

Re:Visions

a journal of prose

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The Boy Who Sits

Dani Rado

There's a boy in my class who sits. I mean that's all he does. He sits at his desk all day with his head down. When our teacher, Mrs. Goode, asks us to pull our desks in a circle, he stays put. Mrs. Goode says, "John, are you going to join us today?" He lifts his head, like my cat does when he's sleeping and I call his name, then turns it to the other side, away from the rest of us. He won't even take the tests. Mrs. Goode tucks the stapled sheets under his arms when she passes them out. When I'm half way through one test, when I come to a problem I don't know the answer to, I pause, lift my head, lean back, look around. I notice that John's watching us- in the back of the room, staring at the back of our hunched heads. When he sees me looking at him he sticks his finger up his nose and I laugh a little. Mrs. Goode tells me to turn around and then reiterates her policy on cheating- it is not tolerated.

I try not to look at him anymore. I try to focus on my paper, but the answer still doesn't come to me.

When we're done with our tests we pass them forward. The boy in front of John turns around and snatches his exam. He writes John's name on top of the blank sheets. Although I am nearly across the room from them I know this because he has been doing it all year. The students in the front row tap the papers on their desks and hand the evened piles to Mrs. Goode as she walks by.

When this is through she asks, "John, would you like to join them for lunch today?" and he shifts his doughy body, rising up momentarily, and settles back down again. Maybe this time he also mumbles "No," because sometimes he does. Then we're dismissed.

John has been like this since kindergarten. Maybe even before, but that's when I met him.

One day I have to stay in the classroom for lunch and recess because I had forgotten to do my homework. That is how Mrs. Goode punishes us. As everyone files down to the cafeteria I go to my locker and retrieve my bagged lunch. I return to my desk. John, I and Mrs. Goode form a scalene triangle as we sit at our desks and wait out the period.

When I was younger I asked my dad about John. I sat on his lap. He put one hand on my knees and one on my back and pulled me in. It was warm there, but I swung my feet back and forth because I wasn't sure yet what I was going to say. I accidentally kicked him in his leg, the heel of my dirty sneaker against the loose muscle of his calf. He put his hand on my shins, but still smiled, and I stopped the swinging. "Dad," I said, "There's this boy at school."

"Your boyfriend?" He teased and poked me under my ribs, but I wasn't in the mood.

I said, "No, just this boy."

He lowered his head so that he could look directly at me. Finally I realized he was waiting for me to go on.

"He never does anything. He just sits there all day."

"Aren't you *supposed* to sit during class?"

"Dad!"

"All right, all right. Don't get excited."

"But he doesn't do anything. Ever. He just sits there. No homework. No class work. He doesn't ever turn anything in!" This was nearing what I wanted to say. I think I wanted to ask him why some one would do that. But he beat me to a question and mine got lost..

"Why should that bother you? It just makes you look better."

“That’s not the point.”

I pushed against his chest and he relaxed his arms, letting me slide off his lap, lightly gripping my shoulder to steady me when my feet hit the floor. When they did, I turned around and ducked my shoulder from under his hand.

John has nothing to eat for lunch and I have tuna and carrot sticks, neither of which I feel like eating as I fill in the answers to last’s night homework. I slide down the hypotenuse and make an offering. He lifts his head turns his sour face at me.

“What do I want that for?” As he snaps at me I realize this may be the first time we’ve ever spoken, maybe the first time I’ve ever heard his voice, though that can’t possibly be true.

I don’t know what to do until I hear Mrs. Goode call my name.

“Go back to your seat,” she tells me.

I notice the boys in the word problems on our math tests are often named John. I try to imagine John riding a bicycle at five miles an hour for fifteen miles, or at a store purchasing six bags of jellybeans for two dollars a piece, plus a seven percent sales tax, and receiving the correct change from a twenty dollar bill, although I haven’t figured out what that is yet, or even growing an average of two inches every year for the next ten years, starting from his current height, which I don’t know because he’s always sitting.

This is why I couldn’t answer that problem on the test, because when I imagine John, I can only ever see him seated there at that desk, occasionally setting up his books around his head, creating a barricade. It seems like when we’re all older, married with kids and real jobs, he’ll still be there, exactly the same, hunched, only a little more than a still life, crystallized in silence until one day the teacher, either an older Mrs. Goode or someone who’s replaced her, comes over and taps on his shoulder, saying, “John, would like to join us?” And instead of shifting his head and grumbling, instead of rising like dough to settle back down deflated, cracks race from his shoulder around his entire body, making it look for a moment like he’s covered in cobwebs, then he crumbles, not like breaking glass but like a sugar-water sculpture, the outer shell of him shattered, laid open in a heap on the ground, revealing nothing underneath, leaving only a slight smell of sawdust and a mess for the janitor to sweep up.

