

# **Re:Visions**

a journal of prose

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## The Brick Joke in Twelve Parts

TL Miller

1.

Hear the brick joke on the first day of school from your seventh grade science teacher, Mr. Dick. Conclude his name is a joke in itself. Chuck Dick. There's a rumor he gropes his female students. This is extra perverse because he teaches sex-ed. End up liking the guy anyway because he has a flair for teaching—Bernoulli's principle, slip-strike faults, cellular respiration. And he's funny. It's incongruous to your twelve-year-old mind—he couldn't do anything bad, he's *funny*.

Years later, none of your friends will remember him telling the joke. "Mr. Dick?" Charles Perez will say. "Didn't he grope some girl?"

2.

Never lead with the brick joke. Establish rapport, first. Give your audience hope there's a payoff. But all the same, tell it early on.

3.

Halfway through building his house, a man runs out of bricks. He's totally broke and can't afford to buy more. Down the street is a recently renovated church with a huge stack of masonry out front. The man visits and says to the priest, "Father, I'm building a house, but ran out of bricks. Could I use your leftovers?"

"Yes, but only if you use every last one," says the priest. "Otherwise you have to pay for them all."

The man carts off load after load with his wheelbarrow. He finishes his house, but a monumental pile of bricks remains. He builds a brick driveway, brick porch, brick sidewalk. Still a huge pile. He builds a brick chimney, brick fountain, brick statues. Still bricks left over. He carpets the floor in brick, wallpapers with brick and lo and behold there's exactly one brick left over and no aesthetically pleasing place to put it. He goes back to the church and explains the situation.

"You'll have to pay for the whole lot, then," says the priest.

"Isn't there another way?" asks the man.

“Tell you what,” says the priest. “Take the last brick—throw it as high as you can. If it comes down, you pay for them all. If it doesn’t, keep them for free.”

The man takes the brick, winds up and hurls it with all his might at the heavens. It doesn’t come down. Where’s the brick?

4.

Tell it to your first girlfriend, the Irish one inclined toward violence, the one whose fundamental insecurity lies in her belief that you think you’re smarter than her. Watch your relationship disintegrate before your very eyes, as sexual favors are withheld and phone calls become short and awkward.

“It’s the joke,” says Charles, who’s acting as a go-between. “She thinks you’re making fun of her because you won’t explain it.” Explain you can’t explain it—someone either gets it or they don’t. Offer to tell it again.

5.

Not on the roof, not divine intervention, hasn’t been launched into orbit. The priest isn’t blind, the man isn’t superman, it doesn’t take place on the moon. The brick is not obliterated by lightning, it is not made of helium, there are no magnets involved.

6.

On Independence Day, drive your grandmother—the one with senile dementia—to your parents’ house for dinner. She’ll ask if you know any good jokes. Tell the brick joke. When you’re done, she’ll say, “Look how big you are. You’ll be getting your driver’s license pretty soon. Tall just like your dad. Always a joker, your dad. Do you know any good jokes?”

7.

Tell it to your Boy Scout troop while holed up in a tornado shelter. The mess tent just blew away. A tree crushed Mr. Schaber's truck. Ryan Kaebisch has a broken ankle and Aaron Bell is unaccounted for.

When you finish, some asshole will yell out of the dark, "Aren't you going to tell the second half?"  
Ask, "What second half?"

8.

Delay is the key. Delay improves all the best things in life—cooking, tax refunds, sex. Delay as long as you can stand. But don't delay too long. It turns to vinegar, waiting too long.

9.

Prior to your grandmother's funeral, reflect to your sister that there are two jokes you're not allowed to tell at a memorial service.

"Which two?" she asks.

"Knock, knock."

"Who's there?"

"Not grandma anymore. What has two arms, two legs, two eyes and doesn't talk?"

"What?"

"Grandma." Feel the jokes have succeeded when neither of you laugh.

"Also the brick joke," your sister says. "You're not allowed to tell that one, either."

10.

Look up your old girlfriend while home from college. It's been three years—find a flimsy pretext to meet for coffee and re-hash old times. She's not as good-looking as you remember. Ask if she'd like to hear a joke. Promise, promise, promise she'll get it.

11.

A man and woman are flying in a small commuter plane. The man is holding a cat. The woman is smoking a cigar. They're secretly in love. The man leans toward the woman and shouts over the noise of the engine, "I'm in love with you, but I'm allergic to cigar smoke." The woman replies, "I love you, but I'm allergic to cats." They make a pact: she'll get rid of her cigar if he gets rid of the cat. They open the window. The man tosses his cat out, the woman her cigar. They embrace.

As the plane comes in for a landing, one member of the ground crew turns to the other and says, "Well, will you look at that! There's a cat holding onto the underbelly of that airplane. And it's got something in its paw."

What is the cat holding?

12.

"A cigar."

No. A brick.

## Dying to be Loved

Andrew Crowe

Cameron shuffled across the living room floor. He bent down to pick up the TV guide with his left hand; his right stayed curled at the wrist next to his chest. Scattered across the table were the newest copies of Sports Illustrated, Good Housekeeping, Time, and Newsweek. Cameron folded himself in half and sat on the edge of the table. He sagged his shoulders and his chest heaved with every breath. He laid the TV guide back on the table and used his left hand to rub the side of his face.

Cameron's mother, Mary Lou, bent over to take the cornbread out of the oven. Her upper body jiggled as she placed the pan on the counter and began stirring the chili. Her dark hair was hastily placed in a hair tie. Beads of sweat formed on her forehead and the back of her neck. She pushed up her sleeves and added sugar to the chili.

"How's the baby," Mary Lou asked.

"She's great. My mom's watching her. It makes her feel good, ya know? She's been full of this new life ever since Hailie was born," Brenda said. She looked over her Gold Clipper coupon book and watched silently as Cameron regained his composure. He rose and made his way back to the recliner. His walker lay unfolded on the carpet.

"And how's your baby," Brenda asked.

"Oh child, you know how that boy is. He'd rather spend five minutes changing the channel than ask for help or look disabled. I just don't know. Still a teenager and already an old man." Mary Lou fished out a ladleful of chili, sans onions and pepper at the behest of her son, and laid it in a plastic bowl. "Take this bowl of food in there for him, if you would, Love."

Brenda moseyed into the living room with the bowl. Steam rose from the hot offering. She asked where he wanted it; he told her to put it on the table, thank you very much. Brenda stood beside the chair. Cameron never looked in her eyes. Instead, he offered a polite nod in her general direction. She stood there, mouth forming words, yet remaining silent.

\* \* \*

"Hi, I'm Cam. I've noticed you around. It's Brenda right? What do you say you and I go out, get something to eat and maybe catch a movie?"

Brenda smiled and politely returned his gaze. She had only been at the school for a few weeks, but she had definitely noticed him. Cameron was tall, muscular, and seemed to be pretty popular. He had a slow, confident walk that made him recognizable to even the newest of students. Brenda had compared him to a gazelle, slowly striding down the halls, waiting to pounce. Sometimes she even saw him dribbling a basketball, bouncing it off lockers and around other students. Now here he was, towering over her in blue mesh shorts, a yellow polo shirt and clean white sneakers.

“I don’t know, I’m really busy this week,” Brenda replied.

Cameron threw his head back and took a seat next to her on the bleachers. She crossed her legs and continued to read her worn copy of *Madame Bovary*. After a minute of Cameron sitting there next to her, she put her book down and rolled her head slowly toward him.

“Alright. Dinner tomorrow. But that’s it. No movie or anything.” She wrote her name and number on a sheet of paper. “Here’s my number. Don’t call after ten.”

“Sounds great. Call ya tonight. I’ll pick out the movie,” Cameron said as he rose and sauntered off. Brenda smiled and put her head back in her book, not bothering to watch Cameron turn and check her out once more.

\* \* \*

A cool breeze slammed the screen door and filled the tiny ranch house with the smell of palm trees and tanning lotion. The chants of girls playing double dutch and the constant pounding of balls, balls of all kinds, resonated throughout the house. Mary Lou placed a folded pair of boxers on a pile of underwear. She was busy folding a 2003 FHSA basketball tournament t-shirt when Cameron struggled to get out of the recliner.

“Why don’t you sit down and let me help you,” Mary Lou asked.

“God damnit mom, I don’t need your help all the time. I get so tired of this. I don’t need or want yours or Brenda’s pity. I’m not totally useless you know.”

“I know, sweetie, I know. But we’re only trying to help. We just want what’s best for you.”

“You don’t know what’s best for me,” Cameron said. He made his way to the kitchen and pulled a glass from the cupboard. He turned gingerly and stood facing the refrigerator. Doctor’s appointments, a school calendar, the basketball schedule, a list of important phone numbers, school and basketball pictures, and magnets from around the South dotted the doors. Cameron took out a two liter of Coke and fumbled with the lid.

“I wish you wouldn’t put the goddamn cap on so tight.” He shoved the Coke back into the refrigerator. There were no cans left.

“You know I don’t drink that stuff anymore,” Mary Lou said. “It must have been Brenda when she was over last.”

“Jesus Christ. It’s Brenda this and Brenda that. Well we know how good she is at screwing stuff.”

\* \* \*

Brenda’s blonde hair was in a bun and her cheerleading shorts rode up the inside of her caramel thighs. Her breasts bounced even as she slowly came over. Her pink tank top was stretched over her chest, leaving little to cover her stomach. Cameron’s eyes descended from her eyes to her cleavage to her belly button to her thighs to her ankles.

“We need to talk. I’m late,” she said.

“For what?”

“No, I’m *late*,” she said, twisting her head to look at him.

Cameron looked away. He watched a couple toss a Frisbee on the football field.

“How long,” he asked.

“Two months.”

“Two months! Two fucking months?! And you’re just now telling me? What the fuck Brenda?”

“I just wanted to make sure before I told you.”

“And,” Cameron said.

“And I’m sure.”

“Fuck fuck fuck.” He spread out on the bench and closed his eyes.

“You know this ain’t easy for me, Cameron. I haven’t slept in weeks.”

“I know, I know. It’s fine, it’ll be fine. No way we’re doing, uh, doing that, huh,” he asked. Brenda continued to look down. “Yeah, well you know me and my mom will be there. I want to be there Brenda. Believe me. I really do.”

“I know, I know. I just need to be alone for a while.” Brenda stood, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand and walked away. Cameron watched as she walked inside. He sat on the bench while the Frisbee players left. He sat on the bench while the full court game finished and the guys went to their cars and drove off. He sat on the bench while the wrestling team filed out of the school, some with hair still wet from sweat and some from the shower. He sat on the bench as the final cars pulled out of the lot. He finally left the bench when he got a call from his mother.

\* \* \*

“Dere’s my widdle girl. Oh yes, dere she is. Dere she is,” Mary Lou cooed at Hailie. The pink dress barely covered the Pampers and Mary Lou pinched the roll of fat on her thigh. Hailie’s full head of blonde hair was up in a pink butterfly clip.

“Take her in and let him see her,” Mary Lou said to Brenda.

“Are you sure? You think he wants to?”

“Oh child, I know him, and I know he wants to see this little angel.”

Brenda bounced the baby into the living room. She stood over Cameron, waiting for him to turn away from SportsCenter.

“You wanna hold her,” she asked.

Cameron looked at the baby, up at Brenda, and then back down to the baby. He smiled a small smile, not showing any teeth, and said, “No, I can’t. Put her in the pen, though.”

“Oh no, you can. I’ll put her right here.”

“No, I said in the pen. Bring it over to me and put her in there.”

Brenda set Hailie in the playpen and pulled it over to the recliner. She sat on the far end of the couch and pretended to watch the playoff football talk. Cameron played with and talked to Hailie. He would reach down into the playpen, tickle her belly with his good hand, and giggle at her. The baby laughed once or twice. Mary Lou watched from the doorway. When Brenda looked up she saw Cameron’s sports photos to the right and his life played out in photos to the left. There were team photos in those little plaques, with little Cameron holding a ball in a little picture on the top. There were some action photos from the Central games and even one with him and someone that looked like a famous ballplayer. There was one of Cameron dressed as a pirate for Halloween and one of Cameron and Mary Lou in some studio. The only men were the ones in the pictures on the right.

\* \* \*

Cameron drove his Cutlass down Exchange Street. The jersey stuck to his skin under his t-shirt and his Marlins hat was pulled down low. He pulled up to Brenda’s house and glanced at his clock. 10:16. He grabbed a bag off the passenger seat and jogged to the side door. Brenda answered.

“I brought you some snacks. I know you’ll like em,” he said as he held up the bag with two Hershey bars, a bottle of A1 sauce and a jar of dill pickles. He walked past her and into the family room. *A Walk to Remember* played on the big screen and the sliding doors were open. Cameron walked to the back porch and sat on the swing. A strong breeze lifted the cover off the pool. A series of ripples flowed through the water.

“I wish you would have been at the game. I scored 27. All for you.”

Brenda was wearing a small pair of light blue shorts with a worn Dolphins hoodie. She had on eyeliner and her hair was pulled into a tight ponytail. She sat on the swing beside Cameron, both legs folded to her left, away from him. Cameron rocked the swing back and forth, his feet never leaving the ground. His arm was stretched across the back of the swing, not quite touching Brenda's petite shoulders.

"I don't want you to bring me food, Cameron. I don't want you buying me any clothes and I certainly don't want your money. I just want you to leave me alone for right now. My parents don't want you here, you know. They've heard things, Cameron."

"Your parents don't know shit, Brenda. Hell, all those people don't know shit about me. I bet they don't even know where I live. Just bus my ass in so I can drop 35 on Vero Beach and send me back to where I came from. Fuck that. Fuck them." Cameron glanced over at Brenda. "I'm sorry. It's just that I only want to be with you."

"I don't know Cameron, I just don't know. I need time, that's all. I mean, soon everyone at school's gonna find out. I can't hide it forever. What are they gonna think? Who's gonna be with me then?"

"I will. You know I will." Cameron went into the bathroom, grabbed some toilet paper and brought it back. He also brought the pickles.

"You better leave. My mom and dad will be home soon" Brenda said.

\* \* \*

Mary Lou held the showerhead in her hand. Cameron sat on the stool while the suds rinsed off his body. He looked down at his chest. *Born to Be Hated* read his right pectoral muscle. *Dying to Be Loved* was inked on his left.

"Why do you always invite her over, mom? Just once I want to be able to eat my dinner without having to be reminded of the past. It's hard enough without her here."

"You know our door's always open to anyone who needs us. That ain't going to change now."

"She don't need us. She's got her own family. She's got her own house and her own life. She didn't want nothing to do with me before. I don't want no pity."

"Now quit that. There ain't no such thing as pity for a person who don't pity themselves. Anyways, maybe she wants to be here. Maybe she wants you to see your daughter. You ever think about that," Mary Lou asked. She helped Cameron stand and he balanced himself against the wall as she towed him.

"I don't want my daughter having no cripple for a dad. Better to have no dad than a vegetable," Cameron said. His tears mixed with drops of water rolling down his face.

\* \* \*

"Oh child, you look tired. How's the baby," Mary Lou asked. She placed an *It's A Girl* balloon on the stand.

"She's beautiful. I wish you could see her. The nurses have her right now," Brenda said. She searched her visitor's eyes and mouth.

"I'm so happy for you. This will be the greatest thing in your life. Although I know it may not feel like it now." Both women forced a smile. The only sounds were a cart wheeling down the hall and the beeps of the machine reading Brenda's vitals.

"Cameron was in an accident yesterday. I think he was on his way over here. He flipped his car." Mary Lou paused. "He was in surgery for almost six hours. They don't know what kind of mobility he's going to have. I just..." Mary Lou began to sob.

Brenda took her hand. The two shared laughs and tears for three hours as Mary Lou regaled Brenda with stories from Cameron's life. Mary Lou finally stood and patted Brenda's left hand.

"This will be the greatest thing in your life," she repeated.

\* \* \*

“How are you and the baby doing,” Mary Lou asked. “Not feeling depressed or sad or anything, are you?” She set her book down and looked intently at Brenda.

Brenda sat down across from Mary Lou and glanced down at the copy of *Anna Karenina*. “Oh no no no, not at all. It’s been really good. My parents have been so helpful and you, well, I really love being able to come over here and just, you know, kinda escape,” she said.

“Anytime, sweetie, anytime.”

BOOM. Both women jerked their heads around toward the living room. Brenda hopped up and ran the four steps into the room. Mary Lou followed quickly behind. They heard a low moaning noise rising from Cameron. A handgun lay on the floor beside the chair. Cameron lay motionless, the baby wailing on his chest. There was blood everywhere. His face. Her body. His shirt. Her dress.

“My baby,” she said. “Oh dear Lord, my baby.”

## let's go

chris kepner

words on paper need staples or tape, ya know. well, i guess that that's not *entirely* so. but that shit rhymes and sometimes that's all i need to get me going. to where? fuck if i kno(west)? well, to the end of this page, for now i guess. for how to make sense of ten thousand events that push in directions northeast-south, and lest we forget that our time's being spent with each passing moment that cries to us, "WHENCE?" whence from the dock doth our fair ship depart? and chart we the course or just follow the...ahem...heart(?)? shall we rhyme every verse or just let fly these words that can never quite capture the dreams that we serve? i "tried to say God" just then. when i "really" "said" "heart".

my name is knight and i like to write. my name is knight and i like to write.

i've been sitting here with this pen in its quill for the better part of my life, if you will, pondering the failure of literature. what's that, you ask? well, let's put it this way: i can stand at the top of a mountain, but of words no amount can allow you to see what i see in the valley around me. (but perhaps you can imagine a valley that *you* saw once.)

i can gaze into the eyes of someone i love, but no clever group of phrases'll make you feel what i feel.

(but maybe you'll remember a love all your own.)

Experience is something deeply personal, yes?

Words ultimately fail.

(but i've learned something that gives me great hope despite the truth above, and that something is that you like to read.)

your name is need and you like to read. your name is need and you like to read.

so no, this is not all for naught.

so know this is not all for naught.

let's go someplace new. so new that it doesn't even exist yet. let's create. let's take 80/90 west for a while. let's take a hard right onto a dirt-hard road that's not meant to be accessed from the highway by vehicles other than those hard-tough construction trucks. let's follow that road through dense woods with no apparent bottom, bumping along and brandishing cigarettes and flaskfuls of giddy anticipation. the car's engine wants to burst, but we push forward: manifest westy.

“but we're going north,” **you** say, “can't you see?”

oh say...can't *you* see that *i'm* the one who's driving, isneed?  
whose broad stripes grip *this* wheel, huh? mine do.

our world exists as two overlapping cones of light thrown out before us. the moon sleeps somewhere far off, lonely, wondering when her earthling friends will ever pay her another visit. turn out the headlamps and we're engulfed by darkness. what a terrifying rush it is to do so and drive blind for a bit. can't help but wonder, will some ghost or *demon* appear right in front of us when the lights flash back on? does that only happen in *movies*?

**“are we even still on the road?”**

hey, we haven't hit a tree yet. we can hear and *feel* the car rumbling along, but we can't see *anything*. eerie. creepy. rushes of wind, howling outside the car. terror! horror! the car accelerates, out of control! faster! faster! faster! faster!

**TURN ON THE LIGHTS!!**

ahh... relax. we're there.

the woods open to a clearing about half a mile across. let's drive straight through to the other side of this empty clearing and turn around to find that it wasn't empty at all. it's so not empty, in fact, that we have to abandon the car and continue on foot. it's a carnival of some sort, or, rather, it looks like a carnival would if it were turned inside out.

epileptic elephant ear light show and cacophonous cotton candy sonata. animals of all kinds running wild, playing midway games alongside humans in funny outfits. let's challenge this arrogant rhino who thinks he *owns* the water guns. i could hit a clown's nose from a thousand yards. let's take one of the stuffed rhinos as our prize just to rub it in his face.

let's eat a ton of Cheez-its and see how many times we can ride the Mousetrap without losing 'em. sounds like a tame enough ride until you picture the board game of same name, which it's obviously modeled after. i give us at *least* four.

ugh. let's get some water and chill in the lounge tent for a while. dim blue light, plush couches and some laid-back tunes. maybe i'll regenerate a stomach sitting here.

let's go talk to those girls by the jukebox.

hold on a second, Tiana.

Chiana.

right. now just a second. i *know* you're not about to pick a kenny g track.

actually, i am. got a problem?

yea. i don't like piss in my ear canal. what the *hell* are you thinking?

kenny g is a good musician!

he's a sell-out piece of shit. his music is like the Cheez-it barf you'll get on your shoes if you put it on. have you ever *heard* what that hack *did* to Louis Armstrong's "What a Wonderful World"?

oh please. if you want to have such a strong opinion about something, how about you get your own fucking argument instead of regurgitating stuff that Pat Metheny said.

touché. you read that shit?

yeah. and honestly, i think kenny g sucks too. i really just wanted to hear some 2Pac.

hey why don't you go get us some beers while i fall in love with the crazy jukebox girl.

