock, more than the land, more than the river itself that sold Nora on this property. Paul laughed at her at the time. "We can build a dock on any pad of the river," he had said, but she liked the feel of the weathered, uneven planks. She wanted to walk it every day for her swim.

Celia comes downstairs, looking as if she never washed off her make-up from yesterday, dark raccoon circles around her eyes. Her clothes are rumpled and too tight. She slumps on a stool at the kitchen bar, away from her parents.

“G’mornin’ sweetie.” Nora says. “How about some breakfast.”

“No.” Celia yawns.

“Really Cel, you know what they say. Your brain will work much better if you eat.”

“Whatever Mom. I’m not hungry, OK?”

Nora is cautious of pushing her away. She’d rather not start the day that way.

“Well, there’s some smoothie in the fridge. How about if I put it in a bottle to go?”

“Yeah, whatever. If it’ll make your day.”

“Sure will. You’re welcome.”

Paul, returning from brushing his teeth, snatches up his briefcase. “Let’s go, kiddo.”

Celia doesn’t budge. Her head is downturned. Paul stands halfway to the door, tossing and catching his keys. “Celia. Now.”

“OK, OK. Jeez.” Celia shifts and puts one foot on the floor, but her focus is still downward. Nora brings the smoothie from the refrigerator around the end of the bar and sees Celia’s cellphone in her hands, thumbs moving rapidly over the keys.

“Cel, you can do that in the car. Time to go,” she says, hoping to thwart an argument.

Suddenly, Paul is baring down on Celia. Nora jumps out of her chair and moves to intercede. “Give me the phone,” Paul growls.

“Dad, that is so unfair,” Celia cries.

“Paul, wait.” Nora takes his arm, trying to calm him. “Why don’t we deal with this tonight?” She turns to Celia. “Honey, it’s time to go. You can send your messages later.”

Celia looks from her mom to her dad, then drags herself off of the stool and storms past them both, out the front door. Paul looks at Nora, rolls his eyes and shakes his head. “If it’s that creep she’s seeing...”

Nora cuts him off. “We don’t know that he’s a creep, Paul.”

“Well, as long as he won’t come meet us I get to assume that. He shouldn’t be hanging around a girl her age, anyway.”

“Maybe we should all sit down tonight and talk about it. We’ve given her enough space on this issue, don’t you think?”

“Yeah, we’ll see.” Paul leans in, grazing Nora’s cheek with a kiss, and then he’s out the door and the house echoes with their absence.

Once they are gone Nora has a moment to think. She tries to clear her mind of Celia and her new boyfriend. He’s out of high school, which makes him at least two years older. But is that too old? Nora dated older guys at that age, and Paul is seven years older than her.

Before long her mind has strayed from this troublesome topic. A spring morning at the kitchen table, the sun slanting in to warm her back, her chair angled so she can take in the view; this is perfection. Starting to consider her morning swim, the tranquil silence is shattered by the ring of the phone. It is Paul on his cellphone. “Speaking of tonight, what’s your plan for dinner?” he asks by way of greeting.

“Is this a proposition?”

“No, Nora. What are you planning to serve – hey Celia, turn down the radio – what are you serving our guests?”

Nora quickly scans her memory feeling the flush of heat that comes with these moments of panic. She kicks off her slippers. Guests? They’re having guests?

“Nora, hello?”

Nora checks the calendar just to be sure that she hasn’t lost her mind. Tonight is blank, as are tomorrow and Sunday. “I don’t have anything on the calendar. I really don’t know what you’re talking about. But I’ve got students today. I’m not sure what I can pull together -”

“Jesus, Nora! I told you about this a month ago!”

“A month is a long time, Paul. But since it’s not on the calendar, it’s kind of hard to plan for. A reminder would have helped.”

“Yeah, like when I mentioned it last week?”

“You did? Crap, I’m sorry, I really don’t remember. When?”

“Christ, I don’t know, Sunday or Monday night. You said you were ‘on it’ whatever that means. So, are you ‘on it?’”

The memory trickles into Nora’s consciousness. “Oh yes, of course, one of those nudges as I’m drifting off to sleep that I’m supposed to file away in my mind’s day planner. I’ve told you that you need to write that stuff down—”

“Nora, I need to know that you’ll take care of this. I need this night to go as smoothly as possible – damn it Celia, the radio!”

Nora fights the temptation to hang up the phone. She would like to leave Paul to his own problems. But she can’t make this problem his alone because apparently there will be guests arriving at their house this evening expecting to be fed, and, if she plans to live peacefully under the same roof as Paul, she should probably try to help. She closes her eyes and takes a deep shuddering breath. “Paul, I don’t remember you telling me about tonight, and since it’s not on the calendar... You have to write these things down. I can’t be expected to remember every little event...”

“Little event? Nora, this is the Harper account. This is our future, what I’ve been working for for the past seven years. This isn’t little, and it most certainly is memorable.”

“Yeah, OK. My bad. What time are they coming? Are they vegetarians? Do they drink wine? Will a frozen pizza offend? I’ll have dinner, Paul. You know I will. I always do. Just do me a favor, OK? Use the goddamned calendar.”

She hangs up the phone. Her questions are unanswered but Paul will call back later, and he can leave a message.

With an hour and a half before her first student arrives, Nora thinks about tonight, and makes plans. Appetizers are easy: some good cheeses and olives from the little French market. A green salad she can throw together, as well as some steamed asparagus. She’ll get that yummy rice

dish at the Middle Eastern restaurant, and that leaves just meat and dessert. She'll pick up fresh steaks and salmon at the butcher, toss together a marinade, and Paul can cook them on the grill. That might not be what he had in mind, which was probably more like a dazzling meal materializing behind the closed door of the kitchen. But that possibility went out when they designed the floor plan with the open kitchen – not to mention when Paul forgot to make note of this momentous occasion on the calendar.

She decides to do the shopping between students and spend the remainder of the morning cleaning house. She can't count on the guests staying in the living areas – after all, Paul is an architect. He designed this house and he'll want to show it off to them – potential clients – with close ups of closets and bathrooms. Nora silently gives thanks for the stroke of luck that had her house cleaners here just a few days ago.

She's left to do a strategic de-cluttering and vacuuming. She starts upstairs making their bed, tossing clothes in the hamper, re-hanging towels. She passes by Celia's closed door, knowing her room is hopeless and glances in Paul's office, not surprised by its tidy state. He does most of his work in town, but he has always bordered on anal – everything in its place and all that. What a refreshing change of pace it seemed when they met. Most men she knew before him, her father included, were unkempt at the very least. Paul cleaned his apartment, put away his clothes, washed his dishes. With time her personal style has become a little more cluttered. She likes to fill her home with things of beauty, whereas Paul likes to keep the landscape clean, displaying the beauty of the house he designed. This issue is one of many tugs-of-war between them.

Downstairs she hides magazines and unopened mail in the antique Japanese trunk in the entry, leaving on a side table the *Architectural Digest* with the article about Paul's design for the new convention center. She puts the majority of the potted plants out on the deck, and centers an orchid on the dining room table, having decided they'll be eating on the deck, so it won't get in the way. She waters the bonsai on the coffee table, carefully

plucking away any delicate dead branches. After wiping down the kitchen and bathroom counters and quickly running the vacuum, she is putting the finishing touches on the kitchen floor with a damp rag just as the doorbell rings. She tosses the rag in the pantry and answers the front door.

The hours with her students are the easy part of her day. She could do this with her eyes closed. Her morning sessions are with college students or with kids being home schooled. And they are serious students – or they have serious parents. They need to be serious to make the trek out to the river, paying \$75 an hour to study with her. Nora turned from a bright career as a concert pianist to teaching when Celia was born, and she never looked back. She found she had a greater gift for inspiring young and eager students than she ever did for auditioning or marketing herself. And it gave her a sense of satisfaction.

A dreamy Debussy rises up to the vaulted ceiling of the living room, and Nora's thoughts drift from her student to a cocktail reception a couple of years ago, for an artist friend. Paul spied the baby grand inauspiciously parked in the corner of the gallery. Gently taking her by the shoulders from behind, he turned her to face it. "Don't you think this night could use a shot of something?" he whispered. "Why don't you play, pull us all out of the doldrums."

"No, that wouldn't be right. This is Tony's night."

"Come on. Tony would love it. A little Bach, or Debussy – that would be the perfect complement to his work. Besides, people are starting to drift away. This might hold them here a little longer."

"No, I'm rusty. And I really don't want to distract from him."

Paul stepped back and squinted at her, seeming to look for something. "Well of course you're rusty. It's been so long since you've played. You know, I think it's time that you let your students go and get back out on the circuit. You're too good to be squandered away on a bunch of spoiled kids who may or may not amount to anything."

Nora was surprised. Paul hadn't mentioned her playing in years. He

supported her semi-retirement so that she could teach, because at the time they needed the money. She had been happy to quit, wanting to focus on her family.

“Oh, I don’t know. Seems like maybe I found my calling. I do it pretty well, and I don’t have to go on the road, which I don’t really want to do, especially while Celia’s still at home.”

“No, Babe. You’re an artist, not a teacher. You belong on the stage. I still remember the first time I saw you play. You took my breath away.”

“Yeah, well, you just had the hots for me.”

“Well sure” Paul said, as he moved in close, pressing up against Nora. “And I still do. And I’d like to have that feeling again, watching you on stage.”

Well, you’ll have to settle for the stage at home.”

Paul stepped back, as if Nora had slapped him. “What is up with you? I don’t understand why you wouldn’t want to do what you love? The piano is your career. Why settle for teaching? Anyone can do that.”

Nora started to protest, but stopped. She knew she couldn’t explain it to Paul. He was so driven in his work, and could never fathom that her passion had shifted. She was passionate about teaching, not about playing.

“I just want you to be happy, Nora,” Paul said after a long silence.

“I am.”

“You don’t seem so happy these days. I think if you get out of the house, maybe you’ll come alive again.”

Nora was confused. She should be grateful for this husband who wanted the best for her, who encouraged her career. But now she resented that he didn’t understand that she had no desire to be on stage again. It occurred to her then that she was unhappy, except when she was teaching.

“Would you rather I played? Would that make *you* happier?” she asked, considering that he might prefer a concert pianist wife to a piano teacher wife. It sounded more glamorous – a more fitting match to an architect embarking on a solo career.

“Of course I would,” he said, moving in to her again and wrapping her in his arms. “I want to see you shine.”

That was the first inkling Nora had of how little Paul understood her at all.

With three hours between her morning and afternoon students, Nora heads into town to shop for dinner. She finds everything she needs and remembers to buy a rhubarb and strawberry pie from the bakery. Waiting for her pie to be boxed, her gaze lands on a sunny table in the front window. The memory of a little girl with strawberry curls sitting at the table, frosting smeared on her cheeks, is so vivid she catches her breath. Paul, Nora and Celia used to come downtown frequently before they built their house on the river. The bakery was a favorite stop as they wandered the shops, or headed to the park. There they would sit, all three scrunched into the window seat, soaking up the morning sun. It's hard to believe that at one time Celia would cast her limber little body over Nora and Paul's laps, letting them run their fingers through her hair. Nora remembers resting her head on Paul's shoulder, remembers him nuzzling her head, planting a kiss in her hair. Standing here now she feels a swelling of her head and a stinging in her eyes, as if in response to that very kiss.

"Will there be anything else, ma'am?"

Nora snaps out of the sweet memory. She pays for the pie and turns to leave the shop, then stops. She stands thinking. She hasn't got a lot of time, but really this is Paul's fault, not hers. Glancing at her watch she calculates – it takes about a half-hour to drive home, and she's still got over an hour until her next student. She can probably make a quick stop at Celia's school to drop off a treat.

It wasn't until her freshman year in high school that Celia told Nora that she didn't want her to come eat lunch with her anymore, up until then a standing weekly date. She said it made her look like a dork. She seemed annoyed, even on the verge of tears, but when Nora tried to reassure her, she snapped. "Come on, Mom. It's so stupid!" Nora was sad, but she understood what it was to feel peer pressure and to need to put some distance between yourself and your parents.

But now, two and a half years since that last visit, Nora thinks that she might turn such a surprise into something fun for Celia and her friends. If nothing else, she wants to extend an olive branch on Paul's behalf. She doesn't want the morning's incident to shadow the whole day. She considers her tight schedule and tonight's dinner. "Oh hell," she thinks. "I've got a canned marinade in the pantry..." She turns back to the bakery and buys out their morning fixings of peanut butter-chocolate brownies, then hurries to the school.

After checking in at the office, Nora takes the box of brownies to the courtyard. With the warming spring weather, the kids are out in droves, eating their lunches on every available surface, as tables are in shod supply. She stands on the edge in the shadows, scanning the sea of kids, looking for Celia's now fuschia colored curls. About to give up hope, she spots Kari, Celia's best friend, sitting with a group of girls on the lawn. Nora makes her way cautiously around the courtyard, eyeing the group, trying to make out her daughter's face. Before she has reached their perimeter, she realizes that Celia isn't there.

"Hi Kari, Lizzie. Hey Shannon. How're you guys doing?" Nora is feeling conspicuous and, somehow, guilty.

"Hey Mrs. Greyson. Umm, you lookin' for Cel?" Kari asks.

"Yeah. Well, I mean, really, I was looking for all of you. I'm just stopping by briefly. I need to get home, and I wanted to say hi. Do you know where Celia is?" Nora notices as the girls look quickly to each other, clearly hoping one of them can come up with a cover for Celia. She shifts her stance.

"Uh, yeah Mrs. G. Um, well Cel is, um, studying. You know, in the library. She's like totally freaked about this chem lab we have this afternoon. I don't know if you should disturb her. You know, you might, like, throw her concentration or something."

Nora looks unblinking at Kari for what feels like a full minute. Her palms are perspiring, her feet hot and slick in her loafers. She wants to slip

them off to cool down. Wants to wade into a stream far away from all of this. She has known Kari most of her life, and she knows a lie when she hears one. Kari has never been one to so steadily hold an adult's gaze. But now she skillfully applies this technique when being evasive, which has the opposite effect of the usual lack of eye contact and shifty movements. Most adults would believe the lie. But because Nora knows Kari so well, and because she knows that Celia's current agenda has nothing to do with chemistry, she isn't buying a word of it.

Nora looks out toward the crowd of kids, takes a deep breath, and then smiles. She turns her gaze back on Kari, hoping that she can communicate what she has chosen not to say. "Well good for her, She sure needs the study time. Be sure to tell her I stopped by and said hello."

She turns to walk away, then remembers the brownies in her hands. She stops, closes her eyes and tries to calm herself. She goes back to the girls. "I almost forgot. I brought you all some brownies. Dig in, but save one for Celia. Or two in case her friend wants one." The girls look uneasy as Nora breaks the string around the box, opens it on the lawn, and leaves.

Nora maneuvers her car through the school parking lot as it fills up with the cars of senior kids, returning from off-campus lunch. She looks to her left before turning right out of the lot. As her vision sweeps to the right, she catches sight of fuschia colored curls on a helmeted rider on the back of a passing motorcycle. She slams on the brakes and turns back to the left, craning to see the motorcycle, but it has snaked past the waiting cars and disappeared down the street. Nora's heart is racing as she ponders what to do. Cars turning into the lot from the street block a left turn. The sharp blast of the car's horn behind her gives her little option. She hits the gas a little too fast, and jerks out into the street with a screech of tires.

Nora drives home fast, the rush of trees watery as she passes them. She runs the scene over in her head. Was that Celia on that motorcycle? Who is that guy? How did she get off-campus for lunch? She must have been com-

ing back to school, that's good. And she was wearing a helmet – thank God for that.

Glancing at the car clock Nora realizes that, in her intentional neglect of Paul's dinner, she has sabotaged any chance of getting in a swim today. As she drives, she lets her mind drift to the calm waters of the river below their home. The water is still cold this early in the season, but it blankets her like silken sheets, a cocoon, a womb. There is no other place where she feels so safe. Once her head is under and her ears fill with water, she is alone with her thoughts. That can be a good thing, or a bad thing. She tries to make it a good thing. She counts her strokes, running a mantra to their rhythm. The crawl has always been her favorite. It is so streamlined, so powerful. Not clunky and graceless like the breaststroke, or big and splashy like the butterfly. So, crawl it is. Stroke, stroke, stroke, breathe, stroke, stroke, stroke, breathe.