* * *

And when it is years later and I have this real job and cozy house, which actually has a white picket fence that I paint each summer to try to hold the flakes of rotting wood into place, a new cat decides to come into my yard. He rolls around on the back porch and sprays the front and back doors, urine shooting out as if from those misters in the vegetable section of grocery store. He does this even if he sees me watching through the glass; especially if he sees me watching. His hair is matted, the white fur showcasing the dirt, the orange patches faded. He’s worn and stocky. He stands outside the windows and baits my cat, also male, into coming outside and fighting, into protecting his turf, protecting his female. My cat hisses and spits with such ferocity that sometimes I think the tomcat is inside my house, has passed through the window like light and laid himself on my floor, as my cat would, to bask in the leftover beam.

My boyfriend wants to come over and take care of the problem. “I’ll take care of it,” he says. He suggests startling it off by firing a gun. I tell him I didn’t know he had one. He says he doesn’t but that he can get one. Then, when I say nothing, he says he can use the garden hose and spray him. I remind him it’s winter, and the hose is frozen in its curled and useless state.

“A trap then. We’ll catch him and give him to the pound,” he says, then adds, “Do you want me to get one and bring it over?”

I latch my back door and look out the window. I can’t see anything but my fence and thinned rhododendrons outlining my tiny yard. He’s too big and orange to be hiding behind them.

“Not now,” I say.

I call the pound.

“Yup, he’s most likely feral,” the man says.

I’m in my kitchen, the phone book laying open on my counter top; this number, the first of three for local pounds, circled with red ink. My cat jumps on the counter and stretches his next towards me. I lean my head down and he presses his forehead into mine.

“Why my house?” I ask.

“You have a cat. He wants to take over. Won’t stop ‘til he does,” the man answers, like I should know exactly how animals behave, like the key to their behavior lays in the strict observation of their habits, like all the workings of their brains are showcased in the way they prance, the way they lick themselves meticulously, their scratchy tongue pulling over their fur, the way they run or walk to or away from you, the way they make gurgling noises in their throats. My cat watches me, he has

since the day I got him. All he knows of me is when I like to wake up, when I like to go to sleep, when I leave and return from work. He's happy when he's right, and so am I.

We've watched each other for years; learned each other's habits. But there's no time to watch for this one, because suddenly we're barricaded in my house, my cat and me, attacked by the scent of urine that circles our home, an olfactious shadow of the tomcat. My cat has tried to drive them off by rubbing his cheeks against the outside corners of the house and my legs, by peeing all over the yard, a tiny sprinkler; but his efforts fail. The tomcat keeps coming.

"Where did he come from?" I ask the man at the pound.

"He was probably doin' the same thing to someone else, so they caught him and dumped near your place." Again he speaks like I should know this, like the key to understanding people's behavior lays in the strict observation of their interaction with animals, the way they croon to them, or yell at them for not understanding, the way they demand obedience or love, the way my cat's tongue will move to my hand when I reach to pet him and for a moment I mistake that for affection.

"They could just make him someone else's problem?" I ask.

"Har har," he goes, "Yup."

"What happens if I just bring him to you?"

"Well, if he's feral he's got to be put down," the man at the pound says.

When I'm done with the man I open the back door and call for my cat, a tender toned, "Hey guy, come here," followed by a high pitched, "Kitty kitty kitty kitty!"

The tomcat cat comes running. He's making little noises, purring louder and louder as he gets closer and closer to the door. I haven't shut the door yet.

I'm almost tempted. The last time he was this close to the door, my boyfriend came rushing up and squared his shoulders in front of the opening. I pushed back behind him. He flailed his arms up, and yelled, "Get! Get out of here you fucking thing! Get the hell out," and slammed the door. He turned and looked at me, his great chest going up and down in his excitement. He did see the cat trying to run off so fast that he slipped on the ice of the back stoop, twisted over and fell to the ground.

At the shouts my cat ran and hid under the couch, and curled himself into a tight little ball.

"Damn it," I said, "You're scaring him."

I tell the tomcat, "If I didn't already have a cat," but reach my hand towards him anyway, reaching for behind the ear to scratch.