.....  
.....

hey! look who's *finally* back! took ya long enough, huh? and seriously, who gets Miller Lite from an open bar? you obviously get the most expensive shit they've got when it's *free*.

**this was the most expensive shit they had.**

well, that's what i get for sending a reader to do a writer's job. here, give me those.

FOOSH!!

the noise wasn't necessary i guess, but it sure was a gas. here ya go: one \_\_\_\_\_, my friend.

(insert favorite expensive beer here ^ )

oh, crazy jukebox girl? who knows where the hell she went... we got into a big argument after i told her that jazz was just a basketball team. it's cool though...her friends kinda sucked anyway.

fill in the blanks. you're doing just fine.

now let's *go*.

we enter a whole row of galleries. there are pitching galleries and shooting galleries and even draft-day looting galleries. in front of gallery six is a sign announcing a poetry reading starting in five minutes. the featured poet is some guy named Swiss Jeppner. let's hang and check it out for a while.

my first poem is called "the cliché's cliché"

...ahem...

pointing out clichés has become a cliché  
we're always self-conscious with note to disclaim  
wherever you look and in every way  
it's like, if you can't beat 'em you join' em  
these days

there's a crowd of about fifteen people gathered to watch Swiss recite some of his stuff. a small reading like

this, he probably figures he'll test out some new material and see how people react.

this one is called "february 2006"

february 2006.  
that's, like, a year and a half since i last talked to her.  
yes, because that was  
august 2004.  
i remember quite well.  
my mind won't let me forget, in fact.  
little things remind me of her all the time.  
stupid things.  
why, every time i saw a calendar last month it called her to mind.  
her birthday is january 26, and january 2006 is just too close to that.

i forced myself to take her off my buddy list, but i can't seem to make myself stop typing in her screen name  
each day in order to check her away message.  
she has a quote from a song in her profile that she put there right when we stopped talking to each other  
and it's been there ever since.  
well, that is, it had been there up until the beginning of this semester.  
does that mean she's finally let go?  
why can't i really let go?

his voice began to quiver just a little during that last one. can you write something like that and call it fiction?  
he must have Experienced it, right? it just sounded too real to be made up. is that because of the dates? not  
exactly the happiest thoughts, but we have to expect low points, don't we? it's just a matter of getting past  
them, dwelling for as long as possible in the highs. Sean Carter told us, beyond a Reasonable Doubt, that we've  
gotta learn to live with regrets.

ambient friends

ambient noise is our sense-lulling friend  
can you even imagine The Silence?  
an ambient voice at the back of our head  
says,  
"am i the choice between wicked and kind?"

ambient friends are the people we see  
'twould do you some good if you take this to heart!  
for any amends that our lives seem to need  
will come.  
now share a kind word or a laugh

a couple of bonobos sure dug that one. you can hear them snapping their fingers. a big silverback snorts from  
his spot in the corner. a few people look around nervously to see if they should be clapping or not. Swiss

smiles a bit and then addresses the crowd candidly.

thanks a lot for listening, everyone. i'm supposed to keep this short, so i've got just one more poem to share with you. this is something untitled that i wrote for my Dad a while back:

when your second wife left you i was still just a boy  
and you came to me for moral support.  
"it's hard, ya know, when you've been with someone so long..."  
did you have this much trouble back when you left Mom?

you're disappointed to learn that i taught myself to shave,  
missing out on that moment that fathers and sons share.  
but you forget when i was little i watched you each morning,  
and with each nick and cut, by example you taught me.

thanks again, and enjoy your evening everyone...

let's hang around and chill with this Swiss cat a little, see what he's all about. i was pretty skeptical at first, but the second half of that reading really won me over. this dude seems like he's got a pretty interesting perspective, huh?

hey, Swiss. that was cool, man.

oh thanks man. i'm glad you enjoyed it. what's your name?

my name is knight and i like to write too.

oh yeah? what kind of stuff have you written?

oh, you know, stuff sort of like this. i'll show it to you sometime if you like.  
this is my friend isneed, by the way. he likes to read and has little to say.

hello, isneed.

**hello.**

you see? pretty soon he won't be able to shut up but right now he's sort of just along for the ride. say Swiss, you wanna chill with us for a bit? walk around and check out this carnival a little?

yeah man. i'm down for that. have you guys hit the Big Slide yet?

no, not yet. is it cool?

yeah man, totally. it's a blast.

let's do it then.

perched about ten stories up at the top, this sure as hell is one Big Slide. we've got our burlap mats and are

ready to go. the cheetah that just started is howling with fear. he's never gone so fast in his life.

hey knight, you ever think about progress?

how things keep changing faster and faster and faster and faster?

if things continue exponentially, will there come a time when we don't even notice the present? (and is that time already here, perhaps?)

like, if the world is constantly changing, does it cease to exist?

do you ever think maybe things are moving too fast for everyone?

hey Swiss, you're deep man. i don't really know about all that. i mean, it sounds plausible and all, but here's what i know. i'm standing at the top of a huge fucking slide and i'm about to have a great fucking time going down it. you can see *everything* from up here, man! *this* is our world. you can see the whole thing *right now*.

check out that pirate ship ride. some moron took their CD case on with them and it must've opened up somehow. see how when the ship was upside down on that last revolution all those CDs came floating down? shiny sides bouncing carnival lights in a thousand different directions? i wonder if he caught any of them when the ship swung under that shimmering sparkling cloud. if he did, i wonder if they were the ones he never listens to that were only taking up space in that obviously poorly-designed black case. or does the one CD he catches happen to be his all-time favorite? what a silly sight that is. almost as silly as the group of intellectuals standing by, trying to decipher the meaning.

a little girl stands in line with her friends. behind her stands an adolescent boy in a black t-shirt. she reads the t-shirt and then says to him, snotty as a slug, "the world is a vampire? no, *you're* a vampire!" that poor kid will never wear that poor shirt again.

that chimp behind him looks pretty upset that they won't let him onto the ride. he thinks:  
*i'd be above that line on that sign if only i could stand up on these two hind legs of mine...*

you're pretty hip, knight. can i write you into some of my stuff?

sure thing, man. i'm pretty ready to hit this slide, though. you ready, isneed?

man, it's kinda cool how you just hang around and take everything in.

**yeah.**

**yeah.**

alright, seriously. the natives are getting restless. MAN, that's a long way down!  
let's go.

## As Much Earth

Claire Denby

Steely gray eyes stared up, unblinkingly at the cloudy sky above. A fierce gust blew brown curls into Alexander's pale face, but he didn't flinch. He should have known that it was over the moment Jesús arrived. A brilliant career had been cut tragically short when he lost this final battle. History had repeated itself on this day, the eleventh of June, and Alexander had fallen again. Only seven years old, he continued to lie prostrate on the grassy schoolyard and wonder where he had gone wrong on his path to world conquest.

As expecting parents, Sarah and Orlando Andrews did not know what an effect a name would have on their child, even though they had themselves lived through the same effects. Alexander- a strong name. A "normal" name. This was what Orlando wanted. He had never liked his own name; it was too unusual, too easy for other people to distort. School time chums had called him Orly, and, much to his chagrin, his first girlfriend had lovingly bestowed the nickname Landy upon him. During a peak in Star Wars popularity, a few of his friends had laughingly called him Lando. His son would not suffer the same ridicule. No one would make fun of the name Alexander.

Sarah had also agreed to the name Alexander, but for much different reasons. Her own name was too plain for her liking- just like the nickname "Sarah plain and tall" classmates had teased her with since 5th grade. There was nothing she could do to escape it either. There was no way to shorten Sarah and her middle name, Mary, offered little better. Alexander would be the perfect escape: if anyone teased him, he had the choice of Al, Alex, Lex, or even Xander.

Alexander was their second chance; with his father's stern eyes and strong jaw-line and his mother's lightly curled brown hair and milky, pale complexion, he was a part of them both but would not suffer under the weight of an unfortunate name. It should not have been a surprise, though, that Alexander would indeed feel the pressure of his name. It was not the weight of ridicule, but that of expectation.

Both Orlando and Sarah tried hard to instill pride into their young son. Sarah stitched Alexander's name

onto the infant's pillow and blanket, and even made a mobile from the letters to hang above his crib. Orlando would sit by the young child's bed every night, to read him stories about different Alexander's. Alexander's first word, though distorted through an untrained tongue, was his own name and before he learned to write anything else, he taught his left hand to carve out in, large block letters, every syllable of that proud name. In his parent's eyes, and inevitably his own, he was bound for greatness. From the age of four, he became a scholar of his name.

"The name makes the man, and the man makes his name," Orlando would often tell him. Both parents took the time to tell the boy about famous derivations of his name. Orlando pointed out Lex Luther to Alexander when he started to read comic books. His father told him that even though Lex was the villain, he was also very powerful since he was able to take on even Superman. Sarah- an avid fan of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*- explained how Xander was just a normal guy, but was able to save the world with only his words and a yellow crayon, while all his super powered friends could do nothing. It didn't take long for Alexander to find a favorite namesake; the historic world conqueror, Alexander the Great. Now he was set to make a place for himself in history. There was only one name that could stand in his way.

Refusing a parental escort, Alexander walked alone down the hallways of Saint Francis' Catholic Grade School. Notebooks and school supplies held tightly in hand, he reached second grade room number 24 and looked up at the class list next to the door. It wouldn't be hard to find his name- Alexander Andrews was always on the top of the list. But there it was, to his horror...

"Jesus Alvarez," he said to himself in an almost inaudible whisper. His skinny fingers tightened around his books, turning his knuckles as white as bone. "My rival has come."

On a mission to find this transfer student, this invader, Alexander marched into the room, head held high and back straight. He scanned the room quickly, like a lion looking for its quarry. It was not hard to find his so-called rival. Each desk had a paper name tag made by the teacher which had been placed in alphabetical order across the room. There, in the prime position, the seat that should have been his, was Jesús. He was a small boy with creamy brown skin and a mop of wavy black hair resting upon his round head. He looked up at Alexander with large, inquisitive ebony eyes when he noticed the taller boy staring at him. Jesús' warm smile and wave were met with a firm salute and an offered hand from Alexander, whose expression was blank. Jesús was puzzled by this odd greeting, but shook his classmate's hand anyway. Alexander nodded, and proceeded to his desk, right next to Jesús.

"We are rivals," Alexander said. He pulled the rest of his school supplies from his backpack and organizing them neatly in his desk. Alexander propped up a folder and stared at Jesús from behind it. However, to his surprise, Jesús just smiled at him.

"I like dinosaurs," he said. He grabbed the hem of his white shirt and held his shirt out, so that the picture of a Triceratops was stretched out.

"Huh?" Alexander stammered. Jesús pointed at the folder Alexander had been using to shield himself. Alexander looked down and saw the picture of the Tyrannosaurus Rex that was printed on the front. He flattened the folder and slid it underneath his notebook. "Yeah, well, I don't like them. My mom bought this for me."

"Oh," Jesús said quietly. Then he turned to the girl behind him. On her name tag, which had "Susan Green" written across it, she had drawn some sort of long necked dinosaur on it. Jesús stretched out his shirt and said once again, "I like dinosaurs."

Alexander as the two other children started to talk about their favorite dinos. He, on the other hand, was left sitting in silence. He didn't have many friends, or at least not people that he actually considered close. He remembered his dad telling him the old expression, "keep your friends close, but your enemies closer." However, he had no real desire to be friends with Jesús, so he decided sitting next to him in class was close enough.

Alexander remained quiet the rest of the school day. He was usually a very good student, but now he barely paid attention to a word his new teacher, Miss Archer said to the class. Instead he continued glancing over at Jesús, plotting ways to take down this new threat. That evening after dinner, Alexander asked his parents to take him to the library. It was only six o'clock, and the local library was open until nine, so they agreed to take him. Both Orlando and Sarah had noticed how quiet their son had been since he came back from school. They hoped

that going to the library would cheer him up.

Once there, Alexander swiftly made his way straight over to one book in particular: it was a large biography, near one thousand pages, on the life of Alexander the Great. He had in fact checked it out nearly a dozen times and had barely made a dent in the wordy text. Each time he checked the book out, he tried to read the whole thing at once. He had only gotten through the first quarter of the book because of this. So while he had practically memorized the beginning of Alexander the Great's life, he never had time to read farther into the life of his hero. Clutching the heavy book tightly, Alexander strode through the library quickly to keep at his parents' side. Orlando was quick to notice that his son had only gotten one book. Usually the seven year old checked out as many books as he could find either about or by an Alexander.

"Are you only getting that, Alexander?" Orlando asked.

"I'm gonna read it all," Alexander said. "Even if I have to check it out a million times. It's the key to victory."

"Victory?" Orlando said, a bit confused.

That was all Alexander would say, though. The trio reached the counter, and Sarah reached a slender pale arm down to Alexander. He firmly handed her his book so that she could place it with the others on the counter for check-out. She was a bit worried to see the grave look on the young boy's face.

"What's the matter Alex?" she asked gently while the elderly librarian ran each book through the computer.

"It's Alexander, mom." He didn't like it when people shortened his name. Then, he continued with a scowl, "I've met my match."

"What do you mean?" she asked. She supposed he had probably lost a game of checkers to his father. The two of them often played on the over-sized checker board up in the fiction section while she browsed.

"Jesus," he said shortly, his gray eyes staring at the ground while he kicked at a loose piece of carpeting.

Sarah's mouth hung slack for a moment, and the librarian raised a silver eyebrow. Sarah shot the librarian a smile and grabbed their books. She took Alexander's hand and walked with him toward their car. Orlando hung close by on Alexander's other side, curious to see where this conversation would go.

"What do you mean Jesus is your match?" Sarah asked her son, baffled as to what he could be talking about.

"The *naaaame*," Alexander replied with extra emphasis. Seeing that his mother still had no idea, he rolled his eyes and gave her a geeze-mom-you're-so-clueless look. "It's the only one that can beat mine. I didn't think anyone still had it, but there was this new kid that did. He's in my class and he stole my seat."

Sarah laughed until she saw the scowl deepen on his face. She smiled at him and gave his small hand a reassuring squeeze. "It's not pronounced like that. It's more like hey-zeus."

Alexander only looked more fearful now. "But Zeus is a Greek god... that's two in one!" he gasped. He remembered his teacher pronouncing it the same way his mom just had. However, since he had only half been paying attention, so he had thought Miss Archer had been talking about someone else. With a mutter, Alexander added, "And it's still spelled Jesus."

Alexander pushed forward in the biography. He forgot his resolution to read it all the way through in one try, and instead picked up where he had last left off. He would read a bit each day after school, hoping to find in it some way to beat his new rival. Meanwhile, in school, his silent observation continued in the months to follow. After the initial confrontation between the two boys, Alexander never mentioned the rivalry to Jesús again. Throughout the year he plotted how best to win his one-man war. All he needed was some way to show his superiority to the whole class.

His first attempt was in athletics. He was fairly tall and well-built for his age, so in gym class, whatever team he was on usually won. To his annoyance, though, the gym teacher, Ms. Hill, insisted on mixing up teams and having different captains for every sport they played. Oftentimes Alexander not only found himself as merely a supporting player instead of the captain, but also was on the same team as Jesús. The final straw came during a game of dodge-ball. Though he was not picked as a captain and Jesús was, he still saw a chance. If he could survive to the last and knock Jesús out of the game, his place would surely be secured as king of the class and

eventually the school. He was so focused on Jesús, though, that he didn't notice another opponent, Susan, aim a ball right at him. Just as Alexander was preparing to launch a ball at Jesús, Susan's ball hit him square in the chest. In dramatic fashion, Alexander spun on one foot and fell to the floor, ball still in hand. He had lost, only five minutes into the game. Any further chances for glory were squashed when Ms. Hill announced to the class that they would soon be moving on to a new section. It would focus on building basic strength, balance and endurance instead of playing sports. The kids would be jumping rope, taking turns on a balance beam, and other such things. Alexander was at a loss as to how he could show up Jesús in particular now.

He decided to turn to the academics. Though he was being taught by Miss Archer and not Aristotle, he was sure that he could not fail in a battle of wits. Alexander placed his bets on a history project due just before Easter break. The displays that the kids made would be set out in the classroom for everyone to see. Miss Archer said she wanted to see a lot of creativity in these projects, so she would let the students choose whatever historical scene they wanted. Alexander knew just what he would make. He worked tirelessly on his project, not even taking notice of the fact that the blanket of snow and nightly glazes of frost on his window were slowly melting away at the coming of spring. In the end he brought forth a detailed diorama of the fall of Thebes at the hands of Alexander the Great, in Lego form. It was Alexander the Great's first major victory, which had helped launch him into world conquest; Alexander was hoping it would be the start of his own conquest. He had read the beginning of the Great's biography so many times, that he had memorized all the details of the battle. Each Lego man and woman was in a tiny hand made tissue-toga and sat in amongst Greek columns and statues of Ares and Athena. However, Miss Archer was a bit disturbed by all the fake blood and dead Lego people with x's painted over their eyes. Though Alexander got an A for the rather accurate representation of the sack of the city, his parents were called in by the teacher to discuss his morbid display of history. In the end, it was another loss, because Jesús, also got an A for his Play-Doh reconstruction of the original Iguanodon display in the Natural History Museum.

The end of the year was looming ahead. Alexander's classmates were all at Jesús' birthday party. He had also been invited to go himself, but he firmly refused to go. The invitation alone had been a test of his will. It had described the party in delicious detail- dinosaur piñata, chocolate eggs and all. Alexander felt left out, but he blamed Jesús for it. He could have had fun with his classmates and eaten good treats if it hadn't been a celebration of his great foe. So instead he stayed grumpily inside, trying to finish the biography on Alexander the Great, which his parents had finally bought for him. He had spent hours reading it, even asking his parents to read some to him before he went to bed. Now that the tale of his hero's life was drawing to a close, the outlook was not good. He had now not only read about the Macedonian king's ascent to power, but mutinies, losses and death. One line in particular stuck out to him; it was a prophesy from an Indian sage to the mighty conqueror. "You will soon be dead, and then you will own just as much of this earth as will suffice to bury you." They were solemn words and they troubled Alexander. He wondered if a patch of dirt would be his only prize for conquest. Yet he didn't want to accept that he had done all that work and skipped the party for nothing.

There was only one last chance for retribution- only one more chance to prove that he, Alexander Andrews, was meant to be future ruler of the known universe. Where Alexander the Great failed, he would succeed. The final stand was a game of capture the flag to be played with the whole class as a celebration for the coming end of the school year. The clear spring sky was bleached almost white by the bright sun on that fateful Saturday morning, no sign of the storm predicted by meteorologists the night before. Miss Archer said that she would think of two numbers between zero and twenty. The two students who got closest would be the captains. In the first round, Jesús won by guessing the number three. Alexander was desperate to guess the second number correctly. He blurted out eight accidentally, and quietly berated himself because he had meant to say eighteen. He was so busy fussing over it, that Miss Archer had to tell him four times that he was the other captain before he heard her. Alexander could barely believe his luck; he thought that it must have been a good sign of things to come. He also won the coin toss at the beginning of the game and so picked the far side of the field behind the school as his team's side. At the very edge of the field there was a hill ringed with bushes. Alexander, following traditional rules of battle, was sure he could win if he took the high ground. When picking teammates, he made sure to pick Susan as the general to his invincible army, not forgetting her quick defeat of him in dodge ball months ago.

A thin dirt path, carved into the ground by years of cyclists snaked its way across the field, separating the two opposing territories. On the one side was Alexander's team, the Macedonians, each child arrayed with bright

crimson bandanas that Miss Archer had provided them; everyone on Jesús' team, the Raptors, displayed a deep midnight-blue bandana. Alexander stood tall on the top of the hill, right next to his team's flag. His bandana was tied around his forehead, slightly covering his eyes to keep the sunlight out of them. He quietly awaited the signal from Miss Archer while the rest of his team stood in three and four man squads. As soon as he had been made captain, he had hastily assembled these squads and given them each orders for the game.

"Alright kids... go!" she shouted, ringing the same bell she used to call them in after recess and to quiet them down in class.

"Squad One, charge!" Alexander yelled, cupping his hands in front of his mouth to try to amplify his voice.

A group of three ran forward into enemy territory- a boy and girl acted as blockers to protect the other boy in the middle from being tagged as he ran for the flag. The blue team immediately lunged at them, trying to tag them all. Running madly, the red squad swooped and dodged, almost reaching the blue flag before losing one of the so-called blockers to the "jail." The remaining two gave up on Alexander's strategy and just made a mad dash for the flag; both were also tagged. This striking failure began the quick dissolution of the remaining squad of Macedonians, and a free-for-all strategy for both teams.

"To the left! No! No! LEFT!" Alexander thundered from the top of the hill, trying to keep a hold on some of his authority. His orders were generally ignored, though, as very few people could tell who he was yelling at, and it often helped the Raptors spot Macedonians who were trying to sneak across to free their tagged team members from jail or grab the flag.

"Just shaddup, why dontcha?" Susan said to Alexander after about ten minutes of this.