Her thoughts light on the current events of her life: Celia – her grades...phone privileges...the evasive older suitor...who is this guy?..; on Paul – his tireless devotion to work...not home enough...hunger for status. But she lets these thoughts slip past and concentrates only on stroke, stroke, stroke, breathe.

Having swum against the current at the outset, Nora returns to their dock with the current, which is fairly gentle at this wide turn in the river. Reaching up to the dock, she feels a warm, strong hand on hers, She rubs the water out of her eyes and squints into the sunlight. Paul is smiling down at her, helping her out of the water, wrapping her in a towel. She smiles to herself as she drives, and then laughs out loud. This is a memory within a memory. She can no sooner recall the last time Paul came down to the dock when she was swimming than she can remember him smiling at her lovingly or offering her a helping hand.

Shaking off the memory, she pulls into their driveway with just 10 minutes to spare before her student arrives.

The next three four with her afternoon students are a slow blur. She is distracted, and they notice. They don't come to study with her expecting to

merely play uninterrupted, but that is what they get today. At one point she wanders onto the deck, staring down into the dark river passing below. The rippling waters lapping against the shore start to mingle with the melody in her head. She imagines herself playing the piano with her feet in a shallow pool. As she plays cool green waters rise up around her, finally submerging her and the piano, yet the music continues, now muffled and watery, and ever more soothing.

She snaps to at 4:30. With just a half an hour left with her last student, she hears the front door. Celia is home and is sneaking in. She has understood from an early age that when Nora is with a student, she has to be quiet and unobtrusive. But this is a different kind of sneaking. She's hoping not to be heard at all. The remaining sliver of Nora's focus leaves her student and goes to the sounds of Celia closing the front door ever so softly and slipping off her jacket and backpack. Normally Celia would come to the kitchen for a snack before going to her room to do homework, or whatever she does up there these days. But instead she quietly takes the stairs up to her room and closes the door.

At 4:45 Nora can't stand it any longer. She excuses her student, apologizing for the truncated lesson, promising to make it up or refund his money. He seems eager to split ahead of schedule. Once he is gone, Nora leans on the door trying to think, hoping to come up with some kind of calm, yet supportive, approach to her daughter. Before she can muster up a plan, the door pushes against her. Paul is home.

Suddenly Nora is forced to remember the evening's plans. In just over an hour the Harpers will be knocking at their door. Nathan Harper is a prominent lawyer in the city whose firm hired Paul's former employer to design their offices. Paul's employer set Paul to the task. The design swept Harper and his associates off their feet. It went on to win architectural kudos nation wide. Now, seven years later, having started his own firm, Paul finally has Harper planning to build a home for his retirement; what promises to be a grand estate that will secure Greyson Architecture a place in history.

Nora swings around to open the door with a smile, but Paul is not buying her forced cheer.

“You’re not dressed yet?” he asks, eyeing her jeans. Of course Nora isn’t dressed yet, He’s lucky she isn’t still at the piano with a student.

“Neither are you,” she turns to the kitchen.

In the kitchen she plates the rice salad, tosses the greens, preps the asparagus, and sets the steaks and fish to marinade. She can’t stop thinking about Celia – wondering where she was at school today. She sets the deck table, lighting candles and putting on some quiet music. Surely the school would have contacted them if she were missing classes? She runs upstairs with just fifteen minutes to spare. Paul, just out of the shower and smelling of aftershave, is getting dressed. As Nora goes through her closet she says, “I got three steaks and three salmon filets. That way if they both prefer one or the other we’ve got the bases covered. We can just wait until they arrive to find out what they want, but you might want to start up the grill as soon as you get downstairs.”

The silence is not unexpected, but it is longer than she had anticipated.

“Grill? You want me to grill? Nora, I’m wooing the most important client of my career and you want me to do it in an apron standing behind a BBQ?”

“Well, you didn’t give me much option. I had students all day, on top of having to clean house and shop. This seemed a fair compromise. Besides, the deck overlooking the river is one of the most beautiful features of this house. I’m sure they’ll love it out there. The weather is perfect and –”

“You just don’t get it, do you? Do you? Or is it that you get it but you don’t care?”

“Of course I care. I just can’t do it all. Not like you want me to. You have to be willing to pick up the slack.”

As he turns away Paul mutters “Yeah, well that’s a hell of a lot of slack.”

Nora stands, grinding her teeth, then looks to the clock. She has just enough time to throw on her linen pant suit with a silk sleeveless top, pull her hair up and brush on a little mascara and lipstick.

On her way past Celia's door, Nora pauses. Over the music she can just make out Celia's voice, hushed, in conversation on the telephone. She knocks softly, "Cel? Celia?" As she waits for a response, not sure if Celia heard her, the doorbell rings.

Nora comes down the stairs as Paul opens the door. She warmly welcomes Nathan Harper and his wife, Rita. They all make their way to the living room. As the men talk about the house, Nora realizes that Paul doesn't know Celia is upstairs, but now isn't the time to mention it. She'll find an opportunity later. Suddenly she's aware that Rita has spoken to her.

"I'm sorry Rita, what was that?"

"Oh, I was just commenting on your cute suit. It looks so comfy."

Nora smiles, but she is caught off guard. Rita is dressed in a cocktail dress and heels. Well pressed in her evening wear, she is a stark contrast to Nora's casually wrinkled linen and loose ponytail. Her compliment could be disingenuous, but Nora isn't sure.

"Thanks. It's, um, perfect for this weather."

When the Harpers are seated, Nora excuses herself to get the appetizers. Paul joins her, pressing up behind her and wrapping his arms around her. Nuzzling her ear he speaks to her for the first time since she came downstairs. "I would have loved to have seen you in a dress."

Nora grips the cheese knife, aware of the sharp edge. "Oh, thanks, honey," she says through clenched jaw. "I know how you love my legs."

"I do. And Nathan is a leg-man, I understand."

She bristles at his attempted joke. "Nice," she says, wriggling out of his grasp to get a bowl from the cupboard. "Let's see if your work doesn't get you the job before you offer up your wife as part of the deal."

"But really, it seems like this evening merits something a little more classy."

"That's funny, Rita was just complimenting me on this ensemble. And it's comfortable. And it's what I'm wearing so there's no point in discussing it."

“Right,” Paul says, leaving the kitchen brusquely.

After he’s gone Nora lingers in the kitchen arranging olives in the bowl and cheeses on a cutting board. She’s feeling warmer so she steps out of her mules and lets the cold of the concrete floor penetrate her feet. She returns the olive jar to the fridge and lingers there, hoping the cool air will break this flush before she leaves sweat rings on the underarms of her jacket.

When she has cooled down she puts her shoes back on, takes a deep breath, and returns to the living room. Paul takes this opportunity to step out onto the deck and light up the grill. “I hope you enjoy dining al fresco,” Nora jokes as she sets out the appetizers. “It seemed the perfect night to take in the beautiful view from our deck.”

Rita and Nathan seem agreeable. Nora asks their preference for salmon or steak, and excuses herself to the kitchen to ready them for Paul to put on the grill. Paul leans over the bar to retrieve them. “Do we need to leave them sitting in there all alone?” he whispers.

“Well, I thought I would get the meat ready for you. They’re adults, they can deal with a little time alone.”

Paul stares at Nora for a moment, as if trying to decipher a mysterious code, then goes outside with a grunt.

While waiting for the grill to heat up, Paul invites Nathan and Rita on a tour of the house. Nora is preparing to politely excuse herself, but with a glare from Paul she finds herself going along. Their modern house, a composition in heavy wood beams, glass and concrete, is an homage to Frank Lloyd Wright. It is small in comparison to what the Harpers are planning. Paul and Nora’s home is 3000 square feet with two bedrooms, two and a half baths, an office, and a den in addition to the living room, dining room and kitchen. Nora thought it was excessive when they built it, considering they didn’t plan to have more kids. But the rooms aren’t overly large, so over time she has come to feel it a comfortable fit.

“The pitch on the eaves over these dormers allows the winter sun to warm the upstairs, yet shades them from the summer sun,” Paul explains.

The Harpers are impressed. So is Nora. Seeing Paul discuss his work is not unlike watching a musician who loves to perform. He is so passionate. It is what drew Nora to him in the first place. While she is reminded of that now, watching him, she's also aware that his passion, *his drive*, are now driving her away from him.

They discuss Nora's decorating, and their use of space. Paul explains the exceptional energy efficiency of their house, which is a big selling point for Nathan Harper. All seems to be going very well until they reach Celia's room. Nora had almost forgotten about her. Paul doesn't seem to consider whether or not she's there, as he puts his hand to the doorknob and almost opens the door. "Hold on, Paul," Nora says gently, reaching out to take his arm. "Celia's in there studying. I don't think we want to disturb her."

Once again Nora catches a flicker of anger in Paul's eyes before he realizes he has no choice. To open up Celia's world to the Harpers would likely not be in his best interest. Before he can respond, however, Rita pipes up. "If your Celia is anything like our kids at that age, that room should be off limits to hapless intruders. But I sure hope we can meet her later."

Paul smiles awkwardly, "Well, we'll see. But her room is just like the office across the hall, with the view down to the river instead of the front drive."

As they make their way back down stairs Paul waylays Nora at the top. "What's up with Celia? Is she joining us for dinner?"

"You know she hardly eats anymore, and when she does it's usually much later. I can fix her up a plate after the Harpers leave."

"Yeah, OK. It would have been great if you'd arranged for her to be at a friends or something."

"Sure. And it would be great if she would just join us and be pleasant, but we can't really rely on that lately. She is our kid though. We can't pretend she doesn't exist." With that Nora pushes past Paul to go down the stairs, then stops short when she sees Rita at the bottom, looking at a picture on the wall, with her ear cocked just so toward their conversation.

Nora is relieved when they have all settled outside. The cooling evening air is a comfort to her, as is the sound of the passing river. Her feelings about water have always been a mystery. As a child she tumbled into the water more than once, having to be rescued by her parents. Her siblings water-skied circles around her while she chose to play in the shallows. She fought swim lessons tooth and nail, then suddenly in college she took to swimming like a fish, and has never stopped. It is her chosen form of exercise. Her favorite sounds are falling rain, crashing waves and a babbling brook. Until they moved here by the river she had tabletop fountains all throughout the house.

As Paul grills the dinner, Nora returns to the kitchen, looking forward to the solitude, but Rita follows along. “I haven’t had a chance to see your kitchen.” Once the asparagus is in the pot, Nora shows Rita around. The kitchen is spacious, with most of the workspace along the half wall facing out to the living room. The oven is backed up to the garage wall, and the outer wall of the kitchen is all windows, with French doors going out onto the deck. Nora loves this room. From here she can see the river, and in warmer weather with the doors open, hear it. Stepping into the pantry to show off the space, Nora notices the clutter – cooking magazines stacked haphazardly, recipe cards spilling out of their folders, the cat’s crusty food dishes, plastic bags overflowing from their recycling bag. Rita notices it too. Nora sees her eyes widen, but is still taken aback when Rita says, “Wow. What a great space. And perfect for hiding the clutter.”

Nora’s laugh is a little too loud – almost a cackle. She can’t even bring herself to demurely excuse the mess. “Oh, dear,” Rita says, and Nora can’t tell if she’s apologizing or placating. “We all have our messes. Without a space like this they have to be right in the open, don’t they?”

Suddenly, without warning, tears spring to Nora’s eyes. It’s as if this woman has read not only her mind, but also her heart, She wants to collapse into her arms. But when she makes eye contact with Rita, Rita turns

away. Feeling dizzy, Nora grips the doorframe and closes her eyes, waiting for the room to stop spinning. After what feels like minutes, but is certainly just a few seconds, she opens her eyes and moves back out into the kitchen. She dabs at her eyes and takes a deep breath. Rita is standing at the windows.

“Allergies I guess.” Nora laughs, though she knows Rita sees through her. Then she remembers the asparagus. “Oh shit!” she barks as she jumps to the pot on the stove. She turns the burner off, removes the lid and whisks out the steamer, burning her fingertips. She quickly puts it under the faucet to cool off but she knows that she has over done it. The asparagus is gray-green and very limp.

“Is there anything I can carry out?” Rita asks. Nora keeps her back to Rita, not wanting her disappointment to register. Whether she’s disappointed in Rita or herself, Nora isn’t sure.

“No, Rita, thanks. You just go ahead and make yourself comfortable. I’ll be right out.”

As Rita leaves, Nora slips out of her shoes once more. She walks over to the French doors, which are flung wide open, and takes a deep breath of the evening air. Her temperature is rising, and there is a rushing in her ears. She drops her jacket from her shoulders, then lets it fall to the floor, but this rush of heat is going nowhere.

About five minutes later Nora, jacket back on, brings the platter of now chilled asparagus to the table outside. Paul is just serving up the steaks and salmon. Nora returns to the kitchen for the rice and salad, and once everyone’s wine has been topped off, she sits at the table. Paul and Nathan appear to be getting along famously, their conversation having moved from architecture to golf. Rita is quiet. She seems to be avoiding Nora’s gaze. She is polite, but Nora wonders if she did something terribly inappropriate in the kitchen.

“Wow. This asparagus could use some starch!” Paul jokes. He and Nathan laugh, but Nora can see the irritation in Paul’s eyes.

“Oh, yes. I’m afraid that might be my fault. We got lost in that pantry and forgot all about the veggies,” Rita replies.

Again, Nora is caught off guard. Was that an insult? Or was Rita trying to cover for her? Wanting to give her the benefit of the doubt Nora jumps in. “Oh, gee, this goof is all mine, just like the mess in the pantry!”

“That’s right, Rita. My wife can get lost all on her own. She doesn’t need your help.” Paul chuckles at his own joke, while smirking at Nora. Nathan, on the other hand, roars. Apparently this kind of humor is right up his alley.

Nora feels herself on the edge. She wants to hurl her wine in Paul’s face. No, she wants to toss the entire dinner onto the deck, or better yet, off the deck, and watch it sink and swirl away in the river. She notices that she is gripping the table, knuckles white. She takes a deep breath and eases her hands down into her lap. Paul and Nathan are still laughing, not noticing her. But Rita is looking right at her. Once again, Nora can’t read this woman. Is that sympathy, or is that scorn? Their exchanged glance is brief, and when Rita turns to the men she puts on a big smile and joins in with their fun.

Right then and there, Nora is certain, beyond a doubt that she can’t take anymore. She stands muttering an excuse, and returns to the kitchen. Going into the pantry, she closes the door behind her. In the dark she slides against the door, down onto the concrete. She is trembling, her rage combined with the overwhelming urge to scream and cry. In an effort to control herself she starts to hyperventilate. She leans back against the door, feeling the cold floor penetrate her slacks. Just when she is getting a hold of herself, she hears her daughter’s voice. “Mom? Hey Mom, what’s for dinner?”

Nora sits frozen. She should probably get out there pronto, before Celia wanders onto the deck or, in Celia fashion, starts yelling for her parents. But before she can move, she hears it. “Mooommm!”

She starts, and then wipes at her eyes. Then, still in the pantry, she hears Paul’s voice, a hoarse whisper. “Celia, what is it?”

“Where’s Mom?”

“I don’t know, but I’ve got important clients out on the deck for dinner. What do you need?”

“Well, I thought maybe I could eat. Any chance of that, or are you guys not feeding me anymore?”

“All right, smart ass. We just never know when you’re going to grace us with your company. I don’t know where the hell your mom went, but when she reappears I’m sure she can get something for you. In the meantime could you keep it down? I’m trying to entertain out here.”

“Right. Yeah, sure Dad. I’ll be a good little kitten. You won’t even know I’m alive.”

The following silence is deafening. The rushing returns to Nora’s ears, and her temperature starts up again. She feels a prickling of the skin on her chest and neck. She tears off her jacket, but that doesn’t cut it. The air in the pantry feels very close. The smell of the cat food turns her stomach. She stands abruptly, runs her hands roughly through her hair, opens the door. The head rush hits her full on. The room starts to spin. The heat becomes unbearable. She’s kicking off her shoes and unbuttoning her pants before she knows it. Paul and Nathan’s laughter from the deck sounds mocking. Her pants drop to her feet, and she kicks them across the slick floor. Her bra and tank top come off together, and she tosses them over her shoulder. Standing in her underpants she realizes that she is panting, but beyond that she hears the river.