He hisses and spits and digs his canines deep into the flesh between my thumb and forefinger. He runs to the edge of the yard, turns around and watches me. I cup my hand, then try to pinch out the blood and saliva through the little holes.

He trots back to the door's large window and looks into the house, then me. He turns and sprays a fine mist at the base of the door and stalks off. I go to the opposite end of the house, to the front door and call for my cat again, who comes running inside and doesn't slow down until he's in the kitchen, in the center of our home, his tiny breath going in and out like it's the end of the world. I close and lock both doors.

I pour hydrogen peroxide over my hand and wince at the small white bubbles that rise up. I decide I'll buy a trap tomorrow. A nice one. One that's a cage and closes when the animal enters to get the food that I will set in there- something nice, like tuna- all without hurting him. Then I'll drive ten miles, at least, and drop him off in a wooded area, but close to houses. Maybe he'll find a house without a cat, owned by some one who won't mind taking him in. But I can't. I already have a cat. I work full time. Money's tight. He's not my responsibility.

Tomorrow he won't be my problem.

The Afflicted Man's Companion

Corey Madsen

For over fifteen years, retired Great Lakes Fleet engineer Walter Matthews had, by teaching himself to read lips, fooled everyone around him into believing that his hearing was perfectly fine. But the fact of the matter was—the only obvious result after years of fog horns and the discordant peal of limestone loads grating against the steel ship holds—he could no longer hear even the loudest, most familiar sounds of his leisurely days, like the grind of his truck's ignition, the TV (which Ida blared most of the time), not even the dynamite blasts down at the quarry, which were now only evident to him by the shaking of the walls. Chatting with his old shipmates at Pinewoods Tavern, most of whom chewed snuff or plug tobacco, he had to keep his eyes focused on the movement and curvature of their bulging lips, the roll of their tongues off that shiny brown wad, interpreting any pucker as a word beginning with “W,” something spoken through spit as an “S,” and so on. As there was always the chance that someone might address him, Walter never kept anyone to his back. He to nod his head knowingly and rely on the neutral response that had never failed him: “Uh-huh, yup.” He always smiled in case something should be funny. Despite the fact he could no longer gauge the pitch of his own voice, Walter—at least to his own knowledge—appeared to still speak at an even volume. He had, it seemed, completely conquered the handicap without much fuss at all.

When it occurred to him that he might also be going blind, however, Walter realized that sustaining this lie would require almost all of his time. Not only were such simple necessities as ordinary street signs lost to him, the lips that were once his window to language were now frosty, distorted, and—in some cases—totally shuttered. It was as if someone had taken a dropper full of black ink and applied a dot to the middle of each retina. Sometimes he caught himself trying to peer around this searing hole in his vision, only to find that it followed wherever he looked. He had to rely on his memory to reconstruct his wife's missing features—the thin line of hair on her upper lip, the little folds of skin just beneath her chin, everything that made up the woman he loved. The buttons on the microwave were goners, as were the knobs on the stove, the controls on his truck radio, the labels on anything he ate. Since he worried about cutting off a finger, he was hesitant to run the electric saws in his woodshop, turning his attention instead to projects that required large pieces of wood and glue. When Ida came out to check on his progress, he could think of no other way to get rid of her aside from muttering something cruel to her. For the last few weeks, she had stayed in her recliner and, as far as Walter could tell, had not come out of the house once.

Shortly thereafter, he began avoiding company altogether, stopping for coffee at Pinewoods less and less, skipping his Lions Club meetings, speaking only when he was relatively certain he'd been spoken to—and even then, giving one-word answers or grunts. He walked with his shoulders bunched and his hands stuffed in his pockets, affecting the demeanor of someone who prefers not to be bothered. He took to occupying other rooms in his house to ward off any unnecessary questions his wife might put to him, pretending to read in the den, making prolonged trips to the bathroom, remaining in the shower until his skin turned soft and puckered. He veered off whenever someone on the street approached him, just in case they might try something kind, like greeting him. It was better to be an asshole than a helpless old man, he decided.

Once, one of the deckhands he used to know aboard the John G. Munson had stopped him in the street, wanting to know why he'd kept walking after his named had been called repeatedly.

“Because I didn't feel like talking to you,” he said, and simply walked away.