Alexander's mouth hung open for a moment. "I'm the leader! You have to listen to me."

"It's just a gaaame," Susan sighed. "Ah, forget it."

With a dismissive wave of her hand she ran down the hill and across the dirt path. Alexander watched as she freed two teammates before grabbing the flag, and bringing it forward a few yards before she herself was tagged. Amazed by her success, he wondered if he was, perhaps, being too serious about the game. Just then he heard some rustling behind him. A small boy named Trevor had snuck behind the hill without notice and came leaping out from through the bushes onto the flag. He yanked the flag to try to pull it from the ground, but instead pulled it off of the stick that it had been loosely tied to.

"Aah!" Alexander yelped. He whirled around on his heel, and fell down on Trevor, pinning him to the ground before he could get away with the flag.

"Geh off me already," came the muffled voice of Trevor from underneath the bigger boy's body. Alexander stood up and dusted off his pants.

He snatched the flag from Trevor's hands, tied it back onto the stick, and placed it into the ground in its new spot, then said, "Go to jail."

Alexander was on edge now. He had to make sure to keep an eye on everyone at all times. Sadly, that was much easier said than done. Most of his team had been thrown into jail because of the orders he had been shouting earlier. He was left with few defenders, so Alexander took to circling the flag like a shark. He only trusted in himself to guard the flag now and would yell orders at any Macedonians who got too close; it was his job to worry about defense, not theirs. A few times a Raptor was able to snatch it from under his nose, but they rarely made it more than a few feet. The blue flag, on the other hand, was now barely seven feet from the path; Alexander was sure that he would finally have his victory over Jesús. Then he saw it- that scruff of familiar black hair. Jesús had given one of his teammates a chance at guarding the flag and was now sneaking into enemy territory.

"You're mine!" Alexander shouted. He raced down the hill, nearly tripping on a clod of dirt. Pieces of turf flew out from his black sneakers as he strove to tag Jesús. By the time he reached his foe, he had built up so much speed that he could barely stop. He barreled straight into Jesús.

"Alexander what're you doing?!" Susan shouted from a few feet away.

"Huh? I'm tagging him, wus it look like?" he replied.

"The *flag*."

Alexander's head whipped around. No one was guarding the flag... no one was even near it! It stood there, emblazoned against the gray clouds that had started to gather. Just then one of the Raptors snatched the flag after

coming up from the backside of the hill. The girl, a tall lanky blond named Cynthia, dashed at top speed for her side of the field. The Raptors cheered madly while the Macedonians struggled to stop her. More than half of their team was in jail and the others were too far away to stop her in time. Alexander tried to get to his feet, after snapping from his stupor, but found that he had gotten tangled up with Jesús in their collision. Susan dove for Cynthia but missed her by a hair, leaving Susan to crash to the ground. With that, the game was over. Cynthia bound over the path like a deer and found herself in the embrace of some of her teammates.

The Raptors continued to cheer, and even some of the Macedonians laughed; it had been a good game. All of the students walked over to the metal bench that sat just outside of the school building. A picnic was waiting there for them, supplied by Miss Archer. Only Alexander didn't move. He fell backwards and lie on his back, staring up into the storm clouds. He swore he saw the face of Jesús there, laughing at him. Grimly, he recalled the final days of Alexander the Great. Alexander wondered again if he too was doomed to an incomplete conquest. He grabbed a clump of grass absentmindedly from the ground at his side. He pulled it up and held it above his head to look at it blankly. Dirt sprinkled down from the roots and fell onto his pale face. His frown deepened. He didn't want "just as much earth as will suffice to bury" him. He wanted cake and parties and fun. Perhaps, he thought, it was time for a change.

It was only as it started to rain, and the kids were being gathered inside to call their parents, that Alexander's absence was noticed. Miss Archer came over to him, a shiny blue umbrella held overhead and holding out a smaller black umbrella for Alexander. Alexander just blinked at her at first, then reached up and took the umbrella.

"Let's get inside Alexander," Miss Archer said to the young boy as he continued sitting in the now wet grass, the umbrella clutched in his hands.

He looked up at her and with a weak smile said, "It's just Alex."

## Continuity

Emily Weisbecker

“I’m sorry...he’s gone,” the paramedic announced as the first visible signs of perspiration crept across his shirt. As he looked over the people in the room, he realized that they were all law enforcement. In his haste to tend to the collapsed man, he hadn’t even noticed the lack of family or friends to apologize to. Just to be sure, he inquired.

“Not as far as I can tell,” offered the cop standing by the door, “but this guy’s pretty young to just expire. Max, the local investigator, is a buddy of mine, so I called him over to check this out.”

Just then, a knock sounded at the door and Max stepped through the frame. He shook hands with the cop and then looked inquisitively at the body.

“Time of Death: 11:42 AM. Cause unknown,” the paramedic filled him in.

“His name’s Dr. Quitkin,” added the cop, “I’ve seen his face in the paper before, some sort of psych professional, smart guy.”

“Any clue as to what happened here?” Max questioned.

The cop shook his head. “I saw some neighbors peering through their windows at all the ambulance commotion, so I think I’ll make a few house calls to see if anybody knows anything. How about you look around the house and get back to me.”

“Got it. Good luck.” Max stepped aside as another paramedic entered through the front door to help move the body. As the cop left, the two paramedics shifted the lifeless body into a zippered bag and hoisted it gingerly to their shoulders. After depositing it in the back of the truck, they climbed into the front and drove away. Max clicked the front door shut behind them. Scratching his head, he surveyed the uncluttered hallway. At the very least, some contact names and numbers would be a good find. On top of that, he hoped to come across some evidence. There were other people looking into medical records, but Max wouldn’t assume it was just a spontaneous health problem.

As the dead body had lain there, occupying the space three feet from Max’s thin leather shoe, he hadn’t felt bothered in the least. Logging time in the detective business will do that to you, and he had experienced his fair share of death. He had grown accustomed to the way skin took on a rubbery feel immediately after losing the pulsing life beneath it. The way eyes blankly stared ahead like glass marbles until a careful thumb nudged the lids down. Even the unnatural contortions that sometimes occurred from falls or broken bones failed to turn his stomach. However, now that this Dr. Quitkin was gone, Max felt the typical unease as a tickle in his chest. It

wasn't enough to deter him from work, but it kept him careful and relatively reverent, when possible.

Before touching anything, Max snapped on a pair of white, rubber gloves. The cop had left a Ziploc bag on the floor containing a wallet. Max decided to take a quick glance. The brown leather wallet was well-worn with creases and scratches, its few pockets holding only minimal contents. He certainly hadn't been the type to tuck various memories into his wallet to browse through at a later date. His driver's license was visible through a clear plastic sheath. Frederic Quitkin, it said. A shiny Visa card was tucked in the next pocket and a blue hospital parking pass in the next. Inside the billfold, three barely creased twenties nestled together.

The one thing that caught Max's attention was the small strip of paper with a smudged phone number penciled across the surface. The number had no name, but the paper was yellowed and softened with age. What would anyone do with a phone number for so long? It seemed like it would be more logical to either memorize it or not need it anymore and throw it away. Perhaps it was someone important, but someone he didn't call often? Or instead it may have been the sentimentality of someone actually giving it to him. Max noted the soft, neat curves of the handwriting.

*"Fred, I...I don't know what to say. I'm not sure what else to do." Allie spoke slowly, her voice laden with emotion. She watched as Frederic's face went blank. She wished he would react. A year and a half of dating at Princeton, but still she felt like she hardly knew him. At first she was drawn to his mysterious nature, but she soon found herself butting up against one barrier after another. She was once drawn to the ache in his eyes, but she grew distraught with the realization that she couldn't fix it. Her feelings for him hadn't lessened any, not really, but she was too frustrated and too hurt to be kept on the outside. Now that they were graduating, she had to leave. The relationship was stagnant. She hardly admitted it to herself, but a tiny bit of her hoped that a little time apart would bring him to his senses and bring them back together. To let that happen, she had to give it time and space, she was convinced.*

*"Listen," she continued, "even though we are going our separate ways, let's not lose touch, okay?" He managed to curve his lips into a forced smile and nodded. "Well, since you're not sure where you're going yet, I'm going to give you my number. It's my parents' number, their house phone, because I know I'll be there for at least a little while I figure out what to do,. But you have to call. Okay? Promise? Good." The tight feeling in her throat was beginning to loosen. This plan sounded feasible, he would call, and everything would be okay. She bent over to write the phone number on a scrap of paper from her purse, ten looping numbers. She raised her arms in one last peace offering. He stepped into them and embraced her tightly, giving her hope that could keep her going for years.*

Thoughtfully chewing on his lip, Max tucked the paper with the phone number back into the pocket of the wallet. The living room to his right and the empty room to his left looked unpromising, so he walked to the end of the front hall and found the kitchen. A thin film of dust covered the counter, suggesting that it had been a while since it had been used. A wooden stand held six large, sharp knives with smooth black handles. Above them, a handsomely carved utensil set dangled from pegs dotting the wall. Quickly surveying the counter tops and the drawers, Max determined that the kitchen wouldn't get him anywhere, so he would go in search of a bedroom. If any place in a house was personal, it would be where Dr. Quitkin slept. After mounting the carpeted stairs, he found it.

The door groaned as it opened. The nubby, beige carpet repelled his toes as he took in his surroundings. Much like the rest of the house, the bedroom contained little furniture or decoration. A simple queen-sized bed frame stood before him with neatly tucked burgundy sheets. A window looked out over a swing set in the neighbor's backyard. Max could tell from where he stood that it was rusting along the poles. One of the swings was curled tightly around the top bar in a choke hold and the other swung heavily back and forth in the breeze. Max opened the top drawer of the dresser opposite the bed. Matched socks were balled together and arranged by color. Each succeeding drawer held similarly sorted clothing, but nothing telling. He then approached the bed. The dust ruffle drooped on one side where its Velcro had come unattached. As he bent over to pat it back into place, he lifted the mattress to peek underneath. Based on the décor, it made sense that Dr. Quitkin didn't have a diary, but unfortunately he had nothing else stashed there either. He lowered himself down to his knees to peer

under the dust ruffle. Greeted only by moth balls, he coughed and looked to his last two options. There were two doors that both stood slightly ajar. Max first stepped into the bathroom. He placed his fingers on the back of the mirror and pulled forward gently. It swung open on its hinges without resistance. Behind the mirror, he found foot cream, a half-used tube of toothpaste, and several orange pill bottles from the local pharmacy. Max wondered if the pharmacy would know of any family. Someone had to know, especially if he was well-known. However, Max chose to persevere. There had to be evidence of a personal life outside of a relationship with the pharmacist.

After pushing open the closet door, Max saw clean, color-coded clothing hung on sturdy hangers. He stepped in and fingered the silky sleeve of a blue suit. Dr. Quitkin had been a well-dressed man, but that didn't help him any. Exasperated, he turned toward the door but in his sharp movement, his foot caught the stack of shoe boxes and sent the top box tumbling to the floor. Bending down to retrieve the loafers, he started when his fingers grasped a Polaroid photograph instead of a stray shoe. This could be something. He scooped up the box and listened as the contents shifted. Before leaving the closet, he lifted the lids of the four other boxes. Each one contained shoes, so he left the closet clutching the home of the photograph.

In the bedroom, sunlight streamed through the window, so he settled on the floor to investigate his find. Excitedly, he held up the black and white Polaroid of a little boy in a woman's arms. The small boy clutched tightly around her neck and she looked off into the distance, unconcerned with the picture being taken. Her eyes were lined with age not yet earned. In the photograph he could just barely pick out the bloodshot lines streaking her eyes and the dilated pupils. Max guessed that the little boy was Frederic Quitkin.

*She waved an impatient arm toward her sister, dismissing the attempt to capture her face. Relenting, her sister bid her goodnight before pulling the front door closed behind her. The woman shifted her son Frederic to her other hip and poked a finger through his choke hold so that he would loosen his grip. She then took a deep breath to clear her head. Her eyes were rimmed with red and she was in no mood to be photographed. If her sister flashed that under her nose, she'd throw it away. There was no reason to remember. There was no reason for anything. She took her arm away from Fred's bottom for a minute but he barely shifted because his grip had tightened once more. She reached across the kitchen table and tilted the glass her sister left behind to her lips. She realized that it was mostly vodka as it stung the back of her throat, but she welcomed the room temperature splash, draining the glass. She set it down on the table again but paused a moment before she let her fingers slip away.*

*Trudging to the next room, she tried to pry the small fists apart. Frederic began to whimper when she pulled him away from her body and the whimper turned to a wail when she deposited him on his bed. He was only four, but he knew that when he was put in his bed, he had to stay there. He obediently placed his head on the pillow, and she promptly turned to walk out the door. A murmur of longing escaped from his lips and he sat back up, raising his arms to her, imploring her to hold him, his lip jutting out to emphasize his determination. Upon hearing the sound, she turned around to look. She saw the pain in his eyes and the small streaks of who knows what on his grubby fingers that she had neglected to clean. He thrust his neck forward a bit more, urging her with his eyes, begging her to return to him. She thought of the glass on the kitchen table, and the bottle that could refill it, impatiently awaiting her in the cupboard. Her glassy eyes lost focus and Frederic became a blur. Rubbing them with the back of her fist, she turned and walked out.*

Max squinted at the picture, trying to see deeper into the woman's eyes than the clarity of the photo would allow. He squeezed his eyes shut to give himself a break from the intensity of his staring and set the Polaroid on the carpet in front of him. The papers in the box seemed to be in a sort of stack, and he wasn't sure if it was intentional or ordered in some way. Based on the rest of the house, he guessed it probably had some meaning. However, not all of the contents of the box were flat. He gravitated toward the baseball on top. He turned it over in his fingers, feeling it fit securely into the palm of his hand just as baseballs had back when he played as a kid. Its dingy skin was scuffed and the red stitching was coming loose in several places.

*The nine year old braced his elbow against the window's edge and shoved upward. With a bit of*

resistance, it gave and slid all the way open. He stuck his face through and looked around the room. He disappeared from view for a minute, but soon a leg poked through and stabbed the air a few times before it met with the desk below. Then the other leg followed and the rest of his body folded through until he tumbled onto the floor.

“Hello?” he called, “Fred?” He was quiet enough so as not to disturb anyone beyond the hallway immediately outside the bedroom. He heard something shift in the closet, so he walked over and pushed the door along its squeaky track. There on the floor sat Frederic. His knees were gathered up between his arms and his chin was lowered to rest on top. His eyes bore blankly into the distance in front of him and he didn’t even flinch at his friend’s un-oiled entrance.

His friend watched him carefully until he saw a blink. Assured that Frederic was in fact alive, the friend softly said hello so as not to abruptly disrupt the apparent trance.

Frederic nodded his chin with a barely perceptible movement, but his friend saw. Something was wrong, but he couldn’t tell what it was, nor did he have the words to ask or the comprehension to understand. Instead, he did what he could do. He pulled a baseball from his pocket, one so fresh off the store shelf that it even smelled new, and rolled it into Frederic’s ankle.

“Hey, let’s play some ball.” He wasn’t pushy, but he wasn’t asking. Frederic then turned his head and their eyes met. The blankness had been replaced by a twinkling of gratitude. Noting this, his friend grabbed his wrist and pulled him to his feet, leading the way out the window and across the street to the park.

As Max absentmindedly passed the baseball from one hand to the next, it slipped through his grasp and bounced on the unforgiving floor, rolling to a stop next to the Polaroid. He decided to move on, pulling out the next item. It was a hospital bracelet with a small metal clasp. The clasp was still securely closed, but the plastic part had been severed, probably to remove it from the wrist it once encircled. In squat, blue type, the bracelet contained the necessary personal information: FREDERIC QUITKIN, AGE 13, BROKEN HUMERUS.

Muttering bitterly to herself, Francine pulled her robe around her shoulders with a tug and headed toward the back door. She had told that good-for-nothing neighbor to stay off her property, but he was always causing trouble. She had been reading in her arm chair when a sizeable thud reached her through the window. She peered through the screen, trying to see what it was. She could hear the tags jingling around her mastiff’s neck, and she could just barely pick him out in the dusk. That damn neighbor boy, what was he up to now? She’d show him. She’d teach him to have a little respect. She’d...as she pulled the sliding glass door open and stepped through, she saw her large dog standing over a dark heap in the grass. Did he kill something? The mound stirred and moaned. Was it a person? The lump was right by her tall white fence and now it was beginning to writhe.

“Who’s there?” She called sternly, summoning her fiercest demeanor to intimidate the thing.

“Fred.” He grunted.

“How many times have I told you to stay off of my land, away from my fence...you could have hurt my precious—! Oh to think you may have done something to my darling dog. But...what are you doing on the ground? Did you get bitten? Serves you right. She can smell a bad seed just like I can. Get up and look me in the eye when I’m talking to you. Didn’t your father teach you any manners?”

“Listen,” Frederic interjected venomously, “I was just walking on top of the fence, okay? I didn’t choose to fall on your side.” His explanation was pierced with brief groans and sharp, sucking breaths, but he was able to pull himself to his feet. Francine’s spine had begun to curve in her old age, so at thirteen, he stood almost an inch taller than she. Just then, her husband approached the back door of their house and turned a switch, illuminating the back yard in a pool of yellow. Francine gawked at Frederic, now bathed in light. His upper arm had a lump of bone about to poke through the skin near the shoulder and the rest of it twisted in a sickeningly unnatural way, hanging from his body like a dead thing.

In the light, her husband got a good look at Frederic and exclaimed, “Jesus, son, what’d you do?”

“Fell.” For the first time, Frederic turned to look at himself. The severity of it made his eyes widen, but he clenched his teeth and pretended not to notice. But now that he had seen the damage, he became aware of an

*intense throbbing that was rapidly morphing into a shooting pain that worked its way up his arm to his shoulder and around his neck.*

*“Alright, alright, let me call your mother.”*

*“Not home.” His stab at monosyllabic stoicism came out sounding more like a sob, but his eyes remained dry.*

*“Jesus...okay, come on, we’ll get you to the hospital.”*

Max set the bracelet on his own wrist and saw that it didn’t reach all the way around. Frederic must have been a skinny kid. Most thirteen year olds were. He chuckled that the hospital bracelet had been kept here with these other treasures, it was just the sort of thing he would have done. Proof of proudly earned battle scars. Max figured he also would have worn the bracelet as long as possible, until it broke and fell off, in order to display his glory for everyone else to appreciate. When Max reached in next, he pulled out a photograph of the boy he now knew to be Frederic, only this time he was facing the corner, and he looked to be about six. The bit of his face that was showing was tear-streaked and shiny and his brow was clearly furrowed. His small arms were folded tightly against his chest and he looked distraught. Behind him, a few other kids milled around beneath a piñata suspended on a string.

*The second Frederic walked through the door, his face changed completely. Before he had been filled with giggles and smiles, delighted at what he might find waiting for him in the next room. It was his birthday party, and his mother had promised that she would try really hard this time. The second he saw the piñata dangling from the light fixture, his whole body jerked and he turned stiffly toward the wall. Edging forward, he moved until he was securely in the corner and then he wrapped his arms tightly around himself, tears streaming down his face.*

*“Hon, come on over here, the kids want to play with you and we’ve got some fun games and stuff.”*

*He didn’t respond and only squeezed himself tighter. Her voiced dropped the frills and she called to him again.*

*“Fred. Here. Now.”*

*He began to tremble slightly and refused to move. Bored, one of the kids grabbed the stick on the floor and began to poke at the red, donkey-shaped piñata. It swung with increasing speed, causing the light fixture to creak in complaint. A look from the mother made him pull the stick away from the piñata and look around for his next target. Sidling over to the corner, he prodded Frederic, first in the back of the knee, and then the shoulder blade.*

What a weird kid, Max mused. Who wouldn’t like a birthday party? He loved those when he was a kid, and he always won the piñata. He wasn’t sure if you could actually ‘win’ with piñatas, but he liked to give himself credit anyway. He was the one to deliver the blows hard enough to release the shower of stale candy that never failed to evoke squeals of delight. Next in the pile in the box, he saw a business card. Perhaps this would belong to a friend or relative, giving him a concrete form of contact. He set the piñata picture by the first Polaroid and brought the business card closer to his face. On the front, black print spelled out the essentials:

Christian H. McLean  
Ph.D., School Psychologist  
Strayver High

On the back, a note was scrawled in blue pen: Fred—Come visit anytime! Max wondered if Frederic ever did decide to visit. He figured that if there was a personal note on the back of the card, it was a safe bet.