Moving toward the French doors she hears a little squeak behind her. She turns, and there sitting on a stool at the bar, is Celia. Her face is drained of color, her mouth open, eyes wide. Nora only half-registers her daughter’s shock. She is being pulled into the river now and the pull is beyond her control. She turns back to the doors and crosses outward rounding the corner to where Paul, Nathan and Rita sit. Because their guests were seated to take advantage of the view, they are the first to see Nora. Rita’s jaw drops. Nathan is mid sentence, with a mouth full of food, and he nearly

chokes. The delay before Paul turns is enough that Nora has moved past him, but he spins around in time to see Nora's back end as she descends the steps from the deck down to the river.

“Mooommm!” Celia howls, but Nora is unphased. Paul shouts, and there is a flurry of activity on the deck. Nora moves through the long grass, across the rough, dry dock, and dives off. As her head enters the water, she knows a blissful calm that takes her back long ago. She is a small child with a fever, and her mother's cool hand strokes her hair from her forehead. She shimmies out of her underpants before her head breaks the surface. She starts swimming upstream, not looking back, not wanting to see or to know. Just wanting to swim away, away, away.

Frogs, Strings, Bangs, and Things

Emily Hipps

There are many theories about the origin of the universe. Some theories involve loud noises; others, craft materials. Whatever the how and why may be, there are two unquestionable facts:

1. we are here
2. we are moving elsewhere

Some scientists claim the universe is expanding before contracting while others contend dark matter is creating more matter and the universe, like Uncle Larry's waistline, will continue to grow indefinitely. I offer a third theory, not based on long, fancy, theoretical math equations, written over a lifetime, and which are inherently flawed because of one late night when Professor Brilliant was distracted because he discovered his wife was leaving him for her golf instructor and as a result he neglected to carry the seven. It's not like I couldn't wow you with equations of my own, but no one at cocktail parties is impressed with boring math equations, even if they do explain life, the universe, and all that jazz. People prefer magic tricks. So that is what I have to offer you, a magic trick guaranteed to blow your mind. Please dear reader, cover your ears so as not to make too much of a mess.

Millions of years ago people believed the sky was a bowl placed over the earth like a shell over a bunt cake, and the stars were suspended from the bowl for dramatic effect. Since then we have made major breakthroughs in the area of cosmetology. We realized what is out there is more than a bowl; there are stars and planets and suns and galaxies and black holes, and much to everyone's surprise the Earth moves around the Sun. But like that know-it-all nerd in middle school science class, we with all our cosmic knowledge

have grown far too sure of ourselves. Show a first grader a math problem as simple as the Pythagorean theorem, and he will probably scratch his head and carry on with his life without attempting to solve it, or he might draw a dinosaur on it. However, give a scientist a problem as complex as the universe and wabam, dozens of different theorems generate and all sorts of thing-a-ma-bobs and people are sent up into space. And just because after so much effort we can't see the end of the universe, we assume there is no end. Sure the universe is big, really big, beyond human comprehension big. Nevertheless, there is an end to the universe; we won't find it in our lifetime, but give it a few dozen generations and we just might—assuming the human race survives that long, which at this time, it seems unlikely. But if we do, it will not truly be the end. Rather, it will be a clear and rather gooey membrane, not unlike the lining of a frog's intestine. That's because it is the lining of a frog's intestine.

Now you may be asking yourself whether and why you should trust me. You should. Because. There is a point at which every natural science resembles a kind of faith. Take for example the existence of the quark. Have you ever seen one? Have your friends ever seen one? Has any one? No. That's because they are too small to see. So how do we know they even exist? Through experiments scientists can see signs of their existence. Despite the lack of hard, tangible evidence, virtually no educated people question their reality. This literally blind belief is a leap of faith by people such as yourself; I am asking you to take this same leap of faith with me. This chasm over which we bound may at first seem larger than the hurdle required by the quark, but that theory was no less radical when it was first proposed than mine is now. As for hard evidence, I do have it, but I refuse to bore you with it. However, if you feel compelled and qualified to examine the gears behind the clock, see Appendix A (sold separately).

The beginning of the universe as we know it is actually a step in the digestive process. I think at this point I should go further back and explain a little. You see, in *The Beginning* there was the Word and the Word was

with God. They shared an apartment just on the corner of First Street and First Avenue. They had a few plants, but They needed something else to spruce up the place. A fish seemed just the thing. So the Word ventured to the Store on the adjacent corner of First and First with the intention of purchasing a colorful fish. But the thing about the Word at this time was that the Word hadn't been written yet, therefore it had a very fluid sense of self and purpose, and as a result was very easily distracted. The colorful array of fish overwhelmed the Word with too many options. The subtle and unique beauty of the patterns and tints of each fish left the Word utterly indecisive; just when He was sure He had found the perfect fish, another, more beautiful, exotic specimen floated by. Then it is no surprise when He happened across an albino aquatic frog, the Word knew this was the pet He wanted. You could see its organs because of its transparently pale skin. Perfect for picking up chicks. So it was not a fish. It lived in water, and it was no bigger than a fish so the land-Lord couldn't complain. It looked cool. Pet fishes are trite, but pet frogs, now they're unique. The Word knew God would be pleased. And He was right; God saw it and it was good.

God had wanted to go shopping with the Word, but She had procrastinated on Her term project, so She was pulling an all-eoner and had no time to go shopping. She was developing a brand new concept, something never attempted before; She called it Creation. It was a pretty and elaborate contraption that moved like the gears of a music box without knowing how to sing a tune. It was interesting because it was complex, but there was no greater value to it. God had planned for it to be more than the sum of its parts, but it lacked the transcendent power necessary to give it greater meaning. Needless to say She was freaking out. By the time the Word returned home with the frog, She had almost given up all hope, and had thrown in the towel, literally. She actually threw a towel into Creation. Unfortunately for the universe, it was the towel spotted with the greasy, charred remains of the Word's failed attempt at a chocolate soufflé, which later evolved into the first black holes. But I digress...

The instant God saw the frog She decided to play with it. She pampered it and fed it and doted on it until, after just a few millennia it had grown quite large. And quite hungry. It ate all of the plants, all of the furniture, everything smaller than it. It grew larger as Their furnishings grew sparser. Soon nothing was left in the apartment other than the frog, the Word, God, and Creation. God and the Word were infinitely large, so the frog did the only thing it could. It ate Creation.

God and the Word had been out to dinner when it happened; They needed some time away from the frog to discuss what to do about it. They had put it in its cage, and left without a second thought. While They were gone, in a feat that would have been impossible had the rules of existence existed yet, the frog ate the cage holding it, therefore escaping. For a while the frog was full and Creation safe, but this was not to last. The frog found himself hungry again and hopped up to Creation, and without a thought, ate it.

Being far from the disaster one might expect to ensue from such an apparent calamity, this was the greatest thing to happen to existence, excluding, of course, the invention of the spork, because this is how the world began. Not with a bang, but a gulp. Luckily for us, the frog was a pig, and it didn't even bother to chew. If it had, everything we know would have been mushed into little bits. So parents, when your ravenous and seemingly beastly children inhale their food without chewing, do not admonish them; it just might be the start of something rather nifty.

However, none of the glory of the moment was apparent at the time. All God saw was Her term project drifting down the esophagus of Her pet. She knew She was in trouble, even at this time the excuse "the dog ate my homework" was old and poorly received, so it seemed likely that the reinvention of this excuse with a frog would not be appreciated. A million possibilities occurred to God about how to retrieve Her project, but most of them involved a scalpel and/or resulted in harm to the much-loved frog. The Word suggested God just wait; after all, Creation would come out someday. In the end They decided to sleep on it.

During the night, Creation moved from the esophagus to the stomach. Juices percolated. Chemicals reacted. Deep inside the universe, something stirred. And as God slept, life began. By the time whatever it is that denotes day to God declared it so, life on Earth had evolved into the universe's most wild partiers, the eukaryotes. God was much surprised at this strange turn of events. She decided to observe further. Around noon, when the Word finally awoke, something strange was happening to the frog. It looked quite distressed. Things were trucking along nicely during the Cretaceous Period on Earth, so you might be able to guess what comes next. The frog burped. The dinosaurs were destroyed by a bit of indigestion. Despite this tragic loss, much of the universe's life forms survived, and God slipped the frog a Tums so it would not happen again. So before you start standing on street corners with sandwich boards declaring the end of the world, stop. God's taken care of it. Just trust Her.

As digestion/life continued on, She took a more active role in shaping what transpired inside the frog, by rubbing it with various ointments, which were absorbed by the frog's skin, influencing the development of Creation inside it. Her little toy had transformed into something dear to Her. Out of Her sterile and static project, something beautiful burgeoned.

So there you have it, life, the universe, and all those other miscellaneous and sundry bits. What you can take from this is a knowledge that Fate, or whatever name you give to the force molding our lives, is not cold or unfeeling clockwork, but simple, straightforward biology. The reason for life is life. This might not seem a very satisfying answer, like a fortune cookie that holds a statement rather than a fortune. But, like with a fortune cookie, if you add "in bed" or "between the sheets" to the end of it, it doesn't seem too bad after all. And solace in the face of despair or evil can be found in the fact that God did turn us in for a grade, and received a C-. She took the minus personally, and intends to do better next time.

LILY

Mary Rudy

Mama always had bacon in the fridge—for sending up smoke signals. The code was simple: if I heard it sizzling, got a mouth-watering whiff of that honey-hickory smell, I was to stay in my room till the trailer door creaked open and banged shut, then count to a hundred real slow—or a thousand if I just couldn't do slow—before I showed my face.

“Can't have you scaring the heebie-jeebies out of my friends first thing in the morning, Lily.”

Lily. Lily Rose to be exact. Mama said flowers were the purest form of beauty and beauty was the one thing we needed more of in this world. A person couldn't help but feel a little bit sorry for Mama, being all ready with that flowery name then ending up with an ugly weed like me to put it on. She didn't intend any meanness in talking to me like that. Told me so herself. Just didn't believe in pulling the wool over anyone's eyes.

“You are what you are, Girl. Can't hide it from the world. No sense hiding it from yourself. You'll just have to be tough as well as ugly. And learn to be really, really good—at something. Damn good. At everything.”

I was fifteen the first time I caught that scent in the middle of the day. It was springtime and the air was heavy with pink jasmine and honeysuckle and I was walking home from school, about half a block away when my nostrils started to tickle and flare from the rich coarseness of it. Right away I felt a tingling in my throat, that crazy rush of panic I always got, knowing I couldn't leave my room. Even if I had to pee. Even if a monster popped out of the closet and wanted to eat me. I shook myself and said right out loud, “Just someone having a BLT,” and kept on walking, but I noticed that my feet were moving more slowly, my steps were smaller. I was sure I'd forgotten something at school but hard as I tried I couldn't think what it was.

Mama had always been really, really good at being pretty. *Damn good.* And she said it wasn't anybody's business how she used her assets. "It's just packaging, Lily. Just packaging. Got to make the most of what you got." And she did.

Sometimes she was the prettiest waitress down at Denny's or IHOP, pulling in more tips than all the other waitresses put together. Sometimes she was the prettiest dancer at the Pussycat Club, showing off more of her packaging than some people thought was decent, and buying herself shiny earrings and necklaces with the extra money she made.

Sometimes she even accepted a little help from her friends. And every night when she tucked me in I'd stare at those sparkly trinkets hanging around her neck and she'd say, "Not for you, Lily. Nothing's ever going to make you pretty." Then she'd tell me the story of how my good-for-nothing daddy took one look at my face and beat feet so fast it left burn marks in the carpet and there she was, a pretty little girl with an ugly little baby and, what else was she going to do? And her words left burn marks inside my belly like a branding iron.

But that's when I knew—my daddy must be Superman to run so fast and soon as he got back from Krypton, where I knew he'd gone to get the cure, he'd fix my face and I'd be beautiful too. I'd kept that little secret and smiled every time Mama told me the story and soon as she left the room I'd close my eyes and pray to God that all the bad guys would behave themselves long enough to let him get back to me. Soon. Real soon.

When I got a little closer to the trailer I could hear Willie Nelson's nasally twang belting out Mama's favorite, *I'm back in the saddle again...* and I knew that the music and the savory smell were hers and I was five years old again, waiting under the covers for bacon and Superman and the slamming of the door. I still had a picture in my wallet.

Superman in his cape, smiling, saving the world. I'd found it in a box of cereal when I was seven and knew it was a message. From him to me. To keep me safe till he got back in person.

Mama'd always said we had to be realistic. She'd plastered mirrors all over our flimsy walls so I'd never run the risk of thinking I was like everybody else and whenever she talked to me she could be looking at herself, fussing with her hair or trying a new shade of lipstick. And in the middle of the dinner table she kept a bouquet of fresh flowers. A big bouquet of lilies and roses that made it almost impossible to see who was sitting across from you. She said that if she believed in all that God and karma stuff she'd say that I was her punishment for being so vain all her life. But Mama didn't believe in any religion crap. And I knew better. If God had wanted to punish her he'd of made me prettier than she was.

On the other hand, Mama figured I could use all the help I could get so a couple of times every summer she'd drag me down to the big church on Maple Street and nudge me into the Sunday School class, telling the teacher that she was sure the good Lord had a special purpose for me. And the teacher would spend an hour telling us how you can't judge a book by its cover while Mama sat out in the chapel glowing in the reflection of morning sun pouring through all those stained glass windows. And by the time I'd get out there'd be three or four of the good men of the church sitting with her, offering her comfort and letting her know that she and her ugly daughter were welcome any time. Any time.

"Come back real soon," one of them would say then trip over the end of the pew and try to pretend that he didn't and turn all red in the face.

And another one would pat me on the head and announce, "They're all beautiful in His eyes."

And Mama would nod and act all churchy and I never understood why she wanted to do that.

Then afterwards we'd go walking through the neighborhood that surrounded all those stained glass windows. She'd gaze at the grand houses with the big front porches and fancy curtains, perfect gardens and lots of gardeners and maids always busy, busy, busy, and say, "That's the kind of place I was meant to live in, Lily. That's where I belong."

And her eyes would sparkle and it always seemed strange to me: except for the workers buzzing around keeping things tidy, there was never anyone home. No kids in the yard. No ladies drinking tea on the porch. No one ever playing those shiny grand pianos I could see through the windows. Row after row of empty mansions. Like a bunch of abandoned tortoise shells.

At fifteen I knew the score. I'd seen the bumper stickers: *If this trailer's rockin', don't come knockin'*. That bacon frying was like flashing it in neon and this time I was locked out instead of in. Like a cocoon turned inside out. The only place I couldn't go was that little cubicle. And, of course, that was the only place I wanted to be.

It had been a long time since Mama'd used our secret code. Maybe years. As I'd gotten older she'd become more discreet, hustling her friends out the door early. Without breakfast. And I'd almost forgotten what the mornings had been like. Almost. The waiting. And worrying. Listening for the opening of the door and hearing every creak and complaint that old trailer had to make. Telling myself there was no creature yawning under the bed. No troll hiding in the closet. Nothing scary in that room but me.

I looked at the trailer door and I looked at the wide open sky and I wondered if Mama had any idea what time it was.

Mama'd never had much use for clocks or rules or anyone telling her what to do or when to do it. As far as she was concerned, rules, and time, were relative. And the only thing they related to was her convenience. So, when I was five and it was time to start kindergarten, missing the first day by a couple of weeks had been no surprise. She'd told me on Sunday that it was time—*you'll have to get up early tomorrow and get ready*—then Monday morning I woke to the unmistakable scent of bacon in the pan so I hunkered down in my bed, quiet as a blade of grass and waited and listened. And soon as that door flew open and bounced shut I started counting fast as I could then ran out and gobbled the leftovers before they could find their way into the trash can. There's nothing quite so sweet as bacon fat

melting in your mouth and the only way I ever got any was off the plates of Mama's friends after they left in the morning. Then I'd gotten dressed in the new daisy print jeans and t-shirt Mama'd bought me for the occasion—*won't make you pretty but it might take some of the attention off your sorry face*— and paced around the trailer while Mama soaked in the bubble bath, singing along with Willie, *Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely nights...*

Then I'd waited a little more while she showered off and put on perfume and a pretty red dress and went outside to tend to the two rose trees she had growing in pots outside the door. It was a summer ritual. Every morning she went out there with the hose and chased the aphids off so they wouldn't suck the life right out, *just like the world will do to you if you let it.*

And she said they might just as well get used to it down at the school because she'd be bringing me in when it darn well suited her and not a minute sooner. "Got to take control of things, Lily. Can't let people push you around."

When she saw that the aphids had landed right back on her roses she crinkled up her nose and went hunting around for a few ladybugs to put on the branches.

"Look at how pretty they are, Lily." Three or four of the little red insects crawled around her hand and up her arm. "Now, watch this." She shook her arm over one of the trees, letting the pretty beetles drop down on the stems and I watched while two speckled ladybugs gobbled down the fat aphids in their path. "See how the pretty ladybugs eat the ugly aphids. And nothing ever eats the ladybugs, Lily. Not even lizards. That red is nature's warning. And if one of them ever did eat a ladybug they'd never do it again because she'd leave a bad taste in their mouth. A real bad taste. Maybe even poison. Remember that."

Ladybugs devouring aphids was very cool but it was Mama's face that I couldn't take my eyes off of. Her slight smile and wide open eyes, staring, almost in a trance.

Then she was done.

“That’s your science lesson for today. Better than anything you’ll ever learn in school.”

And off we went, walking into the classroom at forty-five minutes after the bell and one of the little boys in the front row looked up and said, “Yuck.” And then the other kids looked up and some laughed and others scrunched up their faces or covered their eyes and I felt a burn, like a squirt of pepper sauce trickling down my throat then spreading out so far it made my ears hot. The teacher said, “Eyes on me, children!” and “You must be Lily. We’ve been expecting you. Please take a seat.” And to Mama, with the smile gone from her voice and her eyes turned to slits, “Try to be on time from now on.”

And Mama went on down to the office to have a chat with Mr. Robertson, the principal, and they were still sitting at his desk, chuckling and drinking coffee when kindergarten class was dismissed two hours later. The office lady told me to *wait on the bench in the breezeway* till they finished their conversation and from then on the kindergarten teacher was nothing but nice when Mama brought me to school just in time for mid-morning snack.

I wasn’t the only one who’d gotten older in those years. Mama’s refusal to acknowledge time hadn’t slowed it down any. Oh, she still had that dewy skin and those pretty blue eyes, and Willie was still crooning just for her, *Blue eyes crying in the rain*, but something about her was looking old. Older than other kids’ parents though she was at least ten years younger than any of them. She’d taken to looking in the mirror and saying, “Damn it, Lily. Before you know it I’m going to be ugly as you. I might just have to go to school and learn to be good at something, too.” But she didn’t look like she was much interested in learning anything new.

I sat down on the bench across the driveway from our trailer and waited. We’d just switched ahead to daylight savings time but it looked like Mama was turning her clock the other way.

Only one person in that kindergarten room had smiled at me. JJ (short for Jiggly Jerrold) was at least twice as big as the other kids and dressed all in black, with spiky hair and a do-it-yourself felt-marker tattoo on his arm. He was sprawled out in an open space at the back of the worn out rug that marked the appropriate sitting area and I hooked my eyes on that smile and went right over and sat next to him and he looked at my face and nodded.

The teacher got everyone quiet again and said, “What story shall we read today?” One of the boys jumped up and suggested *The Ugly Duckling* then covered his mouth to keep from laughing and the whole room tried not to laugh because they knew they’d be in trouble and the teacher read *The Runaway Bunny*. But it wasn’t necessary to read the other story because everyone already knew it and at recess all the cute little boys and girls took turns sneaking up behind me and quacking, then running away in a fit of fear and giggles.

JJ called them twerps. He said it was cool to have one blue eye and one brown eye and the mark of the devil—a dark red strawberry stain—covering most of my face. He said anyone can be pretty but only a few of us get to be really, really, ugly. Scary ugly. Said he wouldn’t trade for pretty if you paid him. And from then on we were best friends.

Wasn’t much for me to do, waiting there on the bench for the trailer door to pop open. It was a pretty day, warm and friendly, and I told myself it was a nice place to do my homework. But the history I read wouldn’t stick and every math problem I tried seemed to be impossible. Old Mr. Parker hobbled past, mumbling to himself about Jesus and Nixon, god-damn fascist pigs and *sons of bitches didn’t give me any bacon*. His off-center ponytail and straggly beard looked like they hadn’t been washed since the sixties and I tried to blend into the bench but I knew he couldn’t see me anyway. Where he was living I hadn’t been born yet.

If JJ hadn’t been absent that day he might have been there with me, laughing at the absurdity. At Mama and her friends. JJ’d been coming over after school since kindergarten.

In those days we'd spent the afternoons painting red faces and tattoos on my pretty dolls. Gelling their hair into spikes. Around middle school it turned into listening to music and hanging out, making fun of the kids with the perky noses and identical smiles. Gingerbread kids, he called them. *All popped from the same cookie cutter.* And we'd laugh so hard that, for awhile, we forgot to envy them.

I pulled out my wallet and the picture of Superman, closed my eyes and saw him flying my way with a vial full of magic potion. *Fifteen is not too old to believe. Fifteen is not too old to believe.*

Mama and I had never fought much. Or at all. It had never occurred to me to question anything she said. Until the day I told her I thought JJ liked me.

"Of course he likes you. He's your friend."

"I mean like like. I think he like likes me."

She'd looked at me long and hard then and said, "Lily, you know I've always told you the truth. Nothing but the truth. Even when you were a little girl and it would have been so much easier to tell you pretty lies. To tell you that you were cute like the other little girls. Or that looks don't matter. Or some other fairy tale crap. But I never did that. I took the hard road. Gave it to you straight. For your own good. And that's what I'm going to do now."

I looked at her then and I knew what was coming. I'd heard it so many times: *You're ugly, Lily; Men don't fall for ugly girls, Lily; You have to be tough; Get used to being alone.* And on and on and on. And I didn't want to hear it again.

"Don't bother, Mama. I know what you have to say and you're wrong. JJ's different. In fact, lots of people are different. I have friends, Mama. Friends you don't know. Friends that don't care what I look like. That like me because I'm nice and smart and funny. And that's something you wouldn't know anything about."

The whole trailer seemed to sigh, then, along with Mama. She shook her head and rolled her eyes. But didn't raise her voice. She never raised her

voice. “Haven’t I taught you anything, Lily? JJ’s just a man like any other man. He wants a looker.”

“You’re my mother!” I screamed at her. “Why can’t you ever be on my side?”

“I am on your side. I’ve always been on your side, Lily. That’s why I tell you the truth. Better for you to hear it from me than from some stranger that only wants to hurt you. And I’m telling you now, just because that birthmark has started to fade away doesn’t mean...”

But I didn’t hear anything she said after that. I went in my room and slammed the door and stared into one of the many mirrors that covered the walls. Looked in every mirror on every wall. From one to the other and back again. Made sure they were all telling me the same thing. Over the years I’d learned to walk through the trailer with my eyes on the floor. Avoiding any glimpse of my own reflection. Avoiding the truth Mama tried so hard to shove down my throat. This time I looked straight on. *That birthmark has started to fade away. That birthmark has started to fade away.* It hardly seemed possible. After all these years. But there it was, right in front of me.

The afternoon was growing hot. I opened my eyes and what was flying toward me was a crow, not Superman. And above him only one cloud in the sky, a smudge, like a sloppy thumbprint, with no intention of ever blocking the sun. There were no trees in the trailer park. No shade other than the short shadows of the trailers themselves.

Old crow landed in the driveway and I watched him, pecking and cawing and after a while he hopped over closer to me, to the patch of tall grassy weeds alongside the bench, and munched down a whole army of ladybugs. I expected a reaction, coughing or puking. Or sudden death. But he looked right at me and seemed to be quite pleased with himself. Went back for more. I watched. And smiled.

When I’d finally come back out of my room Mama had dinner ready and no flowers on the table. We sat and ate and faced each other for the first

time I could remember and she said, “You have to accept reality, Lily. Just like I did. My daddy taught me real early what it meant to be a pretty girl. Could be you’re the lucky one. Lucky to be ugly. Gives you the chance to do something else with your life.”

Mama’s voice was infuriatingly calm, matter-of-fact. I kept mine the same way.

“And have you accepted your new reality, Mama? Accepted that you’re getting old? Ugly. Are you lucky, too?”

She went on eating her meatloaf. Drank some wine. Finished with, “Maybe you’ll have to learn the hard way.”

I heard the door creak open and looked up. The sun was beating right down on the top of our trailer and I could see the waves of heat rising off of it like a mass of charmed snakes uncoiling toward the sky. Mama walked out first and saw me on the bench and didn’t look surprised and didn’t nod or smile just looked, then looked away. Like a teacher in the middle of a lecture, checking to be sure I was paying attention. Then JJ walked out behind her and I wasn’t surprised, either. Not really. And I couldn’t see his eyes because they were fastened to the ground and his mouth was drawn up so tight his lips nearly disappeared, his brows pulled so close together they almost touched in the middle. He didn’t even see me. Walked away with his shoulders hunched, in a hurry. I watched him go and ten years of *best friends* flashed in front of my eyes. Mama looked my way again, this time nodding ever so slightly. Turned and went back inside letting the door bang shut behind her. I sat there without moving, felt the sun burning my face and something else burning my insides. I knew that eventually I’d go in. But first I needed to sit there a while and study the old crow plucking ladybugs off of the weeds.

THE END

Tenderness

Kestrel Slocombe

World

There's something romantic about the world.

She loves to say the names of places she's never been to—Venice, Peru, Azerbaijan. We, the poor and the unknown—what happens to us? The embrace of obscurity is warm, but you can't breathe. I don't know how long we've been holding our breath here.

Life

The choices are limited in this life. We almost went crazy a few times when the list on a summer day was so short. We lay quietly while she ripped things up.

Three

There's a strange thing about the number three. Sometimes you'll begin to think you don't exist. It's like those dreams where you don't exist, and you're just watching as stuff happens. When there are three of you, and you are watching the other two closely, you begin to think that one of them is you, and there are only the two of you there in the room.

Moving

We drove too fast. We're not beautiful people—she's bony, I'm sturdy, and he has a big head and hooded eyes. But if we drive fast enough, we get beautiful. Something happens—it's a convertible, and the wind is pinning your hair across your face and making your eyes water, and then your hair gets into your eyes and makes them water even more. The laughter is blown

right off your lips. You fall back to look at the sky and the green branches flying by with the sun coming through their leaves, and you realize that all those people trapped in magazines will never be as beautiful as all this that's moving.

Ourselves

We often have conversations about him shaving. He never does. We can sit in train stations or bus stations for hours talking about it, and other things. We talk about kidnapping people. We pick people and decide what country we'd take them to if we kidnapped them. He usually says somewhere in Europe, she usually says somewhere in Africa, and I usually say somewhere in South America. And we argue about it. And it comes back to him shaving. And we never talk about kidnapping ourselves.

Crickets

In the summer, we try to sleep outside as much as possible. It's never as good as we think it will be, but we keep doing it anyway, because we're proud. "We ought to be more humble," he says, when we're walking out across the fields late at night. We always think that we're going to say brilliant, poetic, romantic things as we lie in the tent and look up through the mesh window at the stars. We always expect the stars will change us, but they don't. It's still just us, lying and listening to the crickets.

Time

She has a dream about defeating time. She talks about it a lot. About going to some place in the world where no one knows us and we've never been, and then maybe time will stop for us. He mutters that he doesn't want time to stop, because he wants to die in Amsterdam, in a garret, surrounded by empty wine bottles, half-finished oil paintings, and opera ticket stubs. And she tells him to shave his beard and stop being such a damn romantic.

She Said I Crossed Her Boundaries

Robert M. Zoschke

Okay, so I admit it, she had been firm and clear and direct, establishing what she said were her boundaries. And I had screwed up royally, crossing those boundaries. I understand that now. I just wish she could understand that I didn't feel like I was doing anything bad. I felt good inside my loving heart. I thought I was helping her out.

What kind of woman wouldn't appreciate her man washing the dirty dishes for her? And let me be quite frank about this...those dirty dishes, well, it wasn't just a few dishes from a few meals in the bottom of the kitchen sink. And let me be clear about this...I wasn't trying to imply by my dishwashing actions that she had not been busy at work. But she had been getting home from work at the same time, day after day, then walking past those dirty dishes.

Well, that's not entirely accurate. She hadn't been exactly walking past the dishes. She would stop and wash one tall glass, open up the cupboard above the counter, and take steady hold of the V.O. bottle. At which point she would pour herself a couple shots worth of whiskey then toss in some ice and splash in some water from the sink faucet then proceed on her soon-to-be-a-bit-more-merry way, past all those dirty dishes and up the stairs to her bedroom, where she would lose herself in the fantastic souluplifting splendor of hunkering down with her laptop and signing onto MySpace.

Oh Christ, MySpace, I don't even want to start going there, I don't even want to start delving into the way she can spend hours on that "site" where she "communicates" with her "friends." What are friends anyway? People who don't look away when I walk in the tavern, people who don't forget my name when I say hello. And what's MySpace? I've got a rotary

phone on the wall in my space at my place. But enough of that. I must stay focused on her boundaries I was crossing, because admitting the problem is the first step toward recovery, right? I admit she had made it clear we had a big huge problem and I admit I wanted that problem to end. So I could join her upstairs in her bedroom and watch her set the laptop aside and pull the covers back and take me into bed with her like she had been doing, before the problem of boundary-crossing by dear sweet humble me.

So, all those dirty plates were stacked up like pancakes at a Knights of Columbus fundraiser breakfast. Believe me, I know what it's like at my place sometimes, when the dirty plates run from the sink to the refrigerator, riddled with food grunge like molten lava encasing a mountainside after a volcano. The truth is, I know what it's like to see flies gathering for Christ's sake. Well, that's part of the truth, actually. That's me being my empathetic, ego boosting, pain-body loving self once again. The whole truth is, I know what it's like to walk through my kitchen sometimes and see flies swarming around the dirty plates. Flies buzzing back and forth—through the broken chipped out hole in my kitchen window and the torn window screen—a growing pack of flies going back outside to Mother Nature where there should have been a much more ample food supply for them, communicating to other flies in whatever manner flies communicate, I don't know, I don't watch the goddamn Animal Planet channel on cable, okay? But I've seen flies leaving the house then coming back inside with more and more friends of theirs from their space, buzzing right back inside my hardly spacious kitchen, to feast on the decomposing menagerie of food particles on dirty plates. I remembered those lazily ignored household cleaning times of mine, staring at her dirty dishes and all I could think of was...*hey, dip-shit, you're on unemployment, sucking government tittie milk to the tune of two hundred measly bucks a week while your woman slaves away at work all day, so do something to help her for the love of Christ.*

So, I washed all the dishes, and I dried them and I put them away in the cupboards where they belonged, and I caught hell for it. And not just

a standard generic hell at thirty-seven cents a can less the brand name hell, mind you. I caught the kind of hell that made me wonder if she had weird double jointed vertebrae in her neck or if she was simply spinning me the kind of hell that Linda Blair spun, swirling her head around like a carousel wheel in *The Exorcist*. Well, the washing of the dishes, that's not the full reason I caught such hell. Half measures, even half measures of explanation, will get a man nothing, right? Wasn't it Martin Luther King who said that? Or was it Martin Luther? Yogi Berra? Richard Simmons? No, come to think of it, it was Angelina Jolie who said that, I'm sure of it, sort of. Whoever said it first was right, and the full reason I caught such hell also had to do with bringing in her mail and vacuuming the house.

It's not like her mailbox is right next to the front door of her house. it's not like I was twiddling my thumbs on the porch and decided to bring inside the mail she could have grabbed on her way through the front door, as if I were impersonating some goddamn goofy overbearing waiter picking up the soup spoon from the table and handing it to her for Christ's sake. Her house is right on a two-lane highway with a fifty-five mile per hour speed limit, and it was rush hour, and it was raining, and she is a mighty fine looking hot number of a woman, and she had worked all day. Did I want to have to witness her pulling into the driveway then walking back across to the mailbox on the other side of the goddamn highway? Well, certainly I would have thoroughly enjoyed watching her gorgeous ass sway in the magnificent way it does, as she sauntered craftily through two-way traffic to reach her mailbox then back into the safety of her driveway.