*“You can talk to me, Frederic. Tell me what’s been going on. Why are you skipping classes so much? I know you’re a bright kid, but you’re throwing it all away. What’s the deal?” Dr. Christian McLean sighed gently, wondering what he could say to get Frederic to open up to him. He just couldn’t bring himself to believe*

*that apathy was to blame. There had to be more behind it. In fact, he had a good idea of the cause, but he needed to get Frederic to say it first in order to confirm his suspicions.*

*Frederic was slumped over in his chair, staring at his scuffed shoes. He was dressed all in black and a silver hoop clung to his left nostril. His dyed black hair stuck out in tufts because it hadn't been washed for a few days. Tobacco-stained fingers picked diligently at a loose chip of wood in the arm of the chair. He was listening intently to what McLean was saying, but he didn't let on, didn't look up, didn't speak.*

*"Frederic, look at me."*

*He finally raised his chin and his gaze bore right through McLean's, making the psychologist a little uncomfortable. The sudden stare caught him off guard.*

*"Listen, can I go?" Frederic's gaze was locked on McLean's left eye. He could feel the tension expanding. He imagined McLean's neck slowly getting hotter inside his collared shirt. His fingers continued to pry and prod the small piece of wood on the chair until it snapped and flicked onto the floor several feet away. McLean's patience was evaporating. He had been extremely understanding, and he was getting nothing, not even a verbal outlash, just nothing at all.*

*"Fuck it, man," Frederic muttered as he lumbered to his feet and turned toward the door.*

*"You're gonna end up like your father if you keep this up." Frederic froze in his tracks, still facing the door. McLean's eyes hardened. Nothing else had worked, but he couldn't give up on this boy. The tough love strategy was his last resort. He looked down at his desk, wondering if he had made the right decision, but when he looked up, Frederic was once again sitting in the chair. He looked like a different person. He still had the somber black clothes, black hair, the punk nose ring, but his eyes were now fixed on McLean's in a way that wasn't menacing. Frederic chewed on his lower lip, a look of desperation seeping into his eyes.*

*"Okay," he said, attempting to keep his voice as even as possible, "what do I do?"*

Max wondered what kind of a business card wouldn't have a phone number. He could at least look up the name to see if Christian McLean was still around. He made a new pile, hoping the card would lead to something helpful, and reached in for the next item. As he was about to pull out a thick wooden plaque with a metal plate on the front, his fingertip brushed something dry, causing it to rustle. He lifted the box and angled it so he could clearly see the side. A number of red rose petals were pressed up against the cardboard, previously pinned between the papers and the wall of the box. He gave one a gentle tug but it snapped in half, brittle and crumbly after so many years tucked away. He brought the deep red petal to his nose and thought he smelled the faint remnants of a rose mingled with that comforting, subtle smell of decaying autumn leaves. He rubbed it between his fingers, dry and raspy.

*"Fred, I have something for you." She smiled shyly and held both arms secretively behind her back. He looked up from his physics book and his face broke into a grin.*

*"Aw, Allie...you didn't have to...what is it?"*

*"First, you have to follow me," she instructed, backing slowly into one of the stacks near the table he often worked at in Princeton's main library.*

*His curiosity piqued, he rose from his chair and followed her with his eyebrows raised and a smile still dancing across his lips. She continued to back into the stack until she was fully immersed in shadows. One of the overhead lights had burned out and this particular section, theological philosophy, would be hard to sift through for anyone who was interested. She looked up at him as he followed, her eyes beckoning him to continue.*

*"Okay, so you can't say it's too girly, just because it's not typical doesn't mean it's not nice." With that, she pulled a single red rose from behind her back and pressed it into his hand. "Happy Birthday, Frederic."*

*His face softened and he looked down to admire his gift. When he was about to raise it to his nose to breathe in its scent, she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips against his, just for a brief moment, before she lowered to her feet and bashfully smiled up at the him. Grinning, he poked the flower stem in a row of books and took her in his arms, kissing her back.*

Smiling wistfully, Max tried to remember the last time he had brought someone flowers. It had been far too long. He made a mental note to stop by the florist on the way home and pick up a bouquet. He wasn't even sure who he would give it to, but he was sure he could find someone who would certainly appreciate it. He dropped the petal above the box, watching it flutter down until it was again nestled amongst the others. His fingers returned to the plaque and he pulled it out, surprised at its weight. He realized that this and the baseball were the main items weighing down the box. The shining metal plate on the front of the plaque displayed an engraving in fancy script: American Psychiatric Association Merrill Everett Award for Medicinal Excellence. Below the label was his name in matching lettering. Frederic A. Quitkin. Max nodded with approval, now he was getting into something more current.

*“On behalf of the American Psychiatric Association, I'd like to present the Merrill Everett Award for Medicinal Excellence to Frederic Quitkin.” The presenter started a round of applause. Frederic blushed a little and pushed his chair back from the table, making sure that the white linen tablecloth wasn't caught on his clothing. He stood up and bowed his head slightly, modest as usual. One of the partners of his practice gave him a supportive pat on the arm as Frederic wove between the tables to reach the stage. His tall frame and excellent posture made him look very respectable in his black tuxedo. He climbed the three steps and shook the presenter's hand, stepping in front of the microphone to say a few words. Back at his table, the woman who had been sitting next to him leaned to the woman sitting on her other side.*

*“Wow, he sounds unbelievably successful. Did you hear about his new depression medication? It's been approved by the FDA and it will be available next month. Are you here with him?”*

*“No, I'm a partner in his practice,” the other woman whispered. “Actually, as far as I know, he's single. He's a lovely man, but he keeps to himself a good deal. Oh, but the patients just adore him, it's certainly not for lack of charm.” At that point he finished his speech and made his way back to the table. The audience continued to applaud until he sat back down.*

*The woman next to Frederic leaned over to address him, “That was wonderful, darling, congratulations.”*

*He nodded politely and thanked her, but then turned to the man sitting on his other side when he heard his name spoken.*

Maybe the American Psychiatric Association would have some sort of personal record about Frederic. Max set the weighty plaque next to the high school psychologist's business card. He was fascinated by the items he was sifting through, but he had been in Frederic's house for quite a while, and he was getting stiff. The daylight was beginning to subside, so he stood up, listening to various bones pop and crack in protest to the sudden movement. He flicked the light switch, flooding the room with artificial brightness. To his disappointment, only one card remained. He lifted it from the bottom of the box and cocked his head as he studied the cover. A dove floated peacefully on the page, with the words “Our Deepest Condolences” resting heavily beneath it. Inside, “We're so sorry for your loss,” was scrawled in black ink at a slant. Under it, there were two names signed by the same hand.

*Tracy and Cillian, she read quietly. Handing off the card to four year old Frederic, his mother slumped onto a kitchen chair and rested her head on her arms. “Why us?” she asked the kitchen table.*

*Meanwhile, Frederic had accepted the card from his mother and inserted the corner into his mouth. The tapping of his mother's foot against the linoleum floor distracted him, so he dropped the card and seated himself on the floor beside her. He knew that nothing was right. Even paper didn't taste the same as usual. His mom was dark and he hadn't seen his dad in three days. He was getting more and more confused, but he didn't know what to ask.*

*“Mom?” he tried.*

*“It's okay, sweetie. Umm, well...we'll talk about this in the morning, or maybe when you're older. Come here, come sit on Mommy's lap.” She pulled him onto her fraying jeans and for once, she clung to him just as tightly as he clung to her.*

So maybe that's what happened, thought Max. His father died when he was little, it messed him up, and now he was gone because of... a high stress lifestyle? Max was familiar with the idea of emotional upheaval taking a significant toll on the body. Thank goodness he had never gone through anything like that. But it was still random speculation, nothing concrete.

With one hand, he began to scoop up the paper items spread across the floor and with the other hand he set the shoebox on his lap. He set the plaque and the baseball just where he had found them. He was going to hold onto the psychologist's personal card until he had checked into the name. Sighing, Max lifted the top of the box and just as he was about to flip it over, a bit of newsprint caught his eye. An extra layer of cardboard lined the inner perimeter of the box top and whatever this was had become lodged beneath it. Max pried it open a bit and smoothed the bit of newsprint that was showing. It threatened to tear, so he ripped the box, opening the space up so he could slide the small cutting out without harm. He reasoned that it would be better to recover this information instead of salvaging the box. He figured he could probably find a matching shoebox top in the closet that would fit.

*Hunter N. Quitkin, who has committed suicide at the age of 36, was a highly esteemed local writer of Cuttler County. His books have just recently begun to receive critical acclaim nationwide. He is survived by wife Diana and son Frederic, age 4.*

Max's lips parted in disbelief.

*"Go find your dad," his mother insisted, trying to redirect Frederic's attention so she could concentrate on her book.*

*"Daddy!" he called out in a singsong voice. There was no response. He bounded down the stairs, pausing to satisfy an itch on the stiff, scratchy brown carpet. When he reached the bottom, he suppressed a giggle. He liked to surprise his dad because he always made a big show of being startled and then swung Frederic into the air or tickled his belly. He passed through the door and suddenly he felt like a brick had been catapulted into his stomach. He couldn't breathe, he sank to his knees. He wasn't sure what was going on. His mind was flashing images and abstract concepts through his four year old brain at speeds faster than he could handle. He leaned his head against the door frame and swallowed carefully as he felt the acid rising in his throat.*

*In the middle of the room were his dad's shoes, floating. Brown penny loafers. He remembered how his dad had showed him how to tuck in a penny to merit the name. Only the shoes weren't on the ground, they were in the air, at the height of Frederic's four year old knees. The shoes tilted slightly downward and connected to a pair of worn-out brown pants. Though they were old and soft, the pants were carefully pressed, straight vertical lines leading his eyes to the hands. They weren't his father's hands. They were swollen, pasty white and pasted together. They looked fake and almost waxy, as though Frederic had drawn them with his Peach crayon. A forest green button-down shirt was tucked into the pants and buttoned at the cuffs. Frederic's shoulders involuntarily curved inward as his eyes continued to travel upward. He didn't want to continue. He wanted to go back to the shoes. Floating shoes. Like his blue flip-flop that has slipped out of the canoe in his friend's pond, but it stayed on the surface, bobbing patiently until Frederic could reach out and pull it back in. The shoes beckoned to be rescued, but he couldn't stop. The neck climbed out of the collar. A bristling yellow rope looped around it and cinched securely to the light fixture above. The small shards fraying from the rope looked like needles poised to plunge through the delicate skin. Deep, colorful bruises bloomed around its tight embrace. The pale, unfamiliar face was tinged with a ghastly blue pallor. The lips were drained of their usual color and a fat, felt tongue spilled from the corner. He looked puffy yet pinched, with unnaturally sunken cheeks and swollen, bruised-looking dark spots beneath his eyes. His eyes. The lids were open. The pupils looked inside. Rolled back almost all the way, so that mostly white was showing. He wasn't a dad. He was a doll. A dream. But his hair was the same. Fanned out over his forehead and ears, all casually in place, no suggestion of a struggle. Frederic couldn't recognize the man in between, but the shoes and the hair were his father's. He heard his mother's footsteps upstairs and the floor creaked just above the light fixture. Ever so gently, the body began to sway. It was only a slight movement, because it hung heavy and limp. But it swayed. Then her steps were approaching.*

*“Fred?” she called, a hint of nervousness in her voice. She hadn’t heard a sound from him in a while, and that wasn’t normal. She couldn’t settle, either he was too quiet or too loud, but she felt the urge to find him and touch his head, make sure he was alright. Her feet hit the landing and she saw him propped against the doorframe. Worried, she quickened her steps.*

*Frederic had gone back to the shoes. They didn’t scare him. She crossed the threshold of the door frame, and her scream loosened whatever part of him had slowed down to take in the sight. After that, the details got woozy. If Frederic had worn glasses, it would have been like removing them and then sprinting forward several weeks.*

Max stood up shakily and didn’t notice as the small newspaper clipping fluttered to the floor. He returned to the bathroom and opened the mirror cabinet again. Selecting the first pill bottle on the left, he glanced over the label. The prescription was for 40 pills of a strong narcotic. The date showed that it had been acquired from the pharmacy two days before, yet it was empty. The next bottle was a commonly prescribed sleeping aid, picked up the same day. It too was empty, though it once held thirty-three pills. All the fragments came together. An entire life spent trying to cure his own problems in other people. At this point, dusk had blanketed the neighborhood and Max realized that he should be getting home. He slid the shoebox back into its slot on the stack against the wall in the closet and descended the stairs. With the psychologist’s business card in hand, the American Psychiatric Association in mind, and the slip of a phone number still in the wallet, Max picked up the phone to call the cop.

## Red Nose Tales

Casey Romero

“Nobody knows *when* they came, or *how* they came. Probably blown in with the Santa Ana’s— those winds make everything crazy. Anyways, one night a long time ago when I was five, the wind clanked the swings against the metal posts, ripped branches off trees, and Brutus howled like a wolf. The sky turned this weird orange color and the power went out for at least a hundred hours. When I woke up the next morning, something was different. The birds chirped and the sun was shining, but my hair stuck up like it does when you rub a balloon over your arm. That night when dad and I went to get ice cream, I saw one of them, and I knew they were up to no good...”

The distant street lamp cast strange shapes and shadows in the tree house as ten small ears clung to the every word of their fearless leader. Buster, Mrs. Conford’s ankle biting Chihuahua, screeched in the night. Evan wished his mom would call them into the house. He knew these stories about the ex-circus people who lived at the edge of town. The juggler who chops off kids’ toes to juggle them, clowns who shove you in their little car and kidnap you, and the bearded lady who suffocates you with her thick facial hair. Evan shuddered as the image of a clown’s face with a big red nose popped into his mind. Tonight, with the tree branches slapping the sides of the wooden walls, Evan was especially afraid.

“But, no one questioned them. Everyone tried to be nice but they only stared at you when you said hi. So the town ignored them, until Cindy Gilter from Mrs. Bomstark’s class didn’t come home for dinner one day. The whole town went mad looking for her. And when her dad went to their camp, he begged the old ringmaster to tell him where his daughter was. And the crazy man just cackled—“

“Stop!!!” shrieked Evan as he clamped his seven year old hands over his ears. “Ty, stop, or I’m gonna tell mom you’re making up stories to scare me again.”

“I’m not making this up,” Ty responded with the all knowing authority of his twelve years. “Do you guys believe me?” he asked the other four boys.

They nodded.

“Evan, as your older brother, I just want to tell you what happened so you don’t make the same mistake

that little Cindy made. Poor little seven year old Cindy. Probably thought they'd give her some cotton candy or a balloon twisted into an animal."

Evan sat in the center of the tree house, where the comforting light from the streetlamp pooled through the window. Wiggling his last baby tooth back and forth with his tongue, he wished he had the full body armor of his Pokemon blanket.

"Boys, time for vanilla ice cream. I have sprinkles," his mom yelled from the kitchen door.

Preoccupied with images of clowns with face paint and jugglers with chainsaws, Evan couldn't enjoy his dessert. He mashed his ice cream around to make it rainbow colored from the sprinkles.

"Evster, before dinner you were singing the 'we all scream for ice cream song'. And you've barely touched yours. I have cookies and cream if you want," Mom tousled his red curls as she sat next to him.

"Mom, Ty said the circus people are gonna come for me in my sleep".

"I promise they aren't going to come get you. We all know Ty and his overactive imagination. Let's have some more ice cream before we tuck you in."

As Evan clomped up the stairs, Ty tripped him and taunted, "Have some cheese, RAT!"

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Worms, crickets, beetles, and rollie pollies crawled between the cracks of the sidewalk. Any other day, Evan would have stocked up on a new supply for Leo, his pet gecko. Today, he trudged along next to Ty and kicked every rock he encountered.

"Hey dog breath, watch out!" teased Ty as he pushed Evan into the street. "Don't get run over on my watch—I don't want to be grounded for all of sixth grade."

Evan readjusted his backpack strap and shot his brother his best "wait till I tell Mom" look. He kicked a rock and sent it flying into the red wooden fence. Someday, he would kick Ty like that rock. He wasn't going to be 62 pounds for the rest of his life.

"Ty, you're a jerk. I know you made up that Cindy girl. All you do is make up stories. I'm not scared."

Evan had to wipe Ty's flying spit from his cheek.

"Yeah, I bet you're not scared. This from the kid who slept in Mom and Dad's room till two weeks ago. You have enough night lights to light up all of China."

"No, you lie all the time. Like when you told me if I jumped off the wall with an umbrella I could fly like Mary Poppins. Or when you said the headless horseman looks at me through my window. And when you told me if I ate a lot of broccoli I would have tons of little trees grow in me."

"Yeah, lamebot, who believes that? This is different. You've seen the lady in Vons with the full beard—she's a circus person. And every year at this time, they have to sacrifice a second grader so they can keep their powers. Girls don't grow hair out of their face. It comes from the blood of a seven year old."

The rock from under Evan's foot grazed Ty's ankle. Evan knew Ty must be lying. He had to be. But then, the bearded lady did give him a funny look last Saturday. With the bright sun reddening his cheeks, Evan felt a surge of courage. He glared at Ty and scout's honored that he wasn't scared.

"Ok rug rat, if you're such a tough guy, let's prove it. I dare you, no wait, I TRIPLE dog dare you to go visit their camp."

"I said I'm not scared," yelled Evan.

"Prove it little dude."

Evan couldn't let Ty win again. "I will!"

"This oughta be good."

Evan almost choked on his words. Visit the camp of people who wanted his blood? But if he didn't go, Ty would keep tormenting him. "But, but not today because I've got Cub Scouts."

"This Saturday afternoon then. Susie's babysitting us while Mom and Dad go somewhere. She'll just talk to her pimply face boyfriend. Perfect time to go" said Ty.

It was now or never for Evan to prove he wasn't a baby. "I'm not scared. And when I win, I get your BB gun."

"Deal. And when you lose, you can never rat me out."

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The next four days took longer than a visit to Dentist Dan. *Pokemon*, *Batman* and his usual lineup of Saturday morning cartoons prepared Evan for his big day. While he picked the marshmallows out of his Lucky Charms for breakfast, he watched countless good guys beating bad guys. Evan wanted to prove he wasn't the same little boy who went screaming home last summer after nighttime hide and seek. After breakfast, Evan trudged up to his room. His newly constructed Lego spaceship was displayed on his dresser. Along with his GI Joes, X-Men figurines and the model airplane he and Dad made last Sunday. And that lamp. Left over from when he was a baby. He couldn't look at it without getting the willies. A clown with a plastic smile, creepy white painted face, holding three balloons stared at him. Last time, Evan tried to hide it in Brutus' doghouse. Before that, down the laundry shoot. But it always returned to its spot on the edge of his dresser.

Evan looked over his survival bag. Cap gun, check. Bazooka gum, check. Jingles, his stuffed bear, check. Plastic army men, check. Capri Suns, check. He had everything he would need.

"Ev, come give me a kiss before I leave," Mom called from the kitchen.

Evan and Ty stood in front of their parents as they read off the usual dos and don'ts. No tag in the house, licorice is not a dinner, Susie doesn't want her hair cut while she's sleeping, Brutus doesn't like peanut butter, broccoli is your friend.

"And Ty, no crazy stories," warned Dad.

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Evan and Ty pedaled against the wind to McGrady Park. Rusted swing sets, a cracked plastic slide, and an old jungle gym greeted them.

"This is ground zero," Ty said. "Not to late to go back, I'll only tease you till you're 40."

"I was born ready."

Evan looked over his shoulder at Ty as he made his way up the hill to the embankment. The chirping birds sang the dreaded "dum dum de dum, dum de, dum de dum de dum". Evan crept to the edge of the embankment that overlooked the ex-circus trailers. No bright colored tents, or elephants, just five old trailers in a row. Old camp fires littered the ground. Was that red dot an old clown's nose? That would be perfect proof of his bravery.

"HEY!"

The shock of the voice made Evan lose his footing and tumble down the hill. After rolling to a stop, Evan lay on his back and noticed clouds in the shape of a turtle. Still in a daze from his acrobatic roll, Evan laid motionless for several moments.

A man with gray and white speckled hair nudged Evan with his work boots.

"Are you okay there son?" he inquired.

Evan hopped to his feet and tried to run but tripped over a log.

"Hey, kiddo, you had quite the fall. Did you hurt yourself at all?"

Evan's eyes formed round O's. As the man inched closer to him, Evan found his voice.

"No! I don't wanna be your sacrifice. I promise my blood is no good."

The old man laughed and Evan thought of the old man who laughed at Cindy Gilter's dad when he went looking for her. Evan wished his legs would unfreeze.

"Who said anything about a sacrifice? I just want to get you a band-aid."

The man wore a faded blue Dodger's sweatshirt like the one his grandpa wore to his Little League games.

"I'm Charlie and this is my side kick Chops." Evan realized a small dog accompanied the man. Evan laughed as Chops began licking his ankles.

Then he remembered what Charlie and Chops wanted, "Wwwwwait, stop. I know you need my blood." Charlie looked puzzled as Evan explained his older brother told him all about the circus people needing

a second grader's blood in order to keep their special talents.

"So that's the story these days? Well, just between us, we don't need a second grader's or any body else's blood for that matter."

Part of Evan wanted to believe Charlie. But the other part wanted to run back to the playground. A tiny lady with jet black hair came to the front door of the second trailer. "Charles, who is that?"

"Oh, how rude of me, I haven't asked yet. What's your name?"

"Uhhhh, Evan."