As a matter of civic duty I must admit such a scenario involving her ass would not have been one of those blessed For My Eyes Only kind of scenarios. Surely the potential was very real, she could very well have drawn some lecherous stare from a corpulent male pissed off at rush hour and pressed into a tizzy against the steering wheel of his truck, a stare at her ass that could have lingered long enough to cause a crash of epic proportion, school busses could have even been involved for Christ's sake. Not to

mention that such a corpulent gawking horn-dog could have also avoided a pile up by steering onto the shoulder of the highway, and coming to a stop right by her mail box, at which point he could have felt his bulging wallet from a good week's pay pressing against his own ass, when he could have offered to take her out for a night on the town, and, well, you get the point. Half measures will get a man nothing and the truth is I was tap city in the wallet, nowhere near even a half-measure's worth of a night on the town. But most importantly, it was raining like holy hell, rain coming down in a torrent, much like the torrent of crazed saliva and God knows what spewing out of Linda Blair's churning mouth when she spun her head around like a carousel wheel in *The Exorcist* for Christ's sake.

Well, it was only drizzling, according to her, and she didn't want the mail brought in because she didn't want to look at her bills. That much she made clear, believe me, clear as day, clear as Linda Blair spinning her head around full circle in *The Exorcist*. What she didn't make clear was whether she felt the mites and the God knows what other kind of microscopic bugs in the dust balls bigger than golf balls all over her carpeting were actually organisms she thought of as household pets, which is the only reasonable answer I can come up with in my own mind, as to why she felt my vacuuming the carpets was more "boundary crossing." And, let me be completely concise.. .the fact that she had not taken the first sip of her whiskey and water surely added to the growing calamity within her, due to my boundary crossings. Not to mention that her first sip of her whiskey and water is actually a gulp, but let's not officially refer to it as such, because she doesn't think of it as a gulp, just a good long sip, okay?

So, that's the way I got myself in trouble, that's how such a problem sprung up between us. And make no mistake about it...it was a huge fucking problem that had turned into a fuckless problem. She had got out of bed after a sleepless sexless night and denied me the pleasure of watching her change into her work clothes by hustling into the bathroom and getting dressed, behind, let the record show, not one but two closed doors. And

she had sneered at me, before she left in the morning, her lip snidely curled up, because she was off to another skull-drudgery day of work, and I had a day's agenda awaiting me that basically entailed driving over to the post office to see if my unemployment check had arrived. Yes, it was precisely at that degrading apex of spite in which she unloaded on me, unleashing her venomous fury, making clear that I had screwed up royally by crossing her boundaries.

The fact that I had awakened before her, and let her sleep, and hustled down to the mini mart for a quart of chocolate milk and a box of blueberry donuts, well, that hadn't earned me any brownie points either, nor won me anything resembling a Cub Scout merit badge for that matter. No, my hopeful effort to wind up sitting at her kitchen table, and looking at a clean kitchen counter where we could actually see the coffee pot and the coffee I had made, sharing a wholesome breakfast of sustenance that would carry her through another work day, that wonderful day dream of mine was shot down in flames. Well, actually, it was shot down by the flamethrower of her voice, emanating with a sarcastic shrill from the kitchen loud enough for me to hear it all the way upstairs, where I was still in bed. wishing like a moron wishes at the horse track for a fifty-to-one shot to win a race, wishing she might see my good honest effort as breakfast provider and decide to first come upstairs for some nookie, a good honest quickie in the name of pride and love before another grueling day. Yes, her voice carried and, make no mistake about it, her words stung, like a goddamn hornet after you knock its nest down cleaning the gutters for the love of Christ, that's how her words stung. "You've got to be kidding me," she hollered. "Who's the last person that should be having donuts and chocolate milk for breakfast?"

Perhaps I should mention at this point that I had, indeed, allowed my YMCA membership to lapse. I suppose I should also point out that her vocalized assessment of me had once upon a time entailed calling me *big man* (she used to gloriously holler out *come on big man, fill me up right now* at the height of our lovemaking, back when we started). But then her assessment

of me shifted, as her voice shifted, when she would purr softly and call me *husky guy* (such as when she saw me no longer using a belt and she would shake her head and say *aw, sweetie, you're my husky guy*). Now, I don't want you to assume that her heart-lifting assessments had allowed me to become so lethargic that I ceased realizing the natural benefits from continuing my stringent daily workouts at the YMCA, benefits such as a mighty fine woman in panting heat for a normal sex life with her man and, well, I'm not certain there are any other benefits than that, getting right down to the nitty gritty.

Surely I am just one human being awash in an exercising sweat that encompasses countless thousands of other human beings, all of us realizing that the monthly tab at a YMCA is ridiculously significant. YMCA fees have become so obscene that I am still surprised Obama didn't mention them in his big economic speeches during the Presidential campaign. Not to mention that my unemployment checks only go so far, and, well, enough about my unemployment checks, I don't even know if this week's goddamn measly stipend is stuffed somewhere between all the junk mail from bill collectors and bankruptcy lawyers in my post office box at the present time.

So, off she went to work, but not before she made sure that I was also out of her house, at which point she clarified that my staying in her house while she was at work would be another case of crossing her boundaries. And to accentuate that no more boundaries would be crossed, she locked the front door and took the key with her, rather than leaving it under the doormat on the porch, where she had always left it, back when she desired such things as her big man waiting in bed and ready to fill her up when she got home from work.

Rest assured I did what any red-blooded American male would do. I did what any overweight but still of sound mind and horny ball sack, living breathing member of the male species would have done. I went to the public library and put my name on the sign in sheet for the computer terminal and I listed a fictitious name after mine in the next time slot to confuse the

librarian who is a couple Ensure Vitamin Drinks short of optimum mental capability, so I would have enough time to compose a heartfelt apology email to my mighty fine woman, written with such a power and cunning that it would be as if Cupid were drawing his bow each time I struck my trembling hands to the keyboard, an email that I knew I had to successfully compose and dutifully send, if I were to get past the boundaries I had crossed, back to where things used to be, at the beginning of our relationship.

Make no mistake about it, I was diligent and focused and supremely interested in getting back to our blessed love nest point, before I crossed all those boundaries. (I envisioned myself thinking and typing with the same fortitude that Lewis and Clark employed when they embarked on their return voyage after crossing all the boundaries they had crossed. How many Indians had Lewis and Clark pissed off on their expeditions? I had no idea for the love of Christ. But I knew I had pissed off one mighty fine woman, and that was all that mattered to me. I didn't care if Lewis and Clark had pissed off the entire Indian Nation, and I had good reason not to care, after our government had given all those Indians free places to live and plenty of their own casinos, so they can live high on the hog from taking casino money like a band of raving marauders born from an evil spawn after Bonnie left Clyde for The Terminator, while all our government was giving me was a measly unemployment check every week. All I cared about was the boundaries I had crossed with one mighty fine woman and how it had pissed her off and how I wanted her to be happy with me. (Yes, of course you can make the leap to assume that by *happy* I mean *ready to hop back into hot panting heat in bed with me*. I don't have a dictionary handy but you can bet the rent money that I wholeheartedly believe whatever definition of happy is in your dictionary, well, surely it harkens more or less directly to the sentiment a woman must feel to *hop back into panting heat in bed with her man*, whether that man happens to be a big man, or a husky guy, or a guy no longer wearing a belt and trying his damn best to shuck free of his tight pants before the panting heat action recommences).

So, it took longer than I had wished, thinking thorough and typing out that email to my mighty fine woman. And I had figured it probably would, that's why I filled another time slot on the computer sign-in sheet with another fake name. And my valiant chicanery served its purpose. The librarian only had time to check the sign-in sheet once and look at me quickly and scratch her head in wide wonder as to whether I was the same guy still sitting at the computer terminal. Because she is not very witty, she is a bored human being with nothing to do but twiddle her thumbs and volunteer at the library. After she spent damn near forty years of holy matrimony just berating the everlasting shit out of her dingbat husband, until he finally responded by purchasing some luxurious life insurance policy on his deathbed, an insurance policy that put a serious chunk of coin in her twiddling hands when he croaked.

If the County Coroner wasn't the librarian's brother, well, all the old fart retirees clogging the library to read the daily newspaper for free, those old farts would have been reading articles about the former librarian's conviction for murder, articles complete with a listing of all the poisons found in the poor bastard's entrails, an alphabetized list starting with the word *arsenic*, but no, all of that was swept under the proverbial rug in this town, unless you happen to overhear the truth, when the bartender at the Legion Hall makes the mistake of spicing up a Tuesday night by offering two-for-one happy hour until the cows come home or the old farts go home to change their Depends undergarments.

So, the old farts were crowding around the table near the computer terminal, hovering over the one copy of the daily newspaper, turning their hearing aids down to shout at others who were turning their hearing aids up to hear the shouting, back and forth and back and forth, a litany of bullshit regarding how many goddamn thousands of dollars they had recently lost in the Wall Street Meltdown Global Financial Crisis. Old farts with hundred percent polyester slacks and pockets still full of hundreds of thousands of dollars, yet wailing and sighing over the hits they had taken

in their IRAs and 401Ks and I don't even know what all the other accounts are called that they were hollering about, I don't even have a checking account for Christ's sake, I cash my unemployment checks at the Indian Casino. But all their hollering added to the librarian's confusion, and that's all that mattered, as I finished my email and read it through again to be sure it was good (half measures get a man nothing, after all) and sent it off into cyberspace, to be read as soon as possible, I hoped, by my mighty fine woman.

I never imagined that it would take my mighty fine woman all day and half the night just to get around to reading my email. I was bored shitless, waiting her out. I was sick of watching Wolf Blitzer on CNN, painting Hillary Clinton out to be a human being who should be elevated to Mother Theresa stature. I was sick of watching Bill O'Reilly on FOX, painting Hillary Clinton out to be a human being who should be confined in a special torture sanitarium for devious social threats. I would have watched a channel with an interesting program that put Hillary Clinton somewhere in the middle of Blitzer's take and O'Reilly's take, if such a program existed, which it doesn't anymore, because that chronic numb-nut goofball Tucker Carlson had to keep wearing those spoiled-child-garishly-dressed-by-preppy-daddy bow ties that eventually turned off and tuned out all his viewers and got his candy ass canned from MSNBC. And there wasn't much else on television, except Sanford and Son, which happened to be a shitty episode dealing with Lionel's problems with his lover woman, which I needed to see like I needed a hole in my head. I would have kept watching Sanford and Son if it were an episode full of Fred Sanford arguing with Aunt Esther until they damn near bitch-slapped each other.

The last channel I tried was ESPN and they were showing some kind of woman's billiards tournament, and that just made me damn near start to cry, remembering all the blessed times my mighty fine woman and I used to shoot pool at the local tavern. Wonderful evenings of enchantment where I would watch her bend and arch and strain to line up shots on tile

pool table, shots I paid no attention to, and rightfully so, what with her hot body looking so mighty fine, all contorted the way it gets when she shoots pool. Those splendid times always led back to hot panting action in her bed, exactly where I wanted to be and wasn't, thanks to crossing her boundaries.

No doubt, things would have been cooking and moving and grooving a lot sooner, between my mighty fine woman and I, if I hadn't made such a grand error before I ever met her, back when I decided to finally get a cell phone. I was out in Vegas for a long weekend of gambling action with a couple fraternity brothers of mine. No question, I was drunk, and I was a single man, and I had bet my last twenty bucks on a fifty to one shot at some bull ring of a horse track being broadcast in the sports book of a casino, I don't even remember which one. Son of a bitch if that nag didn't gallop on the lead the whole way to the wire, I had a wad of cash in my pocket that could have choked the poor horse if it had come upon the wad in its feed bucket, and we had left one casino for another and came upon a babe in a mini skirt and a sleeveless blouse, right there on the street corner, peddling cell phones and what she claimed was nationwide phone service. I did my dip-shit best to lead her on to other things later in the evening. She did her able best as one of the best salespeople to ever grace the face the earth. And I left Vegas with the same cell phone I have now, an utterly useless contraption that bounces calls between God knows how many cell phone towers before actually placing or receiving a call, a curious process that often leads to the power shutting off.

When I realized the power was off, I turned the newfangled thing back on, wishing I were still using nothing but the rotary phone on the wall at my place. When my cell phone came back to life, I saw that I had a text message, and lo and behold, it was from my mighty fine woman. A brief message saying *thanks for your note, come over here right now*. Needless to say, I didn't let my own door hit my own ass on the way out, and off I drove, twenty miles over the speed limit until I saw the Sheriff's patrol car in the tavern parking lot, upon which I drove the speed limit, straight to

her driveway. I opened the screen door to properly knock on the front door. Before I could even knock she opened the door and damn, she had nothing but her neon blue robe on, and she hadn't even bothered to tie the velour belt on the thing. What I was staring at was surely the same thing that made Adam glad that Eve had bitten into the proverbial apple, if indeed I still have that story straight, catechism classes were a long time ago, and I spent most of those classes drawing my own Pre-Goth versions of KISS Singer/Bassist Gene Simmons Dangling Tongues onto the faces of Jesus and all his apostles that adorned the front cover of my catechism book.

My mighty fine woman went into the kitchen and I plopped down on the sofa, waiting for her. She took a while in the kitchen, which was good, it gave me time to pick some Fritos out of the sofa cushions and toss them into the fire that was blazing in the fireplace. I wanted to be sure nothing would impede any ensuing shenanigans in a crinkly crackly way, if we happened to get things started to a sufficient degree right there on the sofa, before heading upstairs to bed. Hell, listening to those Fritos crackle louder than the crackling birch logs in the fireplace, I figured maybe the setting would be just right and we wouldn't even have to move on upstairs to the bedroom.

She came out of the kitchen with a bottle of beer in one hand and a bottle of V.O. in the other hand. And let me be clear about this. . . I have no problem whatsoever with a woman drinking a bit to get her groove on. But to say that she was drinking a bit would be an understatement of historic proportion, and not just any historic proportion. Saying she was drinking a bit would be like a history book from Communist Russia saying the Red Invasion of East Germany was a merely a government paperwork occurrence carried out at the request of Russian-loving Germans.

She was slugging the booze down like a boxer gulping from a water bottle between rounds of a title belt prizefight. How she managed that while walking into the living room, I don't know, but her legs were carrying her across the carpet while her arms were swinging like a circus juggler. Up

came the bottle of V.O. then down it went and up came the bottle of beer and so on, until she reached the sofa, sat down, belched, and never bothered to say *excuse me*. But let me clarify, she did wipe her mouth before kissing me, much more with her tongue than with her lips, so help me God. And help me He did. I had a tent pitched in my drawers that looked as big as the tent Sir Edmund Hillary must have pitched when he reached the top of Mount Everest. Well, maybe it wasn't that big for Christ's sake, but it was big enough for her to look at my drawers and bead her eyes in admiration at which point she said *hello big man*, in a tone of voice that made it clear to me I was not only as good as gold, I was in like Flynn.

Our contortions and gyrations simply couldn't be contained to the sofa, so off we rolled, somehow staying in hip swaying unison as we rolled, like two graceful ballet dancers performing Swan Lake for Christ's sake. Well, the truth is, we didn't look like graceful ballet dancers performing Swan Lake, we looked like mongrel horn-dogs performing a live theater rendition of Aerosmith's Back in the Saddle Again. Sooner rather than later we managed to uncontrollably yelp and howl right at the same time. Then we collapsed onto the carpet in front of the fire at which point I really was glad I had taken the initiative to finally get the vacuuming done. We stayed there by the fire for a good while, arms and legs all twisted up like those big hard pretzels they put in those big bags that make you wonder why they put so much air in the bags instead of more hard pretzels. Naked by the fire, we were spent, with only enough energy to slide into the spoon position, a glorious cuddle that went on until she farted with a force that rustled my ball sack, at which point I didn't even know if she said excuse me or not, she got up off the floor so fast headed toward the bathroom.

I've always been a big fan of Westerns, and I've seen every movie about Annie Oakley ever made, I'm sure of it, but I've never seen Annie Oakley turn a rope into a lasso the way my mighty fine woman used her robe to lasso me by the neck and lead me upstairs to the bedroom for round two. Flat on my back underneath her, I let her unfasten the lasso knot around

my neck as her hips kept up the kind of motion that makes a red-blooded American male believe to the core of his embers that he was put on this earth for the sole purpose of being underneath such female motion. Trouble was, my package was a shriveled hibernating mess after the savagery of round one downstairs and by the time she had the lasso of a robe off of my neck, I was wondering how much down time the Good Lord's plumbing in my loins was going to require, or if there wouldn't be any recovery at all, thanks to the Big Man Upstairs remembering how I defaced my catechism book. "Wait a little while, baby, just gimme some time to rest," I pleaded. My mighty fine woman said "Okay, sweetie." Then she let out a breathy sigh that proved to me why Budweiser and V.O. come in separate bottles.