"This is Evan, he just tumbled down the hill. I think he was spying on us."

The tiny lady bounced over and was eye level with Evan. "Nice to meet you Evan, my name is Elsa."

Evan didn't know what to do. The cut on his arm hurt like when he would get stung by a bee. A band-aid sounded nice, but they might be tricking him. Then again, if they did want his blood, why would they want to stop it with a band-aid?

"Oh, honey, that scrape looks awful. Let's get you a band-aid and some cream. What's the matter? I promise I won't bite," joked Elsa.

"He thinks we need a second grader sacrifice, honey," Charlie warned.

"Well, if we want a seven year old's blood then we can just use our grandson's. Evan, I just made a fresh batch of snickerdoodles, would you like one?" offered the tiny lady.

Evan's stomach growled. Snickerdoodles were his favorite. He could use his arsenal of plastic army men if either tried to attack. As he walked to the trailer with faded balloons painted on the side, his foot crunched the small red dot—an old Christmas ornament.

The tiny trailer was alive with bright colors and what Mom called "knickknacks" from around the world. The Eiffel Tower in the background of one of their pictures and the Great Wall of China in the other. Pictures of Elsa on an elephant, Charles surrounded by lions, two kids walking a tight rope, and a school picture of a little boy with two missing front teeth decorated the coffee table. The background of the missing tooth picture looked like his first grade school picture.

"Did you really sit on a *real* elephant?" asked Evan.

"Oh that's Bruno; he was my favorite. He carried me out to the show every night for years," answered Elsa.

"Did you ever fly out of a cannon?"

"No, I was a trapeze artist. Too short to be a lion tamer which is what I originally wanted to be. Besides, zooming through the air on a bar is a lot more fun than worrying about making a lion mad!" Elsa said.

"Elsa was the best trapeze in our show. I was the ring master. Not as fun as other jobs, but I broke my leg in a tight rope accident when I was a kid and never fully recovered," added Charlie.

Elsa and Charlie amazed him with their circus adventures. The time in Moscow when a lion was accidentally let loose in the crowd, when the bearded lady shaved her beard for a raise, and how one of the star jugglers was blind in one eye.

But his favorite was the strongest man in the world and his fear of ants. "One day", Elsa explained, "I think we were in New Zealand, and someone forgot to clean the cotton candy maker. We all went to bed and the next morning we woke up to Zorr screaming like someone had shot him in the foot. Well, he had seen the machine and figured he would make some cotton candy for breakfast. When he went to pour the syrup into it, at least a hundred ants swarmed his hand. I've never heard anyone scream so loud for so long."

When Evan asked why they lived in trailers past the park and not in regular neighborhoods, they explained traveling around the world had made them appreciate the quiet. Also, most people like to watch circus people, not live near them, according to Charlie. Elsa showed Evan her collection of old red clown noses, and said she was scared of clowns when she was a kid too. The thump in Evan's chest had slowed down and the growl in his stomach soothed. Even his cut didn't throb.

When the cuckoo chimed four o'clock, Elsa asked Evan if there was any one he would like to call, so they didn't worry about him. Evan hadn't realized an hour had passed. As Evan picked up his backpack, Charlie offered to give him a ride back to the park.

"Evan, please, come back anytime you want, I always make cookies on Saturday afternoon. Our

grandson Marcus will be here next week, he's about your age." added Elsa.

Evan thought of Ty sitting alone in the park. Perfect opportunity to scare him a little. Evan asked his new friends if they had any old face paint or a clown costume...

## Juventud

Anna Rodriguez

All she had wanted was a toasted ham and cheese sandwich. Simple. Tasty. Satisfying. Something different from her life at the moment.

“Sorry Miss, I under charged you. It should’ve been twenty pence more for the ciabatta. I thought you’d gotten a bap.”

Erica handed over the twenty p, wondering if she had really been undercharged. The sandwich, plus the soda and muffin for later were...how much? She glanced over her shoulder and saw the long line of people waiting behind her. The time it would take her to do the math to calculate how much she was supposed to have been charged would not justify the fact that she would have made all these people wait. She took the change from the lady at the register and walked away from the counter. She had to go back to get her food, something that was not unusual. She was very aware of her absent-mindedness. It made her very insecure. Sure, she embraced it and all, but it bothered her that she would sometimes find her toothbrush in the fridge or that she could never be 100% sure if she had forgotten to factor some integer in the simple arithmetic involved in paying for her food. She sadly admitted to herself that the pressure of knowing that she was making people wait would have probably exacerbated her usual absent-mindedness while doing math, and thus it had not been worth it to reevaluate whether or not she was being over charged. The odds were that the lady charging her was right and that she was wrong, as usual.

She sat down on one of the common room chairs and unpacked her sandwich. It was only there that she again became aware of her headache: it was still looming over her. Maybe she was dehydrated. She took a sip of from her green water bottle. The headache wasn’t too bad, but it had been weighing down on her ever since she’d gotten the email from her father.

“Hello luv.”

She looked up to see who it was.

“What are you up to?”

It was Eva. The other American girl who lived in her building and attended her program.

“Just eating my sandwich.”

Eva sat down. Great.

“Can I have a bite?”

She reluctantly let Eva have a bite.

“Mmm, scrumptious. Just what I needed. Thanks luv!”

Eva walked away.

Erica was impressed. Eva had only taken *one* bite out of her sandwich. No, that was mean. Really, she was sad that Eva had left. She needed someone to talk to. Well, that wasn't true. She needed someone to be talking to her; to keep her mind entertained, away from her own thoughts. Eva would have been the perfect person to do that. She was always so fluttery, so open and willing to talk about anything that concerned herself. It was just what she had needed. But no, Eva had left to find a more interesting subject.

After a quick lunch and a couple of aspirin, she decided that she would go to the coffee shop. It was the perfect environment for her to do work. It provided her with a very appropriate level of noise, something that was necessary for her to be able to concentrate. The library was just too quiet for her: the silence was distracting. Plus, last week after lunch she had encountered someone of interest. He might actually be there again today.

She walked a couple of blocks up to Piccadilly Circus and continued on Regent Street. She popped into the coffee shop and headed towards the counter. She was standing behind a very attractive man who was holding Pablo Neruda's "Veinte Poemas de Amor y Una Cancion Desesperada". Was it? Yes! This was the same man who had motivated her to return to this particular coffee shop. She could not believe her luck! It must have been destiny. Then again, she didn't really believe in destiny. If she believed that her being at the coffee shop at the same time as this man were to be destiny, then it would mean that the creepy guy whom she had encountered twice on the Bakerloo line could think that their meeting was destiny. Ugh. To be on the safe side, she decided that it was just a coincidence. It didn't mean anything, just what she wanted it to mean.

“I'll have a tall nonfatnowhipmocha please.”

She was very pleased. The man was good looking *and* polite. Plus, she was getting the exact same thing he was. *Another coincidence!* She guessed that a nice caffeine kick with the added taste of chocolate was just what they both needed to get to work. She would try to catch his eye this time without repeating her disastrous display from last week. She blushed at remembering what had happened, and decided to put it out of her mind.

“I'll have the same thing he just ordered.”

The lady at the counter gave her a funny look but said nothing. It occurred to her that the crush she had on Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha was fairly obvious to the barista. She hated that her face always plainly illustrated whatever she was feeling. She had never been able to lie because of this, something she found to be very frustrating. Unlike her younger sister, she had never been able to get away with anything. Not that she had ever needed to get away with anything. She had been a good obedient child. Oh well, not being able to lie was just one more of the shortcomings that she had come to accept with time.

“That'll be two pounds and five pence.”

After getting her coffee, she sat down at a small round table for two and propped her feet up on the chair facing her. She did this strategically to be facing Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha. She dug her books out of her blue backpack and arranged them neatly on the table. On her left side she placed her coffee. On her right side, three books. On her lap, the book she was actually reading. In between the coffee and books she placed a small notebook and two colored pens.

Before getting to work, she looked up at the man quickly. She was happy to see that he was very concentrated on his book. When she had done this last week, he had been staring straight back at her. She had been drinking water, and of course freaked out and started choking on it. The man had just given her a smile of amusement and gone back to his reading. She had not dared to look at him again.

She thought about her relationships with guys. She had always had interesting relationships with guys. In high school she got along better with the males in her class for some reason. She was the girl who would be playing video games and eating pizza late at night with the guys, even though she sucked at video games and worried the pizza would make her fat. For some reason, most of her friends had at some point declared their love for her, much to her annoyance. It bothered her that she was the type of girl guys first became friends with and then fell in love with. It was like she wasn't pretty enough for guys to be attracted to her from the start. Whatever. She knew it wasn't the time to dwell on that just now. She had to get back to work.

People kept coming in and out of the coffee shop, and she continued to read. She read until she had

reached her attention span threshold. Like an athlete building up strength slowly, she had consciously begun to try to bulk up on her reading skills. Every two weeks she'd read for five minutes more than she usually would have. She had started at forty-five minutes and had built up to an hour and fifteen. The concentration she required always had the side effect of a mild headache, like soreness after a good workout. Boy had her brain been working out a lot lately. That email from her dad had sent it into over-drive. But she didn't really want to think about it at that moment.

Instead, she focused her attentions on Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha. He wasn't at his seat, but his book and mug were still there. She fantasized about how their children would grow up reciting "Puedo escribir los versos mas tristes esta noche..." Then again, she wouldn't want to expose her kids to such sad lines. They'd have to be older when they read Neruda. She would leave it to Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha to recite these lines to her on the phone when they were apart.

This was what her breaks from reading consisted of: all that had been repressed during her reading bounced around in her mind for fifteen minutes. This trampoline of fantasies kept her from thinking about the things she knew she should have been thinking about, like the email from her dad. It was hard to see how fast he seemed to be getting older.

Speaking of getting older, where was Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha? She believed they were supposed to grow old together.

It was time for her to regroup, so she decided to read for another hour and fifteen minutes. In the course of this time period, Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha returned to his seat just to immediately leave the coffee shop for good. She looked up just as he was passing her table, and was very disappointed to see that he didn't even glance at her. She wanted to believe that he was shy, or that he had failed to see that the same book he was carrying was the same book that was lying on the top of her right hand pile. She told herself that he was most likely not interested in her. It was something her parents constantly reminded her of: if a guy is interested, he will make an effort to approach you. If he doesn't, he's not interested enough in you, so don't bother. It was a very depressing approach. It was at times like these where she hated being a woman. It saddened her to think that she had no real control over these types of situations.

After Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha left she decided to head back to her flat. She hopped on to the number 23 double decker bus and got off at the George Street stop about twenty minutes later. She headed over to Somerfield's to buy some chocolate ice cream. She would need its curing qualities later that night.

Once back in her flat, she decided to call her dad. The time had come to face the email. She was nervous. It was hard for her to feel that he didn't trust her to make her own decisions. She never felt validated by him, or by anyone else for that matter. That wasn't true. She did. It was just her father sometimes. It bothered her how much what he thought affected her. She knew it was normal but it was still annoying.

She picked up the phone and dialed. Her tag was sticking out of her shirt. She noticed this as she pressed her back against the couch in tense preparation for the sound of her dad's voice. She stuck the tag back in to the best of her abilities.

"Mary Anne? Hi, it's Erica. I'm calling long-distance from London. Could you put my father on the phone?"

The receptionist at her father's office had worked there for as long as she could remember. She was nice. She must have been amazingly effective if she had lasted working for her dad so many years.

"Dad? Hi, it's me."

"Hi sweetie. How are you?"

"I'm ok. I just read your email."

"Ok. You sound upset. What did you think?"

"I thought you sounded upset in it."

"Well, to tell you the truth, I was. I still am. I don't understand why you want to change your major."

"Because it's too hard Dad."

"That's no excuse."

"You don't understand. You don't even try to understand."

"What is there to understand? I thought you wanted this major because it would provide you with a well-

rounded education. It's an excellent education sweetie, and it's being extremely challenging is a good thing. Don't take the easy way out. You'll regret it."

She wanted to cry, but held it back. Her father would never understand. She would always be a quitter to him. And it was true. She was a quitter. She had quit Tae Kwon Do after getting her red belt. Her father had never found out that her instructor was having an affair with one of his students. She had been on the swim team for three years until it got too intense for her. She had danced tap and jazz for three years until it had stopped being fun. She had played soccer for two years and had stopped because her teammates were mean to her. She had taken voice lessons but stopped after her teacher moved away. She had been on the basketball team until she hit senior year, and had stopped in order to take on the course load necessary to get into a college that suited her dad's expectations. She'd taken piano for two years and guitar for one. She'd never stuck to one thing. She was inconsistent, and she knew it.

"Dad, I just feel insecure. I am surrounded by geniuses and I get paralyzed in class. I don't want to feel that way for the rest of college."

"Well do something about it then. You have no reason to be insecure. You're just as good as any of your classmates. Don't just feel insecure. Do something about it."

That was easy for him to say. He didn't endure the humiliation, the pressure, and the inferiority complex. He didn't run to the bathroom and cry after every class. He didn't understand. He never would.

"I am trying to do something about it."

"Don't try. Do. Be proactive. Sweetie, I have to go. I have a meeting. I'll talk to you later. I love you."

She didn't even respond. She just nodded her head and hung up the phone gently. She didn't even have the strength to go to the fridge. Instead, she rolled up in a ball and tried to fall asleep on the couch, making sure that her shirt tag was still in and had not popped out again.

Five minutes later there was a knock on the door. She didn't answer. The knob swiveled and someone came in.

"Luv? Hello? It's Eva."

Eva? What was Eva doing there? Oh why hadn't she locked the door?

"Eva, come in here. I'm on the couch."

She bitterly remembered how Eva had asked her for a bite of her sandwich and had then left her alone to her thoughts.

"What are you doing?"

What was she doing? She was fucking trying to go to sleep to forget the conversation she had just had with her dad.

"Just resting. I'm not feeling too well."

Eva came into the living room.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Neither am I."

Just what she had expected, Eva wanted to use her. She wanted someone to listen to her, and of course she thought *Erica* would be available and willing.

"Oh. What's wrong?"

"I have a headache."

"Ha. So do I."

"Yeah. I get them a lot."

There was a silence. There was obviously something Eva wanted. Erica wished she would hurry up and ask.

"Do you mind if I hang out here for a while? My flat mates are being loud."

Great. Now there was no way she was going to be able to take a nap to sleep off the conversation she had just had with her father. Eva had invaded her personal space, and she couldn't bring herself to kick her out of it.

"No, go for it. It'll be nice and quiet in here. All my flat mates are out."

So both she and Eva sat in the living room. Two American students who lived in the same flat building. Eva didn't speak. Instead, she turned on the TV and started watching *Coronation Street*. After abandoning the

idea of trying to sleep as the TV blared, Erica started watching the show as well. The show was a little stupid, but as she watched more she actually started enjoying herself. She laughed at Eva's attempts to imitate the British accent and attempted to imitate it a couple of times herself. She was having such a pleasant time that she decided to offer some of her chocolate ice cream to Eva. Of course, Eva accepted, and they ate together as they watched a second episode of the show. After it was over, Eva stood up.

“Thanks luv. I'll be heading out now. This was just what I needed.”

Eva left and Erica got up. She washed the dishes and rearranged the cushions on the couch so they would look puffier. Now that the ice cream and the company were gone, she would be able to take her nap for real now. She lay down on the couch and closed her eyes, thinking about Mr. Nonfatnowhipmocha. As she drifted off to sleep, she decided that she would go back to the coffee shop the following day. If he were there, she would try to strike up a conversation with him. For real this time.

## Spark

Susan White

The city is crowded and noisy, polluted and half dead. Rats rot in sewers and children's thoughts rot in the school system. Political leaders hem and haw throw money at the poor and then walk away, satisfied.

"We move towards tomorrow, today," reads the city's slogan as the metropolis slowly decays from the inside out.

And the dreamer sits on the park bench and feeds the birds without a care in the world as it slowly dies.

Chalice did not want it to end this way, he thinks to himself as he sweeps away the dead rats. He would have fought for rights and reform, screaming Thoreau from the back of his throat 'til he was blue in his pinched, pudgy face.

But he is dead now. And so lies the fate of the universe, in the decay and destruction of one single thought.

The thought that we could love.

But that foolish notion was disproved long ago, he chides himself. Only Chalice advocated for its return so vehemently. Only he thought that it might work.

And all it led to was suffering and death.

He is cynical, now, bitter even. And he knows one thing—he no longer believes in love.

It is as the scientists say, just a string of chemical reactions that lead to pure physical attraction. This too, is driven by the practical need of the species to reproduce. Love, even in a non-romantic sense, is non-existent. A myth, a fairytale people used to comfort themselves with in the Middle Ages.

But that was long ago, he muses as he finishes up his sweeping and moves on to raking up leaves. Now is the Age of Logic and Reason, where Efficiency and Order rule. It is true what the wise leaders say. Love is no more.

He laughs bitterly when he thinks of how disillusioned he once was. That time in his life when he thought Chalice's word was God and he followed the mandate of love with the foolish impassioned way of youth.

How glorious had the Lovers been in their time! He muses that they were not unlike the scientists themselves in their misguided fervor.

And then there was her—with the flame bright eyes and dancing spirit. She clung to life with passion

and strength, making every movement and word precise, measuring and yet spontaneously bursting into flame.

She was the spark that set him alight and burned him to a crisp.

For a time, his and her love soared and he embraced it all. The kinship, the brotherhood, the pure idea that the Lovers were a family, proud and indomitable.

And as long as he held her hand, he could ignore the taunts, the screams, the shouts, and the laughter that followed them. The eyes threatened to burn them both, but she fought fire with fire and bitter phrases with poison tongue.

And as long as he held her hand, the world was right.

Chalice was truly a master of rhetoric, he thinks to himself now as he cleans up more trash. Calling on philosophers of old, citing examples, stories, myths, where love and life had prevailed.

And that cursed song—how did it go again? Love is all you need, or some such nonsense. Phony, ridiculous.

You need so much more than love.

He came home one day to find her hushed and expectant. Her eyes were dimmed but her flame was not. She spoke to him in tones soft and he learned the word “father.”

They rejoiced in the thought of a new life together, with one new addition. Chalice blessed her with enthusiasm and congratulated them publicly in front of the entire society.

And they became the first to be parents in the group.

He watches the children as he finishes his duties now. They are ever present in his mind. He often wonders, on deep and dark cloudy days, if the officials purposely placed him near the school. Did they know what the sight of the children would do to him? Did they know what hope it would kindle in the burned remnants of his heart?

But that too was a lie. There is no human heart, he thinks with a sneer, only an organ that mercilessly beats on and keeps you alive against your will, day after day.

A child wanders over, seven or so, holding a rag doll. She watches him pack up his stuff. He has seen her before, great grey eyes like the moody storm that pervades his heart.

He wants very much to shut those eyes up forever.

She stands there, considering.

“Whatcha doin’ mister?” Inquisitive, small, and heartbreaking.

“Cleaning.” Short and terse. No warmth. There it is, just like life.

“Oh. Why?” The grey eyes are filled with an odd calm and it reminds him of cloudy days filled with the promise of a storm. It is that calm he longs for in the dark space of night.

She was never like that.

Even when they found out about the killer. The tortuous snake wrapped about her core. No drug could cure it; no amount of prayer could stop it. Venomous and poised to strike, it killed all hopes of redemption.

The burial was short and sweet. All the Lovers mourned and comforted him. Chalice gave a great speech.

And all he could do was stare. How could so great a fire, a raging flame, be reduced to embers, to coals and then with barely a whisper of air snuffed to only ashes?

Even that which survived did not comfort him. For they took that away too, hid it, locked it away, to keep it safe from himself, in that rage-blind time that followed in the wake of her death.

When he was enough of himself again to pass as a human being, he left.

Chalice was assassinated two months later and the Lovers were no more.

“Because the street is filthy,” he answers finally.

“Is it fun?”

“Hardly,” he wishes she would disappear, join her friends, and go back to order and society, leaving him to wallow in all the filth he deserves.

“I thought so,” she nods purposefully. “You looked too sad to like your job.”

He wishes it were only that which encumbered the scrap he calls a soul.

“I do my Duty for Society,” he says from memory, brokenly.

When he met her, they proclaimed duty to love and life.

When she lay dying, she made him promise to care for—

The child shrugs. “Yeah but that sounds boring—cleaning. I’m gonna fly!” And spreading her arms out she grins at him, beaming bright as the sun. The bell rings just then, and waving, she rushes back into the stream of life.

He heads home to his small apartment. He is troubled now, feelings stirred up by a bouncing, flying spirit that came crashing into his being with no warning.

He remembers the promise.

And he wonders.

The child is not there the next day, but neither is he. He stands instead ready to hand in the necessary paperwork. He will follow the rules and he will bow his head. He will not slip outside the lines.

But the embers anticipate the whiff of oxygen and he will finally fulfill his promise. He signs his name and they bring out the spark he will call his own.

The world may rot, but he no longer cares.

And he thinks, there is no love but an illusion. But it was hers and mine and there will be nothing more.

And there is nothing more.

## A True Account of Buxton Boarding School

Nick Mainieri

Sure, John Buckham had been intrigued by Mr. Hanratty's account of the lake's paranormal past. But the Buxton Boarding School freshman was downright entranced when some of the senior boys told him the lake's *other* stories that evening after dinner. John swallowed these up one after another—hook, line, and sinker. His eyes bulged with wonder as Chuck Merrigold walked his thick fingers along the TV lounge tabletop. *When a full moon's out, the ghost soldiers stroll across the lake's surface, just like it's some old battlefield.*

And so now John, still in his shirt and tie school uniform, was dragging his new girlfriend Emily by the hand down the long sloping hillside behind Buxton Boarding School. Below them was the wooded finger of land known as Tuck Point and beyond that was the vast black surface of Lake Huxituckee.

"John, remind me again what we're doing exactly," Emily, also a first year at Buxton, said.

"Seeing if we can find some ghosts." *Wasn't that obvious?*

"Yeah, so, remind again why." An orange leaf landed on her and she brushed it from her blonde hair.

Shouldn't *this* be obvious too? He pointed at the heavy orb hanging above the black lake. "Well, the ghosts only come out during full moons and the next one isn't for a month. I don't know about you, but that's too long for me to wait. Plus, it'll be colder then."

Emily's tone suggested that a conscious effort was being made not to offend his intelligence. "John, babe, did it ever cross your mind that maybe Chuck and Lance and Will were pulling your leg? Just a little bit? I mean, they are seniors and they have tried playing pranks on you before. They've done it to *everybody*."

"Yeah but I've just got a feeling. Even Mr. Hanratty told us about it today and you know what a local history nut that guy is."

"He talked about fishermen that vanish and freak winter storms that whip off the lake, John. Not about ghosts. I mean you can come up with explanations for *those* things. Maybe a fisherman had a little too much to drink and fell out of his boat, you know, something like that."

He stopped and turned so suddenly that Emily ran right in to him. He caught her in his arms and she yelped a laugh in spite of herself.

John searched his arsenal of winning smiles and gave her the most charming one he had. But even so, he felt the usual rush that meant they were close to each other. "I know you're worried and I'm sorry I dragged you out here after hall curfew, but I've got a feeling. You know I'm into these types of things. This could be really cool and I want you to see it with me." But before he leaned in for her lips he thought, *and I don't wanna go in*

*those woods alone.*

They stopped when the ground leveled, right at the opening of Tuck Point. The slope behind was dotted with an oak here and there but this was where the real forest started. High above their heads, the bare tree limbs clawed at the sky, and although there were no leaves, the forest was so thick and tangled that it obscured their vision of the moon, which presumably still hung over Lake Huxituckee somewhere ahead. The trees ran to the left and right, spanning the width of the point in a nearly straight line, as if the entire patch of forest had decided to spring up all at once.

According to Mr. Hanratty, the freshman world history teacher whose real passion was local Buxton history, Lake Huxituckee had once been the biggest lake in the state. That was until 1922, when Buxton Military Academy (as it was then known) felt the need for expansion. This called for the creation of a wide swathe of land by filling in part of Lake Huxituckee.

When the Military Academy found they didn't have enough materials to get the job done, they appealed to the higher powers. In response, the US Military provided Buxton Academy with a bunch of decommissioned tanks, trucks, and most of an old battleship, which came in three pieces. All were World War I vets, riddled with jagged artillery holes. One section of the battleship had a puncture in its hull big enough to climb through. Buxton piled these old war machines on top of each other, creating the foundation of Tuck Point. Then they covered them with cement and soil.

For whatever reason—labor, revenue, whatever—construction stalled and the gnarled, twisted forest began to grow. According to the stories, the first crews began chopping away and the trees groaned in agony. Roots were yanked from the soil but no sufficient progress ever seemed to be made in eradicating the resilient forest. Several workmen vanished and the common belief was that the evil trees had plucked them off the ground to devour them.

The malcontented spirits of dead soldiers were buried with the machines. The trapped arcane energy worked like fertilizer, spawning the forest. It permeated the soil, filtered into the lake, making it a *live* body—one that swallowed fishermen whole and opened beneath ice skaters, closing up when they fell through. And of course, (according to Chuck, Lance, and Will) the spirits rose from the ground and marched across the water when a full moon was out.

Eventually, Buxton Academy abandoned the hope of expanding onto Tuck Point. In truth, the foundation had been haphazardly planned, and the ground was unstable. Mr. Hanratty said that when it came to the disappearing workers the most likely culprits were sinkholes, but this part was dull. Plausible explanations held no interest for John. The rest was folklore, hearsay, more scary stories that John had become enraptured with.

But he'd find out if the legends were true soon enough. They could be, he supposed. Anything was possible.

He tried looking through the dark mass of forest, hoping to glimpse the milky white ghost of a soldier out for his evening saunter, but could not. He instead turned his head and looked back up the hill at what was now called Buxton Boarding School. The squat brick buildings were dark monoliths against the sky. He looked at Rogers Hall, Emily's dormitory. It was lights out time and as he watched the final yellow window flicked to black.

He squeezed Emily's hand. Then he asked her a question, but he didn't need to. He already knew her answer. "Do you want to go back? If you do, I understand. But I'm going on."

She sighed and shook her head. "No. No, I won't leave you."

He pulled her into the forest and the world became dark.

He took the slender flashlight from his back pocket, brought its narrow uncomfortable beam of light to life. The eyes of some forest critter flared before scampering away. Emily shrieked silently, like she had lost her voice. Her hand flew to John's bicep and her fingernails dug into that tender place on the inside of the arm.

"It's all right," John said, wincing but not yet pulling from her grasp. "Just a raccoon or something."

John pushed them on, marching through what felt like ankle deep drifts of dead leaves. After a gray something with a hideous tail and bulging eyes darted through the light—John thought it was a possum—Emily finally spoke up.

"Turn it off, John. *Please*. It's even worse than the dark."

John obliged, even though it sent them into near pitch-blackness. “Yeah, that’s a good idea anyway. Ghosts probably wouldn’t show themselves if they saw a light coming.”

Emily’s fingers dug even deeper.

They were nearing the lake. John could smell its dank, fishy smell. Plus the air had grown cooler as it usually did the closer you got to water. *Or the closer you get to wandering spirits*, John reminded himself. But he didn’t let Emily in on this little tidbit. He’d spare her a little, at least.

As they went further, a feeling of *heaviness* swelled inside his chest, as if he were having painless indigestion. He attributed the feeling to a higher level of humidity, or maybe air pressure. He thought about asking Emily if she too felt it, but didn’t. Inside his head, some tougher version of himself laughed at his need for reassurance. But the laughter ceased with the speed of a falling guillotine blade, once John heard the noise.

It was a low drone somewhere in the air high up all around them. No, John decided. No, the humming flowed upwards from the ground, growing in intensity as it rose. The heaviness in his chest swelled with each rising wave. It felt *material*—the noise scraped along the surface of his bones. Surely Emily felt it too because she squeezed harder, sending tingling barbs all the way down to his fingertips.

From behind them came a sudden breath-like noise, a deep, rasping intake. Emily screamed, but John didn’t notice. He was screaming too. They whirled towards it and Emily’s fingers came unlocked from his arm. There was nothing there, at least nothing they could *see*, but John sensed something, an existence somehow darker than the nighttime air. Something that was...*negatively*...there. Another deep breath behind them and they turned, screaming again. When the third rasping breath came, John turned and heard only his own screams. Emily was no longer at his side. Had she took off running, back in the direction of Buxton?

“Emily!” he screamed, immobilized by the things he felt around him. Or maybe it was one presence, one presence *surrounding* him.

In the wake of his scream, things grew silent and he listened. There was nothing, not even those deep intakes of breath. If Emily were running he’d hear her rapid footfalls on the dry leaves. Of course he would. She couldn’t be that far away.

“Emily!” he cried again, yanking the flashlight back out of his pocket. He flicked it on, whirled in a circle, called her name once more, but didn’t see her. His mind recalled something Mr. Hanratty said about sinkholes. He scanned the ground, envisioning dirt and grass and leaves vanishing much like grains of sand through the mouth of an hourglass. But he saw no such thing. He spun once more, searching through the trees, but it seemed as though the false light couldn’t penetrate the gloom. The light felt *repulsed*.

Another feeling rushed through his body, but it wasn’t the same kind of rush he felt close to Emily. This one flooded him to his toes, felt more like Novocain. Everything below his waist drew up tight and taught. His thighs deadened, his legs felt like slush.

Something stirred at his feet, slinked around his ankles. His immediate thought was *Snakes!* but when he snapped the flashlight down he didn’t find any. Something stirred the leaves. Not the wind though, couldn’t be the wind. The leaves lifted off the ground and twirled around his ankles, traveling up his shins in spirals. When they reached his knees they floated straight out. In a stupor, he followed them with the flashlight. The leaves coalesced into a pile several feet away and spiraled up, filling a void into a shape vaguely like...a...man? The darker than dark presence around John lurched into this thing, filling it, giving it life. *Un-life*. The leaves took a rustling step forward, then another. Again there was the deep intake of breath and very clearly a gaping, oblong mouth opened in the thing’s face. It raised an orange and brown arm, scraped the tip of John’s nose. Another harsh breath and John felt a tug on the heaviness inside his chest. With a flicker and electric *bzzz* the flashlight went out. That character in the back of John’s head, the one that had been so willing to laugh before, now wondered meek as can be, *But these are new batteries... You just put them in yourself...*

The fear that had him frozen exploded like a cold water balloon but didn’t abandon him. It merely galvanized him into flight. He took off, heedless of direction, heedless of Emily, heedless of everything. All he cared about was getting away from the shuffling leaf thing. He burst from the trees into what seemed like brightness. But it was still night and the moon was just brighter in the open. He was on the tip of Tuck Point. The black, glasslike surface of Lake Huxituckee spanned out before him, feigning slumber. The nomadic soldiers’ ghosts were nowhere to be seen.

As a cloud drew over the moon a mist grew on the lake. Its gray tendrils slowly curled upwards from the water. Its formation looked organic and John understood with ease how this lake could swallow up a fisherman.

From the trees came several howls, long eerie ones—like owls might sound if they could growl. He turned. Three faint lights slowly approached through the trees. The will o' wisps were small and circular. The features they illuminated were distorted, freakish. Dear God! The soldiers were on their way to the lake and he was caught between them and the water!

They weren't the figures with transparent helmets on their heads and carbines slung over their shoulders he had imagined while Chuck, Lance, and Will told him about them

*(a lifetime ago)*

earlier that night. These specters were white billowy things that hovered above the ground and moaned in delirious anger, hunger even. It was certainly hunger that had possessed the leaf thing.

Suddenly they stopped. Light swung into his face and he raised a hand against it. Laughter broke out from the ghosts.

“Hah hah! Hey-y Buckham!” Chuck Merrigold called.

“Little sonofabitch done pissed his pants!” That was Lance.

The light swung away from his face and John saw the three seniors unlimbering themselves from bed sheets. *What...?*

“What do you think of your ghosts, Buckham?” Chuck said. He held the sheet out and shook it.

“Wait...” John said. He couldn't think. His breathing wouldn't slow. Unconsciously, he flicked the switch of his flashlight and it immediately burst to life. “Wait-how-what did you guys-how'd you...”

“Hah hah! Like this!” Will said. He placed the flashlight under his chin and howled. “Every year some stupid-ass freshmo gets it, and this time the lucky schmuck was you.”

John wanted to laugh, accept it as a joke. “No no no,” he said. “I mean the leaves. How'd you do that with the leaves?”

The three exchanged looks.

“What about that heavy noise? No, not that noise,” John said when Will made like he was going to howl again.

Then, finally, it came crashing back.

“Emily. Where's Emily?”

“Uh John old buddy,” Chuck said, “what in the hell are you talkin about?”

John looked from guy to guy, lips moving soundlessly.

Behind the seniors, something sighed through the trees, whispering that low, heavy sound. But this time John caught the undertone. It was mirth. Evil mirth.

## **Texas Waters**

Megan Healy

Jack woke up with a sharp pain in his side and he knew it wasn't from the stitches. He held his breath and stretched violently, twisting to one side in a vain effort to relieve the knotted muscles. He looked toward Melissa sleeping quietly next to him, her faded hair spread out along the pillow, tinged a jarring red from the clock radio that blinked out numbers reading "6:07". He let his breath out carefully, peering over the blue polyester comforter. After a few moments his torso relaxed, and as sleep had escaped him, he swung his legs out into the chilly expanse of bedside air and stumbled into the bathroom. He flipped on the light and stared at the mirror, a small piece of glass hung against peeling green wallpaper, the metallic sheen curling up at the edges to reveal a black matte surface beneath. Jack rubbed his eyes and leaned in to the mirror, examining his face. He needed a shave, a cup of coffee, and a haircut, but there wasn't enough time for anything except a splash of hot water on his face and under each arm. Out in his room he shivered and grabbed his grey pants from across the La-z-Boy where he had flung them before sleep. He walked into the kitchen and turned on the radiator. It hissed damp heat. He yawned, ran his fingers through his curly black hair and stood over the coffee pot as it dripped life into the grey dawn.

Jack had always been one of the bright kids. The kid who sits at the front, who the teacher calls on, who everyone expects to begin saving for retirement at the age of twenty-two. Adults loved him, had let him turn in his homework late with the excuse that he was working on "something special". Jack had recognized at an early age that this was a personality type worth cultivating, and finished elementary school and junior high with a perfect attendance record, a 4.0 GPA, and a winning smile.

In his only visit to the principal's office, Jack had been called in for a Mother's Day art project, a drawing assignment titled "Why I Love My Mom". Jack had drawn a woman lying on the couch, boldly outlined in black marker with a green ball in her stomach. The school psychologist held the drawing gingerly and asked him to explain what his mommy was doing. Jack repeated the phrase he had always heard his

grandmother say into the phone when she came to pick him up after weekend visits: “That goddamn bitch is shitfaced again. I hope she wants her liver to turn green.” Jack had to see the psychologist every week for two months after that, and at the end of eight weeks, he left school one day to find his paternal grandmother waiting in the parking lot, listening to the Catholic radio station in her blue Lincoln Continental. She said “I don’t think you’re going to visit your momma this weekend, Jackie.” Jack’s memory of his mother was always vague, and forever intertwined with a priest saying Mass in Latin as the sweat gathered at the base of his neck and dripped down the tan plastic seats. On the silent drive home, his grandmother popped her denture in and out while he slowly bit into the stale Oreos provided as his afternoon snack.

His mother’s absence from his life added a tragic appeal to his popularity. In high school, he became captain of the track team and spent most evenings after practices behind the equipment shack learning to roll cigarettes and talking about girls. His favorite days were the days it rained. When the rest of the team ran laps in the gym and convinced themselves that thirty minutes on the battered exercise bike was as good as half mile repeats, Jack would head out alone. Escaping the confines of the track, he would take off for the surrounding country, an abandoned swathe of land criss-crossed by narrow tractor trails overgrown with waist high nettles. Overhead, Texas thundered its independence and rage, vowing with each swollen raindrop to reform the earth and sweeping Jack into its tirade. The forgotten path wound through sparse trees, around abandoned farm equipment and places where deep red clay churned in ancient ditches, cesspools of floating bugs and brown leaves whipped up by the wind. Rainwater gathered in every crevice of the gravel and dirt roads; Jack ran straight for the puddles, slapping his feet down hard again and again until his heels had splattered mud across the back of his white t-shirt and his calves were caked. There was salvation in motion. He ran until the storm let up, then jogged slowly back to the shed to sit under the eaves, letting the gutters drip onto his shins and rinse the evidence of his trespassing onto the grass.

And then one wet day in June, he suddenly graduated. It was the furthest any of his grandma’s kids ever got in school; she beamed for a week and carried around his graduation announcement for two. Jack still had it, yellowed, bent at the edges, its gold embossed letters faded into flecks scattered thinly over acidic parchment. His aunt came to watch him walk across the stage in blue robes and yellow tassels, took a picture, bought him dinner at The Old Country Buffet and dropped him at home. He rattled around for a month before he joined the army and went to Germany for two years. He came back with a tattoo of a bulldog across his right shoulder blade, a taste for whiskey on the rocks, and to finally visit his mother’s grave.

Jack was a bright kid. The army recruiter told him that when he enlisted. “Your future looks bright. Don’t waste it.” Jack just nodded. He moved away from Abilene and went to work in the stockyards outside Fort Worth. It was honest work, his aunt and grandma told him, and they were proud of his service in the army and that he had turned out so good. At the stockyards, he developed a habit of eating his lunch inside the office. The other hands teased him; he claimed that he did it for the air conditioning, but for Jack, it was Melissa, who worked the reception desk.

She was freckled and short and constantly sang “The stars at night, are high and bright, deep in the heart of Texas. The sage in bloom, is like perfume, deep in the heart of Texas. Reminds me of, the one I love, deep in the heart of Texas.” Jack loved that she only knew those three lines, and repeated them to herself as she filed and answered phones. She was small and bubbly, wore acid wash jeans with pastel sweater sets and cowboy boots, and cracked her chewing gum. He ate his lunch at a yellowing plastic chair set against the wall, carefully balancing his food on his knees. Jack used the same brown paper bag every day for a week, filling it each morning with a tuna sandwich, an orange, a Snickers bar and a Thermos of milk, then when it had disintegrated beyond use at the end of six days, he used a new one. He loved listening to her unconscious singing and watching her carefully eat her chicken salad with a spork. Melissa thought he was cute, admired his lanky frame and liked to hear him talk about Dylan Thomas and Stephen Hawking and the cinematic genius of *The Seven Samurai*. So when he asked her to dinner, she said yes.

One day she called him. “I want you to meet my mom and dad.”

Jack didn’t know what to say. He twisted the telephone cord through his fingers and stalled. “Are you sure they want to meet me? I dunno, I mean, Lissy, they don’t really know me.”

“That’s why you’ve gotta come to dinner. Next weekend, okay? Whitesboro isn’t all that far. Momma

said that you could just stay the weekend. You and my dad'll go fishing. It'll be great, I promise, they'll love you."

Jack couldn't say no. "Okay babe. But I've never been fishing."

Melissa just laughed.

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The coffee done, Jack thought about Whitesboro as he poured himself a mug. He sipped its bitter blackness and left Melissa a note in solid block letters and slipped it under the coffee pot. It read "Left for work early. Love you - Jack." He checked on his father-in-law, asleep in the room adjacent to the kitchen, and on his daughter, sleeping soundly in her room decorated with pink bunnies and filled with the knick-knacks her grandfather carved for her. Today was Thursday. Not a day that Dale would come in. Out in the driveway, the car's engine turned over in the cool air and Jack pulled away from their vinyl-sided house, heading for his job at the stockyards that had blossomed into supervisor and then part owner position. The yards weren't what they used to be; livestock auctions had begun to move out of the city, closer to the smaller ranches. He didn't miss the long days of working under the sun. He was getting old. He sympathized with Dylan Thomas; living was hard work. Melissa had given him a framed copy of "Poem in October" on his last birthday, a gift whose appropriateness surprised Jack. He thought it was the most beautiful set of words ever strung together.

On days when his father-in-law came to work with him, Dale would scoff at Jack's prime parking space, grumble as they got out of the car. He would pull at the seat of his pants and complain about his eyesight and reach around back for the cooler with both their lunches nestled safely inside before lumbering up the concrete steps to the office. Jack let him come into work with him twice a week, gave him a desk and an official title stamped onto a faux wood placard that read "Dale Marshall, Assistant to the Owner." In his corner of the room, Dale kept a potted plant, a picture of Peggy and himself at their wedding propped against a grey filing cabinet, and a prize winning bass mounted on a length of wood. Jack had him spend Tuesdays and Wednesdays surveying, walking around outside talking with the ranch hands and checking up on the cattle. On days that the oppressive Texas skies thundered or his hips bothered him, he would sit at his desk and reorganize livestock records.

Three weeks ago, he had driven a tractor into a tree. Jack headed outside to help, but in confusion Dale threw the C.A.T. into reverse, pinning Jack against the fence and ripping open his skin, requiring five stitches along his abdomen. Jack watched his father-in-law spit out one side of his mouth and cock his head, straining to understand carefully shouted directions. The cattle bellowed as Dale's shaking hands gripped the molded black seat and Jack's blood ran down his stomach and stained the left leg of his jeans. He told Melissa that he had fallen against a short wire fence when he decided to help load bales of hay and promised her that he wouldn't play at being a boy anymore. Dale hadn't come in for awhile after that. Jack knew that feeling inept was more dangerous than feeling infirm. But all he said when Jack encouraged him to come in to work was "I will when it rains." Jack never understood what he meant.