Without question, I'm the kind of guy who believes the intricacies and intimacies that take place between a man and woman at the height of passion are, well, best kept between just the two of them. Suffice to say, she proceeded to do certain things to get me ready for round two, things that incorporated her gorgeous ass being in a rather close proximity to the gaping jaw centering my thrilled face. Then all of a sudden, like a Bionic Woman U.S. Navy Seal diver coming up for air, to put it bluntly, she rose up and turned to me then whispered in my ear. "I can't wait anymore," she said. "You've got no fucking idea what I'm going to do to you right now."

Now, I must tell you, I'm the kind of guy who's been told I've been fired from jobs because of my crazy fucking ideas. But I assure you, none of those crazy fucking ideas were as crazy as the fucking idea she put into action when she proceeded to return to her own landlocked version of U.S. Navy Seal diving. Let me just say she started working my whole package in racy and exotic ways, and by racy and exotic, well, I mean racy and exotic in the same manner that those premium cable channels talk about their late night adult programming. Yes, that kind of racy and exotic. And maybe if I hadn't been unemployed for so long and actually could still afford those premium cable channels, well, maybe I'd be up to speed on exactly what kind of divergence has taken place between what used to be considered racy

and exotic back when I subscribed to those channels, and what she started initiating. Maybe all that circus juggling of the beer and V.O. bottles had her hands still in a tizzy, I don't know, sometimes people get so riled up that they have to do something with their hands. For some reason, she chose to let one of those hands of hers wander on down and around to my, uh, back door. And that is when all hell really broke loose.

I suppose I would have had an inkling as to what the hell kind of tricks she had in mind that she was putting into action, if I had ever found the audacity to ask her why she had a copy of William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* on the bookshelf near her bed. And now I'm in a proctologist's office of all places, having blown this week's unemployment check on a doctor's visit of all things, getting ready to try and bullshit the doctor, hoping he'll believe I really did eat, apparently, way too many goddamn hot peppers. Maybe you're asking yourself, well, why in the hell did that dip-shit let things happen the way they did? All I can tell you is, she said she knew what she was doing so I rolled with it, for a while, until all I could do was roll away from her, until I landed face first on the hardwood floor of her bedroom. But at least it taught me, once and for all, a very important lesson. Yes, certainly each one of us human beings simply has certain boundaries that should never be crossed.

JIM

Todd Easton Mills

There was Los Angeles Street and there was Main. It was October and the night was cold enough to knock down the smog but not so cold that bums couldn't sleep in a doorway. If it got too cold, then someone would light an oil-drum fire and the bums would come out from the stoops, with a bottle of wine in a paper bag or a curved pint in their front pocket. It was like that—gathering around the fire, pieces of cardboard folded and thrown in like logs. Then something else catches and goes up like a burning eagle. This is how Jim liked it.

So he drank and he talked about life.
He was twenty-six.
He was more alert when he was drunk and funnier too.
But that depended on who he was talking to.

Usually, Jim listened;
he listened with his head pushed forward,
and when the old guys repeated,
Jim's lips would move as he followed along.

Jim had a few stories to tell,
and Jim was getting good. He had been.

He *had* been—like the rest.
He had been beaten up.
He had been robbed at knife and gunpoint.
He was passing through.

He was idling in the concourse
at Union Station.
He was trying to sleep in a comfortable chair
in the ornate waiting room.

He was low.

A policeman asked Jim if he was waiting for a train. He said, “Yeah,” and picked up the newspaper that had fallen in his lap. Jim needed to get his own place. He would pretty soon. In the meantime, he had his job at the Mannequin Factory in San Pedro at \$6.50 per hour.

*

The day labor pool operated out of a storefront on Main with a cracked window. The dispatcher was an old-timer named Booker. He was also called Boot—or The Boot. He had a full-faced beard that covered his neck and horn-rimmed glasses. He talked smart and was built like a heavyweight. His rule was that anyone going out on a job needed a haircut and a shave.

“What about you, Booker?” He would stand up. “What *about* me?” The other requirements were you had to be on time and you couldn’t have liquor on your breath. Since most of the men were alcoholics, they chewed gum to cover it. That was okay with Booker; he just didn’t want to smell it.

“Where’s Eddie?” Booker asked. “He was supposed to be here twenty minutes ago.”

“I think Eddie is sick,” Joe said. “I saw him last night; he didn’t look so good.”

“He driving today. Goddamn it. He was supposed be here with his Plymouth.”

“I don’t think he’s coming in, Book.” Joe said. He was wearing a blue stocking cap and a Army fatigue jacket. He was smoking a cigarette he dug out of the heavy glass ashtray on the end table.

“Okay, how many men do we have for San Pedro toady?” Booker looked at his roster, “Just three? Goddamn it, I’ll have to drive.”

*

The Mannequin Factory was a few blocks from Berth 240, in the part of the city that was once tide flats and marsh. The building was operated by Bethlehem, then Todd Shipyards after World War II. Jim worked in the studio at the back of the building with the mannequin maker Sal.

“Good morning, Sal,” Jim said brightly, He liked working with Sal. He was learning something.

“Good morning, Jim. Did you get the film for the Polaroid?”

“They ran out, Won’t have it for a week,” Jim said self-consciously, scratching his bedbug bites.

Sal was a master sculptor. When he was a student in Florence, he apprenticed with an old man who taught him how to draw and make clay models. There was a rasp on the worktable, carving tools, mixing bowls, calipers. There was a turntable and stacks of Polaroids.

“Mr. Grossman want’a thirteen mannequins this year,” Sal said.

“So, he’s upped it by one,” Jim said.

“He want’a one more this year...one more next,” Sal lamented. He was a short, broad-shouldered man with blue eyes and a goatee.

*

To meet the accelerating production schedule, Sal cast whatever parts he could.

There were sets of beautiful arms and legs hanging from wires.

Sal made exquisite heads.

This was his art. *This* he didn’t rush.

“What are you working on, Sal?”

“Something new.” Sal’s eyes lit up. “Something out’a this world.”

“What, Sal—a new girl?”

“A beauty, a Mexican beauty. She look Italian. I start on her last year. Then she no come around.”

There was a set of arms on the table that were long, thin, nicely tapered, and a set of hands.

“Nice hands.” Jim said.

“You wait.”

“What time is the model coming in?” Jim asked.

“Five o’clock.”

“Do you need some help?” Jim asked, smiling.

“You like to meet’a the girl?” Sal asked.

“No, I just want to learn.”

“You’a smart boy, Jim,” Sal said.

At five-thirty the model, Alexandra, arrived. She was wearing a sweater and jeans. When she walked into the workshop, Jim thought she might be over six feet tall. Under the high-trussed ceiling, with no object for scale, he gauged by her long arms and legs.

“Hello, Alexandra. You back. You disappear; now you back.”

“Sorry I’m late, Sal. I missed my bus,” Alexandra said.

She was an unusual beauty.

Her nose was too long.

She had one eye blue, one eye brown.

She might have been an optical illusion.

She had hair like a waterfall.

Jim couldn’t take his eyes off her.

“Jim, get the Polaroid.” Sal said, moving around the studio quickly.

“Right, boss.” Suddenly, Jim remembered there were only three shots left.

“Jim, you take the Polaroids, I draw. We work together on this one. She’s not a easy.” Sal picked up his calipers and measured the distance between her eyes. “This one goes like this and like that. She put on a little weight.”

“Are those my legs?” Alexandra asked.

“Those the legs I made the last time.” Sal coughed.

“Are we going make the rest of me?” Alexandra asked.

“Yes, we make the rest. But I can’t go fast unless I cast.” Sal was moving around Alexandra drawing her nose and chin in profile.

“That’s all right with me,” Alexandra said.

“That’s make a lot of sense,” Jim said quickly. “Do you want me to mix up a bucket of latex?”

“Better make two.” Sal coughed again.

Jim went to the storeroom to get two bags and a couple of buckets.

He passed by a Dumpster with discarded arms and legs. When he got back to the studio, Alexandra had taken off her sweater and jeans. She sat

on the stool in the bright light, facing it like it was the sun, She and Sal were laughing. Sal told her to pull in her tummy.

“Jim, we ready for the latex.”

“Alexandra, you ready?” Sal asked.

Alexandra, on the stool, in the warmth of a standing klieg, stripped down and smiled. Her hips were wider, her breasts larger than at the last session with Sal. He would have to cast everything again. She was something new—a *Roman* beauty.

“Who is going to apply the latex?” Sal asked.

“I got it, Sal,” Jim said. He was dazzled by her calm and the frankness of her pose. Alexandra felt safe in the strong light.

“Okay, you put it on, Jim. Ready, Alexandra?”

Alexandra smiled. “Sure.”

Sal started coughing again. He coughed hard and a little blood came up. He pointed at his throat.

“Water? Do you need water, Sal?”

Sal nodded yes... Yes! Jim ran back to the tap and filled a coffee mug. When he got back Alexandra was standing over Sal. He was unconscious.

*

Sal didn't have many friends. Or maybe he did and Jim couldn't find them. Mr. Grossman asked Jim to go to Sal's apartment to look around. Sal had a vast collection of art books in floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. His apartment was a mess. This would take some time. Jim made himself a cup of coffee and started looking for an address book. Sal had a desk with a heavy, black rotary phone. He looked in each of the three underslung drawers. Nothing. Mr. Grossman said Sal died eating an apple. But why was Sal always coughing. There was a book about Rodan sitting on the desk with a piece of yellow paper for a bookmark. Sal had written: “The secret is to force the gesture.”

Jim spun in Sal's desk chair. He didn't know what that meant. He looked through the book and saw that Rodan put huge hands and feet on his models.

*

Mr. Grossman didn't come to the funeral but he sent flowers. The mortician asked if the beautiful woman with the veil was a family member. Jim said he didn't know. He never saw anybody from Sal's family. That night he had drinks at the Ace High with Joe and Hank.

"The gesture, you exaggerate, but you don't lie!" Sal said.

Jim looked at himself in the mirror. He hadn't shaved in six days. His beard was oily and black. He had a black eye. How did he get that? He woke up on the floor of the bar. The bartender was named The Dispenser, which was a joke about his chin, which was like a Coke machine. When Jim woke up the stools above him looked like palm trees. Was he that drunk? In the barroom mirror was the face of Minerva, goddess of memory, What was that drink? What was so funny? Why were Fred and Hank laughing all night? What is absinthe?

Jim didn't have any furniture in his apartment, just his mattress that lay on the floor. His gas wasn't turned on yet. His bedbug bites felt like golf balls. He had never studied art, but things appeared larger today—in bold relief. Like when he went back for his last paycheck and saw a truckload of naked mannequins loaded in the truck; they towered like a grove of Sycamores and attracted a strong wind.

"Where did you learn to draw, Jim?" It was Sal again. Well, he knew the answer. His teacher in eighth grade had taught him how to draw. The secret, she said, was to look at what you draw, not the paper.

"In school," Jim said out loud.

"They taught you right. Now come here. Look at this." With Sal's voice came a faint picture of his mentor.

*

"I like the way you make the shoulders, Sal, the bumps," Jim said. It was time for his break. He went back to the lounge and lit a cigarette. There were six large glass ashtrays loaded with butts. There was grease at the bottom of the ashtray and the same grease on the ceiling. Any smoker who

thought about it made the connection to his own lungs. The upholstered rocking chair in the lounge was Jim's lung. It was Fred's lung too. They all three shared a lung. Jim lay on the barroom floor. Why was his mind racing so fast?

*

Jim couldn't remember how he got back to his apartment. But it was Booker who drove him. Booker had come in about 1:00 a.m. and made sure that Jim got upstairs. He left him in the bathroom, propped up against the green tile, which Jim saw as a gigantic Ping-Pong paddle.

When Jim woke he needed air. He got up and thought for a moment that he was tall enough to walk off the metal fire escape with a long step and go a couple of blocks down the street. His head was throbbing; the headache was the symptom of his expanding thoughts.

He could feel the pain.
The obsessional pain of men
in bars
and women in bars
and men behind bars,

where the obsession
is the magazine—
Each mannequin more beautiful
than the next.

They were growing bigger, his bedbug bites. One was so big, he thought of it like a spring-loaded boxing glove. Maybe he could fall on it and it would bounce him back to his feet. Jim was wondering if he would be able to afford a car. Can anyone afford a car? Maybe if he made a trillion dollars. He was wondering if he had enough to buy a bar of soap. He was shaving. He nicked himself and his blood ran out the cold-water faucet. Now someone was banging on his door with a tire iron.

"Hello." It was a woman's voice.

"One second." Jim ran out, his face still wet. He had a towel in his hands. "I thought I recognized that voice."

It was the beautiful model, Alexandra.

“Alexandra! Hello...come in. How did you find me here?”

“I asked around, down at the factory, I just got my first car.”

“You did? What kind of car? Come in.”

“Did you cut yourself shaving?”

“I did, just now. What kind of car?”

“A Volkswagen Bug,” Alexandra said.

“That’s nice. I was just about to make a cup of coffee. I have a pot going. Would you like a cup?”

“Sure.” Alexandra didn’t know how to start. “I, uh...”

“I, uh...” Jim didn’t know how to talk.

“Well, I saw you at the funeral parlor,” Alexandra said.

“But nobody came to the funeral,” Jim said.

“I did. I came. I saw Sal in the casket.”

“He looked good, didn’t he? You must have arrived before me.”

“I got there before anyone, I wanted to say good-bye.” She was wearing a tight skirt, several inches below the knee, and a sweater.

“I, uh...” Alexandra said.

“I get the feeling that something is going to happen,” Jim said.

“What do you mean?” Alexandra asked. She adjusted her skirt, smoothing it down. There was only one place to sit—the mattress.

“I don’t know,” Jim said.

“I don’t know either,” Alexandra said.

“How long did you know Sal?”

“For about six months, He was teaching me how to draw.” Alexandra crossed her long, well-shaved legs.

“You worked at Sal’s studio?” Jim asked. He was surprised.

“No, he was teaching me at his apartment. Are you interested in art?”

“Yes, very interested. Sal was teaching me too. Would you like a *bucket* of coffee!” Jim asked suddenly, in a very loud voice.

“No, I’ll have a *wheelbarrow!*” Alexandra replied. She was louder and laughed like a jackhammer. She laughed like a jackhammer, and they fell into each other’s arms.

He was a bulldozer;
she was a Ferris wheel.
The gesture
was no longer suggestion.

They were lovers
with gigantic hands and feet.
Massive moving parts,
oil gushing
from ball bearings like watermelons.
They were making art until dawn.
Making wheelbarrows of art.

“Let’s go for breakfast,” Jim said.

“I would love to,” Alexandra replied. “And lunch, lunch, lunch!”

THE END

A Note to the New Homeowners

Shane Alan Noecker

A few things:

1. These keys here on the counter are the only set in my possession. You can keep the Jamaica-flag-with-pot-leaf keychain. I never got Spoorthi's set back from her, as it's pretty impossible to get keys back from someone who doesn't return your phone calls. So you can decide whether or not you want to get the locks changed. I mean, don't worry about Spoorthi. She's a very petite woman. Her legs are no thicker than the peach tree in the front yard. And she's passive. She lets things happen to her. So if she kept a set of keys, I wouldn't worry about it. I'm not deriding her, but I just want you to know she's basically harmless.

However, I'm not sure if she made a key for Lucas, who is certainly not harmless. He'll assault you for no reason. You can decide if you want to take your chances. I'd recommend a locksmith if I knew one.

Note: If Lucas does show up at the house and someone lets him in and he immediately starts walking toward you like he's been watching a Rocky marathon, don't bother calling the cops because he's a lawyer and his dad's a judge.

Note: If he throws a punch at you without provocation, but you're able to grab a handful of his greasy hair, you should generally be able to avoid the brunt of each subsequent blow.

2. I'm not sure if the peach tree in front will produce fruit this year. It hasn't yet. It may be that it's still too young. My soon-to-be-ex-father-in-law told me that some fruit trees need to be planted in pairs for pollination. He wasn't sure if the peach was one of these. Though it's still just a sapling, I'm

sad to be leaving it behind. We planted it ourselves, and I'd always imagined tickling the ears of our children with the fuzzy skin of the future fruit.

3. The right—in our case hers—sink in the master bathroom sometimes clogs up. This has nothing to do with the P-trap as I first suspected, but is deeper down the line. If it ever gets clogged, you should just call Roto-Rooter, as filling the whole sink with Draino will only piss the plumber off. Before we figured out that the problem was deeper, I thought that facial hair was probably the culprit.