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Whitesboro was a solid two hour drive north of Dallas, out to where the highway became a two lane stretch into endless horizon, the exits simply white gravel lanes that sprouted suddenly off to the side. The countryside was hilly and green, filled with leafy trees in the height of their summer glory. Jack loved being on the move, watching the long stretches of concrete highway disappear under the car and stopping for cherry limeade at Sonic. Pat Green wailed out of the radio and the afternoon light flickered across Jack's aviators. Melissa slept with her head against the window as Jack downshifted for the Whitesboro exit. He leaned across the car and gently woke her up. "Lissy, which way now?"

Jack pulled the car into a long driveway leading to a single story, brick ranch house. The wrought iron gate depicted a bull standing on letters spelling "MARSHALL". Melissa leaned over and kissed him quickly. "They'll love you, I promise". Jack smiled back at her. "I know they will."

Mrs. Marshall greeted him with a hug and said, "Now honey, I want you to call me Peggy. I just can't believe y'all made that drive all the way out here. You must be exhausted. I made peach ice tea, right here in the fridge. You just go on out to Dale's garden and pick us a cantaloupe for dinner tonight and come on back for a nice cool glass. Don't you worry about a thing." She was a slightly plump woman, with short brown hair chopped into a bob, wearing too much eyeliner and a red t-shirt with the words "Happy Fourth of July" stamped across a background of blue shooting stars. She hugged him again.

Jack didn't want to disappoint her with the reassurance that he hadn't been worried, so he just smiled. He and Melissa went to get a cantaloupe, came back and listened to Dale and Peggy argue over when the steaks were done and if the kids wanted any blackberry cobbler and whether that old yellow tomcat was dead or just run off. When Peggy found out Jack had been raised Catholic, she said, "Oh, well, honey, 'raised' isn't the same thing as 'is'. There's no reason why you can't be raised Catholic but *be* a Methodist." Jack assured her that she was right. Peggy gave him more cobbler.

The next day, the heat of northern Texas beat the tired earth into submission. Jack and Melissa spent all morning in the garage converted to a rec room, lounging on the ratty brown couch and watching old movies. Melissa's dad stuck his head in later and said "I'm gonna go survey the cattle. Y'all should come."

Jack hadn't said much to Mr. Marshall yet, and silently nodded. They piled into the white pickup and rattled off through the field. The house grew smaller as the trio rode several acres out toward the horizon. Mr. Marshall had not invited Jack to call him "Dale." Jack looked at the patchy grass covering the hard packed dirt under the thick treaded tires and watched the cows graze. Mr. Marshall told Jack he was looking to check up on the bull. The cows stared down the truck, before nudging their calves and each other out of the way, slowly parting to let the car through, and swallowing the path of the truck after it had passed.

"He's big and lazy. Keep an eye out for 'em," Mr. Marshall said. He tugged at his black baseball cap and sent a stream of chewing tobacco juice out the window. He was a beefy 6'4" and graying, but he still enjoyed a beer and told dirty jokes, the kind of man who would have been a star athlete or a formidable opponent in a fight twenty years ago. He kept a prize winning garden, and sold the occasional cow to the local tannery or meat processing plant. He drove with one hand resting on the top of the wheel and his other hand dangling outside the open window, humming tunelessly under his breath.

"OK, Dad", Melissa said. Jack looked at her as she answered and marveled that she could be the offspring of someone so mightily masculine. Petite, tanned to a bronzed perfection by the summer sun, with streaks of gold in her curly blonde hair, Jack thought she was the best thing that had ever happened to him. She laughed at all his jokes, could tell a story to a brick wall and make it laugh, and was the smartest person he had ever met. He told her that once, but she looked at him so sad that he never said it again.

"I see him, I see him!" Jack was too enthusiastic for Mr. Marshall's taste.

"No you don't."

"Yeah, I swear it- under that tree, over there. See him? That's gotta be him."

Melissa laughed. "He's right, Dad. Over there, in the shade."

Mr. Marshall grunted and moved the truck toward the large animal. Jack held his breath, awed by the bull's reign over the field. They stayed in the car, watching the bull stand in the shade, its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth like an overgrown dog. Its head drooped down until it almost touched the dirt. A young cow standing next to it, grazing, prompted Mr. Marshall to make a joke about there being two sets of lovebirds on this here field. Melissa reprimanded him with a "Da-ad".

The brief survey over, Melissa grabbed two fishing reels from the back and jumped out the side door. Jack thanked Mr. Marshall for the ride, and followed Melissa toward the pond. She walked swiftly down to the bank, a muddy stretch churned up by the hooves from a herd of cattle fighting their way toward water to relieve their dehydration, and immediately cast a line into the water. Jack watched her gracefully toss the rod from her shoulder, letting the weighted end fly through the air following the arc of the sky. She turned to look at Jack over her shoulder. "C'mon! Cast a line."

He did so, and stood next to Melissa in his flip flops and khaki shorts, feeling his feet sink slowly into the muddy banks. He squinted out across the pond at the sunlight treetops meeting the clear blue dome of sky, his reverie interrupted when he felt the fire ants bite at his ankles. "Damn!" He drew his breath in sharply

and hopped from one foot to the next, his rubber sandals making squelching noises against the mud as the ants refused to leave him alone. Soon he felt a tug on the line and hauled a slick, green catfish up to the surface. He flopped it onto the ground and bent down, watching it suffocate.

It was too small to eat, too big to throw back into the pond, as Mr. Marshall had instructed them to thin out the fish population. “Ain’t no cow that can drink from a pond fulla catfish.” Jack hovered above it, watching its white whiskers get caught in blades of crab grass and rip out one by one, dying in a confusion of violent displacement from the pond’s secure depths into heat, dirt and brilliant sunlight. Jack felt a sudden sympathy with the fish, flailing its fins uselessly against the thick air, helpless against its inevitable death.

Jack turned his back on its destruction, abandoned the pond and walked into the house to help Peggy set up dinner, listening to her explain quilting and answering questions about his mother with stories about his grandma, a cross-generational focus that seemed odd to Peggy. Melissa came to look for him later, and Mr. Marshall showed him the catfish he had caught after Jack left. He had put it in the rain barrel, out past the razor wire fence. It had curled its sinewy length into a horseshoe shape following the edge of the barrel, the black spots on its back glinting in the porch light, and gazed balefully up at Jack and the Marshalls. Jack stared at it long after everyone else had gone inside.

Later that evening, after her parents had gone to sleep and Dale’s snores could be heard throughout the house, Melissa came into Jack’s room and sat down on the edge of his bed. She rubbed his back until he woke up. “Come outside with me,” she said.

“OK.”

Melissa took him by the hand and they crept out the back door and climbed the step stool set over the wire fence, escaping the cultivated yard and cantaloupes and the air conditioning and Mr. Marshall’s snoring, and ran into the field. Melissa led him to the cattle feeder, an imposing white box with a rusty ladder that could be climbed to a flat metal surface a story in the air. Jack laid down along the cool steel surface and looked at the stars. The warm sky had not yet succumbed to the depths of night; the edges remained deep purple while the center revealed more stars than Jack had ever seen at once. The Milky Way cut a dense cluster of bright stars across the night, slashing through the blackness, reminding Jack of the sparks of backfiring cars against dark asphalt. The night air carried the smell of cattle and heat and the sounds of rustling leaves, and somewhere a car motor started in the distance.

Jack stared at the brightness and imagined his future with Melissa. He pictured it as bright as the stars, illuminating his life. He saw their wedding, the birth of their children, the funerals of his aunt and her mother, and repeated the words of the army recruiter into Melissa’s ear: “Your future looks bright.” He imagined that his own mother must have felt this way once, filled with a mad rush of joy to live, but he couldn’t picture when. Melissa curled up into a ball against his side and he absently stroked her back, absorbed in the alarming expansiveness of the universe and his finite existence. He felt her drift to sleep. He stood up, raising his arms over his head, and jumped off the cattle feeder, flailing his arms into the silent night before hitting the ground twelve feet below, rolling over onto his back and laying there winded. He hit the hard packed dirt with his fists and leaped up, ran to the rain barrel, and reached into the water with his bare hands, clutching the writhing, slippery catfish against his chest and flying back across the yard, racing against the time the fish could hold its breath until he reached the pond. He lowered the fish down into the water and held it there, moving it back and forth to create a current that forced oxygen into its gills. He leaned down into the pond and whispered, “Your future looks bright.” He felt the powerful fish begin to fight his grip, and so he let it go. It faltered for a moment, beating ineffectively against the muddy bottom before working itself loose and darting into the cool depths of the pond.

## Beautiful Struggle

Andrew Crowe

*Wednesday, December 12 7:14 a.m. 681 Johnston St.*

Alexander MoneyPenny fumbled around the kitchen trying to find breakfast. He reached into a doorless cupboard to pull out a box of Marshmallow Stars. He opened the next cupboard looking for a bowl only to find two mugs and a stack of paper plates. Both sides of the sink were full so Alex pulled out the top bowl and gave it a quick rinse. He ran his fingers around the inside of the plastic bowl and then the outside to get the spaghetti stains off the Cool Whip print. He began to pour the cereal only to have two cockroaches appear in the bowl.

“God damnit,” Alex muttered. He threw the box near the trash bag on the floor. The box of cinnamon sugar toaster pastries he grabbed next was empty except for a half-eaten crust. He opened the fridge and surveyed the scene: a gallon of milk, two Dr. Cola cans, fruit punch, cheese, bologna, butter, syrup, and eggs. He flicked a roach off the counter before setting the carton of eggs down. The roach crawled off the white lead paint chip and down the basement stairs.

“Come on girls. Get up. Let’s go.” Alex fixed two omelettes as his sisters promenaded upstairs, putting their faces on. Alysha came down first, her brown hair still wet and in a bun. The cover-up did a decent job of masking the circles under her eyes that she shared with everyone in the family. The gray tank top hugged her chest as she bounced down the stairs.

“Huh uh. Nope. Back upstairs.” Alex said.

“Come *on* Brother. I’ve got a jacket to wear over it.”

Alex shot her a sideways glance and Alysha stomped back up the stairs. The next time down she was followed by Amy. A year younger, Amy still had a little baby fat which she was covering this day with a turtleneck. Her dark hair provided a sharp contrast as it lay on the shoulders of the soiled tan sweater.

“Where’s Mom?” she asked as she sat down at the table.

Alex walked to the living room to put on khakis over his shorts. He ignored the fact that they had mud stains up through the ankles and that they were 36s or 38s. Either way, they were much too big.

“Brother, where’s Mom?”

“Don’t worry about it Amy. Eat your food.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“I said eat your fucking food.”

Alex grabbed his red polo and put it on while slipping into his boots. The sleeves barely covered his tattoo. He had gotten it as a present when he turned 15. It was the four Aces spread out with Alex Alysha Amy Always vertically on the cards. "It's cold. Wear your big coats. And don't forget your lunch tickets."

"Can I have some money?" Alysha asked. She ripped out her lunch ticket and slid it into her backpack.

"For what?" Alex pointed to the table and Alysha rummaged through the wallet.

"Eight bucks," she said.

"Leave me two, I gotta get lunch. And give your sister three. Now go or you'll miss the bus." Two love you's and two kisses later the girls were out the front door. Alex should have been going with them. He would have been a junior at Central Hower High.

*10:48 a.m. Target store #73*

The walkie cracked as the voice came on. "Alex, you have a call."

Alex dropped the rest of the toothpaste tubes in the cart and made his way from A8 past the registers and to the break room. He picked up the wall-mounted telephone and pushed the flashing red light.

"Yes, hello, this is Jackson middle school. Is this Alexander MoneyPenny?"

"Yeah."

"We have Alysha and Amy here and unfortunately they both were found to have lice by the school nurse today."

Alex suppressed a sigh as he rolled his eyes. "Thank you. I'll be up shortly." He used the phone to make some calls. His cousin was asleep, Ryan wasn't home, and Eric didn't have his car. Alex threw on his coat called his manager, punched out and ran to the bus stop.

*12:09 p.m. Mike and Mike's Mini-Mart*

"That'll be two dollars," the clerk said in his Bosnian accent. Alex put the two fudge rounds, three bags of Cool Ranch Doritos, pack of Juicy Fruit, chocolate chip granola bar, and star crunch into the plastic bag and handed the clerk his two crumpled singles.

"Here," he said as he handed the bag to Amy. "I'll be right back."

Alex scurried over a small brick wall and into a gray house. The girls waited for a few minutes as they sat on the wall devouring Doritos. Alex hopped back down the stairs after straightening his shirt and rubbing his eyes. He smacked the girls on the back of their heads.

"Come on, I got a surprise."

"Is this gonna be another one of your stupid ideas?"

"Yeah, Brother, no more snowball softball."

*12:58 p.m. Lock 3 Park*

Alex leaned against the rail as he let a string of spit fall into the Ohio-Erie Canal. He watched the white blob flow with the mirky brown water while it snaked between the buildings of downtown. The National City Bank and Goodyear World Headquarters rose above the horizon. A decimated parking garage sat to the left where the old O'Neill's shop used to be. Main Street ran parallel to the canal as busses whizzed by and the lunchtime crowd ate at Serpico's and Subway. The city workers were eating uptown at Luigi's while Main Street had a hum of construction workers and college students.

Alysha and Amy lurched across the skating rink as Alex moved to the bench. He hovered over his hot chocolate as the girls took turns sprawling on the ice. His eyes were glazed over as he lost himself in the hypnotic hums of downtown life. The constant *pssshhh* of bus doors, the honking of car horns, muffled

conversations of Christmas shoppers, and the sweet smell from the Wonder Bread factory.

Amy waddled off the ice and relaxed on the bench. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was knotted in the back. "Oh Brother that was so much fun. Did you see Lysha on the ice? My pants are so wet. Gimme a drink. You think mom is home yet?"

"We'll see babe. I'm glad you had a good time. Look at your sister try to walk over here." Alysha fell onto the bench. The back of her jeans were soaked to a darker color. Alex pulled a folded five out of his pocket and tossed into his sister's lap.

"Go pay for the skates. I'ma go use the phone."

*1:29 p.m. CVS store #243*

Alex fingered through the magazines before picking up a Rap Today. Nas and Jay-Z were juxtaposed on the cover with the title *Battle for Your Soul*. He set it back down and found the newest issue of Sports Illustrated. He rolled it up and slid it into his back pocket.

The girls were comparing prices when Alex walked up behind them and draped his arms on their shoulders.

"You have to get the multipack. I don't even wanna hear you complaining about how you need Supers in a couple days," he said. The three of them walked up the aisle and Alex handed Alysha a ten. He pulled the magazine out of his pocket and handed it to her before he walked out the door.

*2:11 p.m. 681 Johnston St.*

The girls jumped to the second step while Alex took a long stride to avoid the hole where the first used to be. Alysha opened the door to see their mom sitting in an armchair. She continued to stare at the blank tv screen as the kids took off their shoes and coats.

*3:17 127 Adams Court*

Alex greeted Ryan, Eric, Kylin and his cousin Bradley as he walked up on the porch. "Why y'all sitting the fuck out here?"

"Moms said she had to clean. You know how she do." Bradley said.

"Well tell her my moms'll be over bout nine. Fat Fat, tell your mom I'll be over bout ten. Glok tell your mom I'll be over bout eleven and Pooky tell your mom I ain't ever coming back." Alex said

"Whatever man, whatever," said the chorus.

"Peep this, peep this," Eric said. "So I'm rolling over on the west side, off Copley. I got this smokin light-skinned chick with me I met up at Foot Action. We just smoked an L, you know, so I was like dang, B, we gotta head back to my place. Just then the cops roll up and *blip, blip*, they got my ass pulled over. They come up to the car, talking that bull and then they call in for a K-9 'cause I wasn't letting em search my shit. Now listen, listen. The dog starts sniffing at the trunk and barking like crazy. But before they can open it, the dog pukes. The god damn thing pukes. That shit made the police dog sick. Now that's some good ass weed."

*8:21 p.m. 681 Johnston St.*

Alysha and Amy sat watching the Simpsons as their mother washed dishes and cleaned up the kitchen. The girls ate the hot dogs with a fork and dipped them in a pile of ketchup. Alex plopped down and hung his feet in the air. Amy moved the plate onto the arm of the burgundy couch and her brother placed his feet on her

lap.

“You do your homework yet?”

“Duh, I was only in school for an hour, how could I get any?”

Alex dug his heel into her thigh before Amy could push them off.

“Crybaby.”

“You want these Brother?” Alysha asked as she offered the plate across the room.

“No baby, you eat em.”

*11:01 p.m. 681 Johnston St.*

Alex walked in the bedroom and glanced around. The walls were barren except for a single magazine cutout of Usher. Alex shivered as the cold air rushed out the door. The girls lay on a queen size mattress and box springs that set on the floor. Alex pounced on the two masses and pulled down the top of the comforter.

“You two brush your teeth?”

“Brother, I told you yesterday we don’t have no toothpaste.”

“Right, right. I’ll get you some tomorrow. Gimme kiss. But don’t be breathing on me.” He turned his right cheek to Amy and then his left to Alysha before pushing himself up off their stomachs.

“Night Brother.”

Alex went back down the stairs, slipped off his boots and pulled his cover up as he situated his head against the arm of the couch. He drifted off to the sounds of Cliff Huxtable and his mom’s relaxed breathing.

## The Pinball

Paul Donahue

You know when you try to study in those real quiet areas of the library and you feel like everyone's trying way too hard not to be too loud? And then you feel bad when you make any noises at all? Like you feel like you have to apologize to everyone for unzipping your backpack? I hate that. Hate it. Now when I study there I bring my headphones so I don't have to listen to everyone trying to not make noise. But when I do that I start wondering if I'm typing abnormally loud because I can't hear the keys anymore.

On this particular night I was there for a test I had to study for. French History, can you believe that? Christ. I mean don't get me wrong it's good stuff and everything, but as a senior trying to fulfill his university Foreign Studies req, it sucks. And I have to take it because I didn't even realize I needed a Foreign Studies class until last semester. In college they don't have people fiddling around with your paperwork to remind you about shit like this like they did in high school. Fuck me. French History.

And across the room this girl kept on getting up and walking around and sitting back down. It wouldn't normally bother me but she was kind of hot. I mean she wasn't *really* hot but she was pretty hot. And what kept getting me was she wasn't really trying to look hot, you know? She had on this kind of skin-clinging tank top and a sports bra and sweatpants. I mean I don't know maybe she planned it that way but it just kind of seemed like she didn't really care and she was just studying at the library with her friends. Either way, I had to get up and sit in a chair facing the opposite direction.

I don't know if I said this already, but I suck at studying. I'm really, really awful. One night I just quit reading after seriously 15 minutes because I couldn't decide how to pronounce *Robespierre*. Every time I would come across it I would half-keep reading, half-try to decide on how to pronounce it, and I couldn't decide because I wanted to know how it was really pronounced and not just how to temporarily pronounce it.

By the way, the French? Crazy. Completely crazy. The Reign of Terror sounds absolutely absurd. Just marching people up and chopping their heads off one by one for seriously the whole day. And then people would come and watch and shriek and stuff. Like it was entertainment or something. Chickens and Farmer Louis. Watching everyone get whacked but looking around at each other going, "You could be next, I could be next, this is fucked up." I mean they had to resort to just killing everyone in sight just to right the proverbial ship. Yeah, we had the Civil War and Reconstruction was a little fucked up too but at least it was a legitimate war, you know? I mean which would you rather have, civil war or *Reign of Terror*?

I studied for awhile, but I'm not really sure I learned anything new. I was too distracted by hot sweatpants girl and this other guy who had a cold or the sniffles or something and kept hawking his snot

through his nose and swallowing it. It was grossing me out. I mean I had my headphones and everything but I can't have the music *too* loud or *that* ends up distracting me, and this kid kept hawking just a little bit louder than the music. That's how I knew. And I had to keep checking the score of the Monday night game to see if Torry Holt got any more catches for Team Anonymous.

Team Anonymous is usually notorious for having the funniest and most vulgar fantasy football team name possible. I'm Anonymous this year because last year when my buddy Greg Wierzynski was home for fall break he left his computer on and his ten-year-old sister Annie somehow got on and read the word "sex" and told her mom, who ended up getting mad at me. It's probably a good thing Annie didn't understand the whole name, which was Sex In The 3<sup>rd</sup> Trimester. Hah, that was a pretty good one, actually. My favorite was from two years ago when I was Fun With Colostomy Bags. The best part was when I would announce my picks at the draft, I would always go, "Fun With Colostomy Bags select: Kerry Collins." Of course I would never actually draft Kerry Collins, I just said a random football player, but seriously everyone would laugh when I would do it, even in like the 14<sup>th</sup> round.

I stopped at Lugo's for a few Mooseheads before going back to the apartment. I usually do, even though it's a five minute drive out of my way. I go there because I've kind of gotten to know the bartenders, who are pretty cool. I mean they don't give me free beer or anything but this one guy Sarge will just fill up a pitcher of Moosehead for me right when he sees me walk in. He's in a fantasy league too, and sometimes we both have players playing and we yell at the TV and shit. I only let myself drink one pitcher tonight because of that damn test tomorrow, but I almost made Sarge fill me up another one when he called me a pussy for going home early. I figured it'd be bad to fall for that and be hungover for the test. I mean who wants to be hungover *and* think about the Reign of Terror? Not me.