Let me explain. My wife's upper lip, which had been limned with bleached blonde hairs while we were dating, became as hairless as her ruddy lips the week of our wedding. The first time I noticed this, I was fearful that she'd started shaving. Now I know this may seem like an impossibility. How could a Princeton-educated woman not know that shaving would only cause the hairs to resurrect thicker and coarser? But there are quite a few things they don't teach at Princeton.

We had a policy, from our third date onward, that we would always be completely honest with one another. We would keep no secrets. We would tell each other when we were angry or horny or sad. We would try to be one in mind as well as in body.

So when I suspected her of shaving, I asked her where her moustache had gone.

She didn't answer me. Her dimples receded and her fat brown eyes turned away.

"I always thought it was cute," I added.

She still didn't respond. I let it pass. I really did think her blonde moustache was cute. I missed moistening the light caterpillar fuzz with kisses.

But as I said, the plumber found no hair. He thinks there may be something living in the pipe, some sort of nematode colony that periodically dies off in droves and chokes the PVC with wormy carcasses.

Sometime after the first clog-up, I found a receipt for a laser hair

removal clinic in the bathroom trash can. I was relieved to know that I wouldn't one day find myself married to the bearded lady, but now I wonder, was that the first thing she'd kept from me, her first secret?

4. The water shut-off valve is on the side of the house, right below the hose hook-up.

5. Garbage day is Tuesday. Be sure to roll the can to the curb the night before, as they usually come by around six. I hope you won't mind, but I threw some stuff in the can that I don't want to take with me a—broken badminton set, an old area rug, a few other things.

6. Parking on the street overnight is illegal according to a city ordinance. Please be careful about this, the cops will ticket you. It can be annoying, but it's a good law, I think. You get to know your neighbor's cars, and you can tell if there's a suspicious vehicle in the neighborhood.

Like one night when I came home late from work. There was a strange curvaceous sports ear on the street. This was last October. The sun was already setting. I remember the orange glint in the crook of the Mercedes hood ornament.

Spoorthi met me at the door, which she hadn't done for a very long time. I tried to step past her, but she wouldn't allow it. She took my briefcase and set it down. She kissed me. And there in the entryway, we made love. Consider adding more grout to the entryway floor. The corners of the tiles are as sharp as shale. Even though there was a rug, I could still feel their edges digging into my forearms. I can only imagine what it must have felt like for Spoorthi. But she didn't complain. She encouraged me on, repeating my name in such quick succession, I almost didn't hear the car engine coming to life outside.

When we'd each caught our breath, she stood and walked, naked, around the corner. After dressing, I followed her down the hallway, past the pink and white striped wall paper, which she picked out, not me. Unfortu-

nately for you, it's the newest improvement to the house and won't need to be replaced for at least a decade.

Our bed was unmade. The air, cold. Spoorthi stood by an open window trying to wedge the screen back in place.

"I'm fixing this," she said.

I could see that.

"I was letting a bee out."

"Isn't it late for bees," I said.

"See for yourself."

Then I heard a faint electronic droning. I wanted to believe that she was telling the truth. And maybe she had been.

"In the bathroom." She pointed.

Stepping onto the linoleum, I saw hundreds of bees. In the tub. In the toilet. On the floor. Most were dead. The rest seemed half-dazed, waddling over one another, wandering circuitously. How had they gotten in? And what was wrong with them? Were they starving? Had they eaten some household chemical? I didn't know. There were so many of them. If they'd risen up, they could have driven my wife and me from this house. But they only continued turning their lazy dance steps along every shining surface.

"Look at all of them." Spoorthi bent down and flicked a pale one wandering along the rail of the tub.

That was how we found out there were bees living in the west wall. You should already know about this. As it is my legal obligation to disclose any prior infestations, I told my Realtor and she should have told your Realtor, but I doubt that your Realtor told you the whole story. The swarm had apparently gotten in through the hole where the air conditioner hookup feeds into the house. They colonized a pocket in the wall where the insulation wasn't very thick and, eventually, chewed a small hole through the sheetrock where the wall met the ceiling. Though I hadn't been around to see them, I imagine they must have practically poured out of the hole. Hundreds of them. To become a contorting mass dying as one in the tub.

Which was really a convenient place for them to die. We closed the door and showered in the other bathroom for two days. And when we looked again, they were all dead. We swept up their carcasses and scooped them into a grocery sack . We didn't need to call the exterminator. No one got stung. And the paper sack didn't weigh any more when the whole bottom was hidden beneath their fuzzy shells.

Descant

Mary Ann O’Gorman

Richard came home and said, “I’ve got good news and bad news. I was let go at the casino and rehired by the one in Shreveport. Take your pick as to which is which.” Cathy could only think about Eve’s cross. It sat on the highway to the mall, straight, tall as a white egret in the wild saw palmettos, held in with an eighteen inch concrete footer. Cathy had Eve’s name and date of birth and death burned on it and dug the hole for the concrete herself, right next to where she found some shards of glass.

Cathy had not gone to the scene of the accident until two days after Eve’s death. She left the closed casket in the funeral home alone, and had Richard drive her out onto the highway. They parked on the shoulder and Cathy walked along the asphalt in her Sunday clothes, the cars driving by her so quickly they stirred up a wind that shook her through. She walked until she found the broken glass, then she walked back to the car and took a flare from the trunk and laid it in the grass as a marker. This is where Eve left the world. She asked Richard to take her back to the funeral home where she sat in silence for the hours between the first and second visitation. Richard sat with her in silence, and stood up quickly to greet the first visitors of the evening.

For three years, Cathy had kept the cross up. On holidays, she would drive out to the highway and wrap a decorated wreath around the cross, attaching it with wires so it wouldn’t blow away. On Eve’s birthday, she would place simple bouquets of flowers, irises and dyed chrysanthemumss all in purple, Eve’s favorite color. This public place let Cathy know that anyone who went past the cross would think of her girl, her child, even if they had never met her.

And now Richard was asking her to move 250 miles away. The cemetery where Eve was buried was not as precious to Cathy as the places where Eve's soul had entered and left this earth. Soon after Eve's death, Cathy's doctor suggested she have a hysterectomy as a solution to the painful periods she suffered through each month, but Cathy refused. Her uterus was where Eve's life had started and was now a sacred place to her. When she cramped and curled up in her bed, she remembered that the pear shaped envelope in her body was where Eve's soul had entered the world. She held the pain to herself and was glad to be reminded of the hidden, sacred place.

The cemetery held something that did not look like her daughter, something that Richard had turned away from, something that caused him to fall into her arms in the cold room in the hospital. Richard had only looked at Eve's face and could not see her. Cathy saw Eve's hand and recognized her chipped jungle red nail polish and knew that this was her baby. "She's with God now," Cathy said to Richard to soothe him, but neither one of them believed in God from that moment on, so her words were not of any value.

She could leave all that behind her, but she could not leave the cross.

"So what am I supposed to do about Eve's cross?" she asked him.

Richard couldn't answer the question. He wasn't a man to think out loud. He simply said, "I guess we'll have to think about that." Then he started looking at houses in Shreveport on the internet.

Richard didn't go to the cross anymore. The first year, he would walk out on the highway with Cathy and help her hold down the wreath while she fastened it on. He would place his hand on her back as they walked back to the car, helping her in on the passenger side, closing the door for her. She would watch him walk around the front of the car, and if a truck went by, the tightly sealed capsule of the car would rock and Richard seemed vulnerable and exposed so close to the highway. She wanted to thank him for the child and for the help and for the hand on her back, but she didn't know how. They would stop at the Sonic, Eve's old workplaces

and the girls on skates would roll over to their car and reach in through the window to give her a tender hug. Richard and Cathy would order some food and pick at it in the car, watching the young girls, not their daughter, balance the trays as they spun on their skates. Cathy would leave Richard her last few tater tots, and that was the best way she could thank him.

But after the first anniversary of Eve's death, Cathy stopped asking Richard to come to the cross with her. She would visit mid-morning, on her break from work. He never asked to go to the cross, and Cathy began to think that maybe he thought a year was enough. She began to question her own visits, wondering if there was a time to stop grieving a child, but she could not stop going. If the cross was neglected, she would not be doing all she could as a mother. But it was more than that. If she did not visit the cross, she might begin to forget, the way the girls at the Sonic had forgotten, or moved on, or were reluctant to comfort her still, delivering her food to the car with a simple, "Here you go, ma'am," as if now they did not know her.

In bed that night, lying in the dark, Richard said, "It looks like we can get a little more house for the dollar in Shreveport."

Cathy said, "We don't need more house." She reached across the mattress and held his hand. "What am I supposed to do about Eve?"

He said, "Maybe you could get someone to take care of the cross for you. Maybe your sister."

Cathy thought of her sister. Liz had come to the house within two weeks of the funeral with boxes and tape and encouraged Cathy to pack up Eve's things. Cathy was still numb and simply did as Liz told her to. Some of the boxes disappeared, and some were in a closet, labeled "baby clothes," "school work," "knick knacks," and no mention of Eve. Liz's big block letters in black marker made Cathy shrink when she saw them. "I don't think Liz would do it," she said to Richard. "When do you have to start up there?"

"In two weeks. You need to tell them at work that you'll be leaving. I'll

call the landlord tomorrow, see if I can get the deposit back.” He squeezed her hand. “I know this sounds strange, but how about a lawn service? Maybe they could keep it looking nice.”

Cathy imagined a small pick up pulling up on the highway, a man with a weed whacker walking around the cross in a deliberate circle, his tan hands tying the new wreath on, and then as he returned to the truck, spitting on the ground and reaching for his cell phone to find out where to go next. He would get into his truck, fill out a bill on a clipboard, and drive away. After the novelty of the job wore off the cross would be a task on his list, not even a person he didn't know. “I'll think about it,” she said to Richard.

She told them at work that she would be moving to Shreveport and this was her two weeks notice. Then she drove out to the cross during her lunch break. She didn't talk to Eve at the cross. Cathy knew she wasn't there. The cross, if anything, reminded Cathy that Eve was not here anymore. When she visited the cross she had the same feeling of love that she had felt watching Eve in a school play as a child, or seeing her working at the Sonic when she drove by. Eve was not hers to keep, but she was hers to love from a lookout point. This day, she stared at the cross and thought about how she could leave it.

Staying put was an option. Richard could move to Shreveport, she could find a smaller place, and they could travel back and forth every other weekend. But the emptiness of the bed at night, the lack of Richard, frightened Cathy. She felt that if it was someone else, she would think that person was crazy to stay to maintain the cross. Then she felt completely opposite, that leaving the cross was out of the question.

She adjusted the wreath of spring flowers and ran her hands along the horizontal bar they rested on. She would have to leave. Just as she could not part with her uterus, she could not leave Richard. Richard also was a source of Eve. To leave him was to leave the beginning of her child. Eve's conception had been an accident. Cathy and Richard were just kids, fifteen and sixteen, and one afternoon things had gone too far.

Cathy felt caught up in the chaos of her body and Richard's body and could not think clearly. When she told Richard she was pregnant, he smiled and held her. With help from their families, the two of them managed to raise their girl. There was no heroism between them, just the welcoming smile that Richard gave her that time, and she knew

The next day, Cathy drove to the back door of the Home Depot and asked for a cardboard box that had held a fridge. A man handed her the cardboard, and she collapsed it as little as possible and put it in the back seat. She then went into the store and bought a box cutter, sandpaper, several paintbrushes, a can of polyurethane, duct tape, and some landscaping stones from the garden center. She drove to the cross, parked right in front of it, and pulled the cardboard box from the car. She set the box on top of the cross, and used the stones to hold down the flaps that splayed out on the ground. On the side of the box that faced the pines, away from the highway, Cathy cut a door flap in the cardboard, and crawled into the small mausoleum with the cross. She removed the wreath and put it aside with the plan to save it in a box with the other wreaths and materials she used to make them. Then, she started to lightly sand the cross.

In the confined space of the box, the highway sounds played louder and the wind of the passing cars seemed stronger. Cathy worked quickly, wiping the dust off the cross, then applied a coat of polyurethane. The strong smell of the chemicals made her dizzy in the dark box, and she pushed the flap open several times to get some air. The sudden sunlight blinded her, and back in the dimness of the box she saw spots in front of her eyes that lasted long enough to feel permanent. She applied the polyurethane through the darkness of her temporary blindness until she was seeing again in the brown light of the box.

When she had the first coat on, she crawled out and leaned against her car. She had to allow four hours for the first coat to become smooth and hard. She opened the passenger door of the car and sat with her legs outside the car, and waited in silence, getting comfortable with the rocking motion

of the car. When the county police pulled up behind her, she was dozing in the passenger seat, the sunshine warm on her legs.

“Ma’am,” he asked “are you okay?”

Cathy was disoriented. “I think so,” she said.

“Are you having car trouble? Can I call roadside assistance for you?”

His dark uniform was a silhouette with the sun high behind him.

“Oh, no, I am fine.” She explained to the officer what she was doing, and pointed to the cardboard box. “I don’t want to uncover it until that first coat is okay and won’t be picking up the dust from the road.”

“I understand that, ma’am, but I can’t let you just sit here on the highway like this. You are posing a hazard to yourself and others.”

Cathy watched him open the door flap and he disappeared into the box for a moment. His head rose over the box.

“It’s hard enough,” he said. “I’ll need you to pack up now.”

Cathy wanted to stay longer, but she knew the officer would not let her. She knew he was being kind and did not want to reject his kindness. He held the box still as she put the stones in the car, then helped her gently fold the box to fit in the back seat.

“I will have to come tomorrow,” she said. “I need to get a second coat on before I move to Shreveport.”

“We’ll worry about that tomorrow. Just know that if I see you here, I will have to ask you to move on.” Cathy felt that he wouldn’t see her tomorrow. even if he drove by three times.

When she got to the cross the next day, she quickly set the box up and stepped in. In the dim light, she ran her hands over the cross and felt the smooth hardness of the polyurethane. She applied the second coat deftly, thoughtlessly, like tying a shoelace or wiping a running nose. In the box she felt the gravel under her knees. She lifted a knee and brushed the loose rocks to the side. What she thought was a pebble stuck into her hands but when she tried to brush it off, it stung like a wasp sting. She held her hand outside the cardboard flap of the door and saw the sliver of glass in her

hand. She pinched it between her fingernails and tugged on it. It slipped out and left a bead of blood on the palm of her hand. Cathy stuck her hand in her mouth and tasted the saltiness of her blood.

Then she took the sliver of glass and placed it on the sticky surface of the cross. Back in the dimness of the box, she brushed her hands along the ground, pushing through the grass for the harder surfaces. She retrieved pebbles, a soda can ring, and more glass. She placed the items around Eve's name that ran on the vertical piece of the cross. She could not see what she was doing. The front of the cross was facing the road, and was on the closed side of the box. She gently reached around and placed a pebble, another sliver of glass, a piece of metal, around the name facing the highway.

Cathy knew that Eve had lain here on the road, her small body flung out of the car, her blood seeping through the grass that hid the rough gravel and the trash tossed out a window. She had taken a few last breaths here while her boyfriend ran from the car looking for her everywhere but where she was. Inside this box, the smallness of Eve's end took up all the space and became large. Cathy had put the cross up, but the gravel, the glass, the dirt had taken Eve in and was truly the last bit of her on this earth. Cathy pressed what she could find into the cross.

She returned to the car, dizzy from the polyurethane which she now carried with her on her fingers. Again, she sat with the door open, her legs over the side of the car. She curled up on the seat and fell asleep. Again, the county police stopped, and the same officer woke her up.

"I don't think it is dry enough yet," he said to her. She knew he had checked it before he woke her. "But I will need to ask you to leave. I have driven by three times already. If something should happen to you, or because of you, I would be responsible."

She stood up and held onto the side of the car. "That's fine," she said, "I'm done." Cathy placed the stones in the car while the officer held the box still, then they put the box in the car, a little less gently today. The unveiled cross stood, still white, but the gravel and glass around Eve's name added

a texture to the surface that Cathy was proud of. She stood there, hoping some of the glass shards would catch the sun. An eighteen wheeler raced past, and the wind drifted over the cross, dusting it lightly with red dust, quieting the brilliance of the white, making the mosaic subtle, more a part of the highway and the grass.

Spoons

Taylor Eagan

I knocked three times and checked the apartment number twice before the door opened and when it finally did, I found a beautiful man staring at me. Minutes later I was sitting in his living room, clutching my purse and staring at the coffee table. It was covered in coasters of every color, design and size. One read, “Bottoms up!” another displayed what I believed to be a vintage portrait of Jesus. Magazines and newspapers with ripped corners and water stains were stacked in neat piles around the room. I picked up the closest journal to find it dated and bar-coded by a library I had never heard of. I set it back down and cleared my throat. The beautiful man smiled.

“Want something to drink?” He stood up from the love seat, his sweaty calves making an appalling thwap as they un-leech themselves from the russet leather. I crossed my bare legs which felt unexpectedly naked, knobby and ashen.

“No thanks. I’m fine.” I didn’t mention the flask I kept hidden in my purse for such occasions. I also didn’t mention that I had drunk the majority of it before I had even stepped out of my car. I was never very good with nerves and this was the first date I had had in a long time.

I couldn’t do it alone.

“We could play a game until we think of somewhere to eat. I honestly didn’t expect you to show up.” He squatted in front of his TV stand and opened one of the cabinets. Several Scrabble letters cascaded onto the carpet. “How about dominoes? Connect Four?” He faltered, shoving box after box to the side, more game pieces spouting to the floor. “Clue? It’s my favorite.”

I could feel my eyes start to water.

“I haven’t played any of those since I was, like, thirteen. Not that you can’t play them when you’re older, it’s just...well. I don’t really play board games anymore.”

The tiny buckle that held my left high-heeled pump together looked bent. I bounced my foot up and down until it broke completely. My shoe fell to the floor.

“Shit.”

Liam almost looked concerned as he picked up tiny metal trinkets. A thimble, a boot and what looked to be a battleship.

“It happens all the time. Really.” I gulped and my mouth felt dry. “How about that drink?”

After he had left to make the Jack and coke I had requested, I began to wander around the room. His apartment was small and pristine, yet filled with items that some would consider clutter. I wondered if he had a cleaning lady.

“Do you have a cleaning lady?” I heard him cough, and when he returned from the kitchen, his cheeks were flushed red. I had never seen a man blush before. It was endearing.

The coffee table, chairs, curio cabinet and bookshelf all seemed to match. I guessed the wood to be pine; sanded and oiled with a pale blonde varnish. Classy, yet not over-priced.

I found everything in the room distracting.

“Want to have sex?”

I nearly choked on my own tongue.

“Excuse me?”

“I was just kidding.” He laughed before I could slap him. How could a man be so revolting and so adorable at the same time?

I bounced my broken heel again, drinking as fast as I could.

Liam was an attractive man. In fact, he was the most attractive man I had ever been on a date with. His arms were cut with veins and when he walked, he had to take short, waddling steps to accommodate the bolts of iron muscle that ran down his thighs.

“How about Indian?” He was sparring with his tie and the tie was winning. “Maybe Middle-Eastern?”

“Let me.” I took the tie from him and pulled it around my own neck. Just as I slid the skinniest end into the tag that hid behind the fat end, I noticed three initials written in permanent marker.

L.A.S.

“Isn’t your last name Alexander?” I loosened the tie and slipped it back over my head.

“Yes,” he exclaimed, ripping the freshly knotted cloth from my hand.

Thirty minutes and two drinks later we were on our way to The Taj, the town’s most popular Indian restaurant. My drinks began to kick in the moment Liam had pumped his car into gear and the yellow streetlights flew by my window, leaving long paths that looked like comet tails. Or hair. I gagged at the thought.

“So, Liam.” I was feeling daring. The alcohol coursed right to my head. I smiled with all my teeth and in my mind they sparkled. “What made you ask me out for a date?”

He tightened his grip for a turn, taking glances at me with just his eyes. Doing so without turning his head made him look like and a chameleon. A chameleon with big olive eyes and sweet eyelashes that curled. Big, big, eyes.

The button for the radio was massive. I punched it and the hushed wail of a violin began to bleed through the speakers.

“What the hell do you listen to?” I pressed several other buttons.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?” He leaned closer to the wheel. “I prefer not to talk while I drive.” He pressed the colossal power button again and the oldies station I had found faded away. I must have made a face and he reached over to pat my hands which were laced together in my lap. I had to smile.

Something in the glove compartment rattled and before I know it we were parked and Liam was paying the meter.

“You coming?”

“Yeah. Just a second.” I felt around by my feet for my purse which seemed to have exploded sometime during the ride from Liam’s apartment. “I dropped something.”

One by one, I found the contents that my purse had regurgitated. My wallet, flask, keys, cigarettes and a lighter. Then three more lighters. Then four more. None of which were mine. I peeked between my legs and under the seat. Blood rushed quickly to my head.

Nearly a hundred lighters. Red ones. Ones with flowered prints. Zippo’s and cheap ones from gas stations. Hundreds of lighters in a plastic bag.

“Colleen?”

I sat up and undid the top buttons of my sweater. He said my name like he was calling for a dog. It made me feel like Lassie.

“Are you alright?” Liam’s tanned face appeared at my window. He opened the door for me.

“Absolutely,” I lied. An image of the bag full of lighters flashed into my mind. “Just a little warm is all.” I unbuttoned the rest of the buttons.

“Wait until you try the food.” He grabbed my hand and held it until we had been seated.

Once we had found our table, napkins unfolded on our laps and water glasses full, Liam ordered Lamb Curry and I followed behind with Chicken Pakora and a glass of pinot noir. Usually a white wine would satisfy my thirst, but tonight had turned out to be unnecessarily traumatic and I wasn’t feeling much like myself.

While we waited for our food we talked. We began with literature. He rarely had time to read, though when he found an empty thirty minutes, he made it a priority. One of his favorite authors was Gogol and another was one I couldn’t pronounce. Next he brought up favorite vacation spots. Liam wasn’t much for traveling but he’d been to a dozen different countries and almost every state.

“I absolutely love sailing,” he said, rearranging the silver utensils and dove colored china in front of him.

“You have a boat?” I sipped from my wine glass slowly this time. I wished I had chosen a sushi bar. Sake bombs would have been so much more fun.

“No. I borrow a friend’s.” He switched his salad and dinner fork. Liam’s spoon sailed off the edge of the table and he disappeared below the folds of the cloth. He reappeared before long but to no avail and he shrugged.

The waitress returned with plates piled high with steaming Indian cuisine and Liam asked for a new spoon. In the glow of the centerpiece candle, I felt like a queen. The skin of our hands looked as smooth as melted butter and with every flicker of the wick, more of Liam’s freckles were erased.

“What?” He stopped chewing.

“Hmm?”

“You were staring.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize.” I picked up my fork and began shoveling chicken into my mouth and washing it down with gulps of wine. I could feel red splotches sprouting up over the bridge of my nose and down my neck and chest. I thanked the candle for remaining lit and hiding the rash.

Forty-five minutes later, we had finished eating and Liam had paid the check, put down a tip, and we were back in his car driving to his apartment. He slowed for a stop sign and something rattled again. I was pulling my hair up messily from my face and neck which were still flushed and damp. When I was finished, I leaned forward to unlatch the glove compartment.

“Colleen, don’t.” He grabbed for my hand but it was too late. The compartment was open and a waterfall of lighters gushed into my lap and around my feet.

We sat at the stop sign for minutes while Liam stared at me and as I stared at the lighters that I was now drowning in. I looked up at him. He blinked.

“I have to go,” I said, pushing open the car door and kicking lighters onto the curb as I stepped out. They crunched beneath my broken shoe.

I huffed. Everything had been going so well. I had chosen to ignore the lighters earlier, which, to be honest, I thought was pretty creepy, and Liam had made up for it during dinner by being a fine chap. He was sweet and quiet and gorgeous. Ultimately, he was everything I was looking for in a lover right now.

And now there was this.

Now I was swimming through lighter fluid. If we had gotten into an accident, we would have been made into toast instantly.

“Colleen, please,” Liam said as he got out and stood on the opposite side of the car. I could only see his head past the open moon roof. “I can explain.”

“Can you?” I quivered. I contemplated running away right then but I had no idea where I was. Everything around me looked the same. “Please. Be my guest. Explain to me why you have hundreds of lighters billowing out of every crevasse in your car. I would really like to know.”

“They were given to me.” He looked hopeless. Hopeless and cute. I wanted to both hug him and light him on fire. And I could have.

“Someone just gave you all of these?”

“Yes.”

“Why?” I slammed shut my door, squashing even more of the lighters, their fluid dripping through its crack. “It’s just...I don’t know. Weird.”

After this, we stood separated by the car, me glaring and Liam begging me with his eyes to get back into the car. Perhaps I was being insensitive. I considered the fact that I had had several drinks throughout the night which could have clouded my tact and grace. My car was at his place anyways.

I refused to get into his car until all of the lighters had been safely stored in the trunk where I couldn’t see them. The rest of the drive home was spent in completely silence, just as Liam liked it.

Once we were back, I stormed from his car towards my own which took longer than expected with a broken heel. I hoped he wouldn’t say another word but he did and somehow it was relieving. Two words, in fact.

“Don’t go.” I turned and found he had followed after me. His hands were crammed into his pockets. “Please. Just stay a little while longer.”

“I was really having a nice time.” It felt like a walnut had lodged itself into my throat. “I just got a little freaked out.”

“I know. I didn’t mean to ruin anything. I forgot I had even put them in there. It’s no big deal. I like to...” Liam trailed off. “Collect things.”

He reached out a hand to me, which I took warily. We walked next to each other up the entire flight of concrete steps that led to the front door of his apartment complex. He keyed himself in and moments later I was inside of his living room with my back pressed against the door and my arms wrapped around his neck.

“You’re a good kisser,” he said.

“You’re not bad yourself.”

We stumbled into his bedroom, feeling each other up the entire way, and then he disappeared into the adjoined bathroom. While I waited for him, I made my way around the room, dragging my feet along the lush carpet, leaving a long trail of footprints behind me like a slug.

The room was straight out of a department store furniture ad. The navy blue and grey plaid bedspread with matching pillows reminded me of college. Yet bed itself was queen sized and perfect for two people to sleep comfortably, unlike the full sized ones found in every dorm room. I plunked myself down on it and bounced right back up. It was the softest bed I had ever felt.

Across from the foot of the bed along the wall sat his dresser. Its top was littered with an assortment of objects. I moved closer to inspect further. A glass jar with what looked like a class ring, several pairs of cuff links and a chain or two. Next to that sat a metal dish full of loose change that he deposited into at the end of every day. Random toiletries: deodorant, after-shave, cologne. I picked up the latter and brought it to my nose.

It reeked of sandalwood and leather. As I began to place it back down onto the dresser, I noticed the clear “TESTER” sticker that had been fixed strategically on the bottles side.

The toilet flushed in the bathroom and I heard Liam turn on the sink. I jumped quickly back to the bed, smoothed my skirt over my crossed legs, and waited.

“Mind if I change?”

“No. Go ahead.” I turned away from him towards the window. He pulled open two of his dresser drawers, one after the other, before he stripped off his shirt and unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. I could only imagine the V of muscles that cut into his hips from his stomach and lower past the band of his boxer briefs. I shivered.

Something thumped onto the carpet nearby. I shifted my gaze towards the bed where he had thrown the khakis he had worn onto our date. There on the floor lay a silver spoon.

The same silver spoon that had made a suicide leap from the edge of the table before dinner.

“Is that...”

“No,” Liam said, throwing his body onto the floor. When he stood, the spoon had disappeared. I tackled him back onto the bed.

“Give me that.”

“No. It’s not anything.”

I straddled his scantily clad body, a body that was indeed toned nicely, but I ignored the matter. I struggled to pull his hands from under him and then he rolled over, pinning me with his own weight. He held his left hand far above my head and in it was clasped a silver spoon, identical to the one from the restaurant.

“Don’t be mad at me,” he said, wincing as if I was going to hit him.

I smacked him on his bare shoulder once for wincing and again for stealing the spoon.

“Is this a habit of yours? Stealing things from people wherever you go?” My legs were getting tangled in the comforter and it was getting harder and harder to move. I could feel the TESTER sticker gaping at me from the dresser. It made too much sense. I smacked him again for the hell of it.

“Stop hitting me.”

“Stop being a clepto.”

This ended the fighting and he hovered there above me, out of breath and flustered.

He kissed me and I kissed him back.

“So now you’re just going to start stealing those too?”

“That wasn’t stolen.”

“How do you figure?”

“You gave it to me.”

The spoon dropped onto the carpet.

I took great care to sneak out the next morning without waking him. I stealthily slid from under the covers and crawled across the room, picking up various articles of clothing that had spread themselves along the floor. Liam looked charming, cocooned in the sheets like a caterpillar. My head rang from the wine.

I didn’t bother leaving a note and figured he’d just have to call if he wanted to. If he felt like asking me for a second date, of course. I stepped over a pile of magazines and then returned and knelt down next to them. The one on top had a white address label on it. I had to pull it close to my face to read because my contacts were almost completely dry and had misted over. The address didn’t look familiar and I wasn’t surprised.

Once I was free of the apartment complex and in the safety of my car, I pulled a cigarette from the emergency pack that I kept in my center console. And that’s when I panicked. I frantically picked up my purse from where I had thrown it dumped its contents on the passenger seat. Flask, wallet, cell phone, chapstick. But my lighter was missing.

I threw the unlit cigarette out the window.

Contributor's Notes

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Todd Easton Mills defined himself as a traveler as a young man, but was often homeless in great cities of the world. His work has been published in *Yellow Silk*, *Voices*, *ONTHEBUS*, and in the anthology *Poets on 911*. Currently, he lives in Santa Barbara with his Zimbabwean wife and is a student at Antioch University.

Shane Alan Noecker grew up in Minnesota. He and his wife, Rebecca, recently sold their first house in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and now live Pune, India. His short stories have appeared in *Knock*, *South Dakota Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, and many other journals.

Jeanice Perezis is a senior at Coe College. She is graduating with a major in English and a minor in Sociology. She is interested in continuing her education in Colorado.

Mary Ann O’Gorman’s most recent publication is a chapbook of poems published by Finishing Line Press in May, 2008, titled *Life in This House*. It has been nominated for the Mississippi Institute of Arts and Letters poetry prize. She has studied with X.J. Kennedy and John Casey at the Sewanee Writer’s Conference, and with Charles Martin through the low-residency MFA offered at Sewanee.

Crystal Robinson is a sophomore psychology and creative writing major at Coe College. She enjoys both writing and reading poetry and especially enjoys finding out about what others are writing.

Mary Rudy was born and raised in central California. Her work has appeared in *Writer’s Digest*, *Pisgah Review* and *Cup of Comfort for Dog Lovers II*. She currently lives outside San Francisco with her husband, two children and two dogs.

Meagan Scott is from Tacoma, Washington and has spent her entire life telling stories.

Jenna Shaw is a senior at Coe College with concentrations in English and Classical Studies. This is her fourth year as a Review staffer, and she will continue literary studies, in one way or another, after graduation.

Katie Sherman is a sophomore at Coe College. She enjoys working on the Coe Review staff and is looking forward to a future in the literary publishing/editing world. Although she loves her hometown of Sandwich, IL, she loves traveling and experiencing new adventures.

Kestrel Slocombe grew up in rural Massachusetts and began writing stories

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Shellie Zacharia teaches in Gainesville, Florida. Her stories have appeared in *Potomac Review*, *Washington Square*, *Zone 3*, *Hobart*, *Opium*, *Keyhole*, *The Pinch*, and elsewhere. Her story collection, *Now Playing*, is forthcoming from Keyhole Press.

Robert M. Zoschke co-edited and contributed writing to the anthology *reflections upon the 50th anniversary of Jack Kerouac's On the Road*, and he is the author of *Door County Blues*, both from Kentucky's Published in Heaven Books. His first novel is excerpted in the anthology *Other Voices* from Wisconsin's Cross+Roads Press. His poetry, short stories, and essays have been published by a unique blend of outfits including London's SAW—Poetry with and Edge, Michigan's Vertin Press, *Rosebud Magazine*, and *Horseplayer Magazine*.

Richard Lee Zuras is Associate Professor of English/Creative Writing/Film Studies at the University of Maine @ Presque Isle. His work has appeared in over twenty literary journals including *The Laurel Review*, *Story Quarterly*, *Weber Studies*, *Lake Effect*, *Passages North*, and *South Dakota Review*; and he has held scholarships at Bread Loaf and Wesleyan and garnered a Yemassee Fiction Award. He is currently seeking an agent/publisher for his debut novel *The Bastard Year*.