Parker wasn't home when I got back to the apartment--probably playing Hide the Salami over at Andrea's. The kid's whipped. No one with a respectable amount of testosterone should be allowed to miss Monday Night Football for a female. Well, for Marie-Antoinette, maybe, but we're talking about a girl who threatened to break up with him when he "forgot" their 8-month anniversary. I mean he was aware that it was 8 months, but what do you expect him to do for that? How long are you supposed to keep up the monthly-anniversary charade, anyway? I've always just avoided the entire thing. I could tell that all my old girlfriends secretly wanted to do it, but if you just don't say anything for the one-month they'll leave you alone about it. I'll do the year anniversary, but I don't need a month-by-month tally. The way I see it, it takes a full year to make sure you don't completely hate the person anyway.

Plus, it's worth the wait for my one-year anniversaries, I get really sensitive and have great ideas and stuff. After Emily Bucholz and I had our one-year in high school she was so head over heels in love with me, she probably would have married me right then. Then she got really crazy and overprotective and started accusing me of things like flirting with the girl tearing tickets at the movie theater and I had to end it.

The living room looked strangely different, and before turning on the TV I sat on the couch for an entire minute trying to figure out why, before realizing that it had been recently cleaned. I mean the place wasn't *clean*, but Park had probably gotten his bi-yearly housekeeping urge today. Huh. I flipped the TV to C-Span hoping there might be some late-night House debates going on. I knew they had some big energy bill coming up and one of these nights they'd have to stay up past their bedtimes trying to sift through all their partisan-politics bullshit for this thing.

Turns out they were debating, but Nancy Pelosi was about to take the floor, so I had to change the channel before I got too upset. I fucking hate Nancy Pelosi. I sat there for awhile in the dark just kind of staring at stuff. You know when you're just kind of sitting there not really doing or even thinking anything and you just kind of stare at stuff? That's what I was doing, until Laura wandered across my mind. She had the tendency to do that.

Laura Keller and I have been on the brink, and I mean the absolute brink of a relationship for seriously three or four months. I mean we're really close friends and everything and I know there have been at least five different times where if I had kissed her she would have kissed back. Not drunken kisses where you both wake up the next morning and mutually pretend it never happened, but times where like I would drop her off at her place and she would look at me for a second longer than usual. Or there was the time when I cheered her up

after a bad day by getting her some butterscotch pudding. It's her favorite, and when she asked me how I knew and I told her that she had mentioned it once a couple months before, she looked at me like I had just saved a litter of kittens from a burning tree. As if I was literally standing there with the kittens in my arms in front of the burning tree, with bigger triceps and soot all over my face. Like it's a big deal that I listen and remember stuff she says.

But she's a classy girl, though, really. Lot of class, and she respects herself, like she's really comfortable with who she is and everything. I always thought that was the sexiest part about a girl. I mean yeah, you can be cute and smart and laugh and stuff, but when a girl really likes herself, not full of herself or anything, but really *likes* who she is, that's the best. And that's Laura. Plus, she's brunette, really the only acceptable hair color for a girl. I know I should just ask her out or whatever but I always chicken out at the last second. Actually not even the last second, most of the time I chicken out way before.

A few weeks ago I got close. I mean I got really close to doing it. I met her at Bartholomew's, this deli place, after class and I was going to pretend afterwards like I had to go in her direction, which was through this park that has some fruity name, and after that I don't really know what but I would have steered the conversation in a sentimental direction or something. Anyway, we were crossing the street and she got a text message from her roommate Kelly, who had apparently locked her keys in the car and Laura had the only other one and had to go help. But I swear I would have done it that day. Since we were already crossing the street, I had to keep pretending like I had meant to go that way the whole time and I ended up walking through the park anyway for no reason, and even stopped and sat at a bench that I pretended would have been the one where I would have asked her out.

I couldn't pretend for too long though, because some bum saw me and started asking for handouts. When I told him no and got up to leave he said, "Fine, hope you like the yuppie burger you're having for dinner tonight!" Not one to allow someone like a homeless wino to enjoy the balance of power, I wheeled around with a puzzled look on my face and said, "You know I've never actually tried one of those, but the homeless deadbeat burger is pretty good." I don't understand how these people can't get jobs at gas stations or something. Newsstands.

A dull buzzing noise distracted my train of thought. I knew it was my cell phone, and I knew that I had no idea where it was. I hate that, when your phone vibrates and it's somewhere in the room but it could be anywhere because it sounds like it's vibrating from behind you and in front of you and from under the couch so you have to just sit there for 15 seconds trying to figure out what direction to start looking in. And I always miss the call and I get pissed because I always secretly hope it's Laura or whatever girl I have a crush on at the time even though it usually ends up being Mom or Park or my buddy Brandon from back home.

By the way, when I fall, I fall hard. For girls I mean. I can just pick them pretty well from the beginning, and from there I just start falling. I get really soft. Sometimes I think I'm just getting duped by that high school puppy love bullshit but I always end up actually liking the girl in the end anyway. I don't know if this happens with other people, but it kind of seems like a strange way to go about it. Whatever, I can't help it.

I finally found my phone. It was underneath a pillow on the couch. I seriously walked around the whole room before finding it right next to where I had been sitting. It probably even had fallen out of my pocket earlier. And actually it wasn't even a call, it was a text message from my older sister Becky. She just figured out the whole text messaging thing a few weeks ago and now sends them whenever reasonably possible, which to her is often.

hey just ran into julie sellers! u remember her she used to babysit us! she says hi! love u

Jesus, Bec. I mean yeah thanks, but I don't need constant news briefs about your life or anything. And you must have been eleven or something, which would have made me six so it's not like I have a bunch of lucid memories of Julie Sellers anyway. Unless she was the one I locked in the storm cellar, which was hilarious by the way, but that might have been Abbey Willits, and I think it was a few years later. She was seriously pounding on the door and screaming and stuff and I remember just sitting there and being kind of confused, because I knew it was supposed to be funny. I also had to finish my grape popsicle. I mean I had to because I had to open the door with both hands and I couldn't just put the popsicle down on the floor or it would've gotten dirty. I guess in retrospect it probably would have been an acceptable sacrifice.

I worry about Becky a lot though. I mean she's older and everything and supposed to look out for herself but I seriously worry about her all the time. I just don't think she has a lot of direction, you know? Like for a long time she was dating this guy Dane, huge tool, and he didn't even have a job and just lived at Bec's apartment and drove her car and ate her groceries. And she said she was in love with him, but seriously the guy was a huge douchebag. He got really pissed one time when I beat him in Madden, and he threw the controller across the room. I mean don't get me wrong, I do shit like that with my buddies even when I lose in Mario Kart and stuff, but I had just met the guy and it was in front of his girlfriend and everything. And no one knew how to act after that for the rest of the day, it was really awkward. But eventually it all dawned on Bec and she told him to get lost. I'm still worried about her. I call her every now and then to talk. Not about stuff like old babysitters or anything but about how she's doing. I just need to know she's ok.

Just as I was about to see if Nancy Pelosi was done talking I heard voices coming down the hallway and I knew it was Kyle and Smitty. I can always tell when Kyle is walking down the hall because he doesn't tie his shoes and you hear them scuffing the floor about a mile away. And I knew Smitty because he has kind of a funny voice. Not one you would laugh at necessarily but he just kind of sounded funny. At first I kind of wanted to run up and lock the door so I could just sit around and enjoy the night. Plus I had that French test. I knew if these guys stayed for awhile things could get out of hand. But then I figured fuck the French, they were all a bunch of drunks anyway. I found myself wishing Kyle and Smitty had brought over a bottle of wine. It's hard to drink wine and not be classy. Actually, nevermind.

They didn't knock first, they just came in. I don't really care, I like the open door policy. You could call me a regular William McKinley, minus the getting assassinated part. They were armed with the standard Kyle and Smitty artillery, Kyle with a two liter of Jack and Coke and Smitty with his sparkly bong. I've never understood the whole idea behind making drug paraphernalia look like its been dipped in a scrambled rainbow. I mean are there actually people out there who take bong rips, then spend an extended amount of time going, "Look at how swirly and purple this is, bro.." I mean I get that it's neat to look at when you're high, but don't you want to think about cooler shit, like Aristotle or something? I don't know.

It was a pretty standard Monday night for these guys, except Smitty didn't have his A's hat, which I thought was strange. He usually has his A's hat, especially when he's drinking. By the way, his name's actually Alex Schmidt, but we call him Smitty. I always wondered what his parents were thinking when they named him. It's just kind of hard to go from a word ending in x to a word starting with "sch." I mean did that idea ever cross their minds? How quickly did they decide on that name? They should have at least taken long enough to realize that saying Alex Schmidt out loud sounds ridiculous.

"Danny Boyyyyy!" Kyle was already in fine form. "Dude, what're y' doing in the dark, let's drink."

He flipped the lights on and helped himself to the recliner and Smitty had a seat next to me on the couch, situating the bong carefully on the table. He grinned stupidly at me and candidly declared, "I'm drunk," and I laughed. You have to remember he has kind of a funny voice, it would have been funnier if you were there. Kyle threw me the two liter, and I took a pull and shivered as I swallowed. Kyle makes a pretty strong two liter of Jack and Coke, and I knew I would get drunk pretty quickly because of that pitcher of Moosehead I had earlier. Fuck it, c'est la vie; I took another thorough pull. Things were definitely going to get out of hand.

Smitty picked up the remote and turned on the TV, cackling hysterically when he saw the channel I had been watching last. I threw the bottle back to Kyle, who took a swig before asking, "So what's up, man? What you been up to? Where's Parker?" Don't get me wrong, he's my friend and all, but I fucking hate it when someone asks you two questions at once. Just give them to me one at a time, Jesus.

"Nothing man, just some studying, got a test tomorrow, stopped at Lugo's." Then, as an afterthought, "I don't know where he is, probably Andrea's."

Smitty, who had taken a bag of weed out of his side pocket and started packing a bowl for the bong, started laughing. Not really laugh laughing, but kind of like a breathing hard kind of laugh, and he was squinting a little bit. He reared his head back and howled, "Chris Parker you sly dog!" He laughed some more and gradually started talking to himself. "You tramp! Bahah, what a tramp he is. He is seriously such a dirty--"

"You stoned already, Smitty?" I wouldn't have put it past him, but usually he waited for everyone. He turned to face me and beamed. "Uuhhhh, no man. Hahaah, yeah I am. Ahuh."

“Puh, Smitty you hunka dirt.” Kyle had just downed another long gulp, and tossed the bottle back to me.

“Huh, yeah? Get off my case man, you want me to load this or not?”

“Yeah, fire it up, let’s go. Danny Boy, you got the honors.”

“Nah guys, I’ll get drunk with you, but I got this test tomorrow.” And another hard pull.

I don’t really smoke that much. Seriously, I don’t. I mean every once in a while I get talked into it but usually I try to avoid it. Plus I bet Laura wouldn’t like it if she knew I did it. These guys though smoke like fucking Thomas the Tank Engine.

“Alright man, that’s cool, don’t wanna forget all that shit you learned.” Kyle was aimlessly looking around the room at the various posters and decorations. “That always sucks. Oh, *aha*, Danny is that the stop sign we took that one night?”

I laughed softly, “Yeah, that one night at Cody’s?”

“Yeah, oh man I was fucked up that night. I think I had 18 beers that night. Or like 12 and some shots. Or no, I found that bottle of Grey Goose and, *ha*, Smitty, you remember when we--”

“Ohhh, *yeah*.”

“We—wha—no, Smitty we’re not fucking watching this.”

Right after taking a formidable bong rip, Smitty had stumbled across the cooking channel and Emeril was making a soufflé or *trouffoux* or some shit like that. Actually I had no idea what it was, I just said soufflé for the hell of it and I think I just made the second one up. But he was putting on this stuff that looked like frosting and I could understand why Smitty was so excited.

“Dude do you have *any* idea how good that probably is? That’s probably the greatest food in the world. Honestly it’s probably the greatest food in the world. Fuck, we should get that recipe. I bet I could--”

“Oh my God, Smitty, shut the fuck up.” Kyle had just taken a monster hit of his own and started coughing violently into the crook of his elbow.

“Yeah, that’s right, you would cough, you piece.” Kyle and Smitty always had this ongoing feud all the time. I mean they’re best friends and all they do is bitch. It’s pretty funny I guess, but I kind of wonder how they haven’t ever resorted to just beating the shit out of each other.

I started getting really bored out of nowhere. Like really bored. I mean continuously slugging alcohol is great, but sitting on a couch listening to two stoned kids make dumb comments at each other and argue over whether to watch Emeril or *I Love the 90’s* just makes me want to go insane. The football game was probably over, so I got up to head to my room to check Holt’s final stats on my computer. It wasn’t until I stood up and felt gravity pulling me in seven different directions at once that I realized that I was only one thirsty swig away from killing 2 liter. “Holy Christ, Danny Madman, what the hell did you do with my booze?” I gave Kyle kind of a goofy look, took the rest of the bottle down, and almost lost everything at the realization that it was mainly Jack. Luckily Parker’s toilet would have been much more accessible than mine.

My room isn’t anything special. Bed against the wall, desk, computer, closet, more posters and shit on the walls. I usually keep it pretty clean, but currently it looked as if I had purposely thrown everything possible onto the floor. I waded through a heap of pants and shirts and sat down at my desk, turning the monitor on and instantly forgetting about Torry Holt.

**Laurie431:** hey you!

**Auto response from RythmProject09:** studying and lugo’s, feel free to join me for a cold one

**Laurie431:** I stopped by lugos to see if you were there but I guess you had left ☺

**Laurie431:** Good luck w/the test tomorrow! You’ll do great, see ya!

**Laurie431 signed off at 10:49:11 PM.**

I read the messages a few times, I always like rereading them for some reason. Am I wrong when I consider the “hey you” to be more affectionate than the average greeting? I mean she could have said anything, but she went out of her way to add the “you” at the end. I don’t know, I always thought it meant a little bit more than just hello, but maybe I’m just strange. There’s just a little added sentiment to it, I can’t really explain it. Regardless, she had stopped by Lugo’s to see me. Probably right around the time I was sitting around the room looking at stuff. God dammit.

What if I called her? What time is it—11:18? No way is she asleep. She's probably studying. She studies all the time, I mean all the time. She's probably sitting at her desk, wearing her gray Dartmouth sweatshirt and those stretchy green Adidas exercise pants. Her left leg is bent horizontally so that the side of her foot is up on the chair, a foot with a light blue sock on it. Her hair is probably up in a pony tail, not really far up her head, just kind of where girls regularly put it. I mean as opposed to when they put it up a little higher, like almost on top of their head, which I find extremely sexy. I don't know why I find it sexy but I do.

Seriously though I think I should call her. I mean yeah I had a few drinks in me but I don't think it's the alcohol talking. I should seriously call her. Just to say hey. No that's stupid, I would look retarded. *Hey Laura, I um, got your messages...* No way. But I just wanted to talk to her. Actually I wanted her to come over and just lie in my bed with me and talk. I could honestly just talk to her all night. Like I wouldn't even care if we didn't hook up or anything. Seriously. I mean yeah we'd obviously *eventually* have to hook up, don't get me wrong, but right now I just wanted to talk to her.

I know it's really dumb, but Laura is already one of my speed dials. I don't even know if she's one of the top nine people I call, but she's speed dial four. Four used to be Pete Mackovic, but he's studying abroad this semester, and I put Laura there because I like to think that I'll eventually call her a lot.

I flipped my phone open and just kind of sat there staring at the floor for a minute trying to think of how to start the conversation. I can never just throw myself into things like this. I mean I had to get my tone of voice right, you can't sound like you're trying to sound too cool but you also can't be really eager to talk to her. And I had to think of what to say if I got her voicemail because you talk differently when it's a voicemail and I had to leave one because she'd see the missed call and it'd be weird if I didn't leave one. But I couldn't really come up with anything so I just hit four.

Calling a girl you like and sitting there waiting for her to pick up is seriously one of the most unnerving things in the world. You know what I mean? All I do is sit there with my lungs full just fanatically wishing she won't pick up so I can just leave a voicemail. And with each ring I'm like *thank you she's not picking up* but then I get frightened all over again when I think about her suddenly picking up, which is what Laura eventually did.

"Hey! Danny!"

*FUCK* "Hey, Laura, what's up?"

"Nothing, I'm just driving back from grabbing a Starbucks."

"A Starbucks, huh. Gonna be a late night?"

"Ugh, yeah, I have a paper to write."

"Oh boy, what class?"

"Oh, this Psych class, Brain and Behavior."

"Hoh jeez, well, at least you'll be pretty good at--brains and behavior after this then, huh?" *What the fuck kind of line was that?*

"Haha, yeah."

*God that was ridiculous.*

"So what's up?"

"Oh," (*shit*) "wait, hold on a sec."

(Have you ever done that? Just told the girl to hold on because you can't think of shit to say? I do it all the time.)

"Hey, sorry, uh, nothing's really going on, I just saw that you called. Or--"

"I called you?"

*Fuck.* "Or I mean I saw your message, just wondering what you were up to."

*I guess that sounded all right.*

"Yeah, I stopped by Lugo's to see you but I guess they had kicked you out already."

"Ha, yeah I got a little rowdy for them."

"Oh no, really? What'd you do?"

*Jesus Laura* "Ha, no I'm just kidding."

"Oh, haha, ok."

“Ok well good luck on your--”

“Hey, I’m actually right by your place, I could just swing by and say hey for a bit.”

*WHAT. Ok—*“Uh, yeah that could be cool, where are you?”

“Umm, I’m on Ashland, I just passed Courtney Street.”

“Oh ok, cool, well I’ll see you in a bit then.”

“Ok, bye!”

“Bye.”

*Holy schmoly. I only have a few minutes, she’s not that far away. Shit, where’s the Old Spice? God dammit. Where’s the—shit. God. SHIT. Let’s just find out, I probably smell like a—alright it’s good enough, I was at a bar anyway. Is the living room clea—oh fuck.*

I forgot all about Kyle and Smitty. How long had I been in my room? Three minutes, a half hour? Lord knows what the hell they were doing. I opened the door to head back out to the living room and my nose was met by an onslaught of marijuana and—was that bacon?

I wanted to just throw them out, but I almost doubled over in laughter at the scene Kyle and Smitty had made. I mean it was completely ridiculous. All the lights were off, and at first I couldn’t even see Kyle, but soon spotted him face down on the floor next to the recliner. He was wearing Parker’s 1996 Penny Hardaway Orlando jersey, and one of his shoes was off. The carpet was vomit-free, at least for the time being.

Smitty had found my CDs and had thrown in *Graceland*. He was still was awake, but was half-sitting, half-lying on the couch, his eyes shut, doing kind of a snaky-wriggly dance, like the only kind of dance you could do while lying on a couch. He had a really goofy smile on his face and everything, and I questioned if any of his senses outside of his hearing were even functioning at all.

They had cleared the table enough to put a Scrabble board on it, and the only words they had made were *for, ran, no, of, and feet*. The game had obviously ended prematurely in a violent fit of rage involving one them throwing the rest of the tiles around the room. Actually they probably got bored of the real game and ended up just throwing the tiles at each other. And it wasn’t until I started picking the tiles up that I noticed six Hot Pocket wrappers scattered around the floor under the table.

“Danny, you’ra son of a bitch.”

I stood up and looked at Smitty. He was still doing his snake dance, but this time he had his feet into it. Like his feet were up in the air and doing these weird kick moves while his arms kept on doing the snake dance. Then he got up and just started jumping on the couch. He could have been my four-year old-cousin Joey jumping on the bed or something. I mean I haven’t jumped on furniture at all since I was about thirteen.

“A son of a bitch Danny! You, m’boy, are a sonofabitch!” He started clapping and adding spin moves to his jumps. “Motha fuckaaahhh! Oweee—ohshit--”

He misjudged one of his jumps and one of his legs fell to the floor, which caused the rest of him to follow suit and he kind of awkwardly fell-slid onto the floor and underneath the table. It was a combination of the most uncoordinated thing you’ve ever seen, the funniest thing you’ve ever seen, and the most graceful thing you’ve ever seen. Seriously it was kind of graceful. He actually ended up hitting the table with his head, spilling more tiles, along with bong water, onto the floor.

I started laughing. Laura was probably walking up the god damn sidewalk, and I just started laughing out loud to myself because my two friends were both unconscious on the floor. And I couldn’t get enough of the Penny jersey. I mean that’s what he got the idea of doing, sitting there bombed in my recliner, to go get Park’s Penny jersey from his closet. And there were Scrabble tiles seriously all over the place.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not a tightass, normally I would just deal with something like this in the morning, but I mean Laura was going to walk in and see this scene. I had to do at least *something*, but I couldn’t even figure out where to begin. I mean I really couldn’t even narrow it down. I guess I could

*knockknockknock knockknock*