Driving his pickup—which was something Walter Matthews did every day—presented him with a different set of dilemmas. As the meters on the dash were no longer readable, nor were many of the street signs that seemed to drift past his window like vibrant wads of cotton, he conditioned himself to follow the centerline only, going at a steady crawl, sticking to the streets he'd been driving since they were nothing but dusty beds of gravel. The taillights of other vehicles were still

discernable, although the red glare seemed to bleed over the pavement, obscuring the centerline and sometimes, he noticed, the pedestrians at crosswalks. He never let the speedometer needle—now just a fuzzy orange sliver—creep into the upper two thirds. He counted each gear when sliding the shifter into Drive. He backed out of the driveway as slowly as possible, giving other drivers plenty of time to honk. As for traffic lights, thankfully there was only one in Ward Branch, which he avoided by taking Lakeside Drive, one street over, whose amorphous Stop signs he already knew by heart. Whenever he reached his destination, whether halfway across town or a few blocks away from his home, he would nearly weep into his steering wheel for joy of having finally arrived.

Two months after he'd first noticed the difficulty he had reading the TV Guide, he made an appointment with the nearest eye specialist he could locate in the phone book (with the help of a magnifying glass), which turned out to be an optometrist forty miles away, in Alpena. Telling Ida that he was making a trip to the hunting camp to cut wood, he set out at seven in the morning on a Friday, worming his way through slowly waking downtown and hugging the shoulder along the southbound route at a steady clip of thirty-five miles an hour. Other vehicles roared past him, bleating their horns and startling him. More than once he had to glance out the driver's side window to make sure that Lake Huron was, indeed, to his left, exactly where it should be. He noticed he had to remove a hand from the steering wheel occasionally to shake out some of the cramps and wipe the sweat on his trousers.

After two full hours, he was amidst the vaguely recognizable landscape of fast-food chains and strip malls, as well as a profusion of pushy drivers who seemed to want to run him off the road. Before he could signal and make his turn, he found himself hopelessly pinned in the left lane, watching an endless parade of glinting car hoods stretch clear to the horizon in his rearview. The person next to him was laying on his horn. He couldn't tell if he had six feet or six inches to work with, for the car in front of him was apparently without taillights. To make matters worse, a jaywalker was stranded on the concrete median, waiting for the right opportunity to finish crossing, making one more thing Walter had to worry about flattening. Then, as if God had parted the traffic, an opening appeared and Walter carefully nudged his pickup over to the right, just in time to make what he wasn't even sure was his turn.

He pulled into three different parking lots until he finally discovered the correct one, thanks to a rather large, unmistakable billboard of an eyeball on the building's façade. When he killed the engine, he realized with a thick flush of dread that in little more than an hour he would have to embark on the same journey again. It took him a full minute to gather the nerve to climb down out of the cab, and when he did, the smell of the asphalt was enough to make him sick.

Inside the waiting area, a receptionist greeted him from behind what looked like a standard office partition, separated by a sliding glass window. As Walter leaned into the opening, he noticed that she had red hair—a deep kind of red that only showed through in true hair colors. For some reason, he felt almost gracious to her for allowing him to glimpse this one solid detail. He searched for her lips, but they were buried under layers of distortion.

He could hear her asking him something.

"I'm here to see the doctor about my eyes. I have an appointment. The name's Walter Matthews."

She slid him some forms, which he knew immediately were written in too fine a print to read. He pretended to glance it over before handing it back to her.

"I can't see it," he said, and then added: "Any of it."

When his name was finally called—repeatedly—he found himself allowing the receptionist to lead him down the sterile white hallway by the arm, not resisting in the least, giving this woman, who smelled of apples, complete control over his movements. Inside the examination room, he waited another fifteen minutes before the optometrist entered, which set him on edge. Although he couldn't make out the man's facial features, Walter immediately felt a large male presence, a hulk of shoulders and chest that was reassuring to his own vulnerable state. He could just make out the semblance of a dark brown mustache, but other than this, the man's face about as distinct as a slice of white bread.

When the optometrist said something, Walter responded: "I'm sorry, doc. My hearing's not so good either. You're going to have to speak up."

"How's this?" the optometrist said. Walter could tell he was shouting, but he didn't care. "Can you hear me all right when I talk at this volume?"

"Yeah. That's perfect."

"Now, what's the problem?"

"I can't see shit."

For over a half an hour, Walter leaned back into the plastic covering of the examination chair, dug his fingernails into the arms, and did what most people thought he was incapable of: everything he was told. He pressed his face into the cold metal bridge of the biomicroscope, stared without blinking into the painful beam of light the slit lamp shot into his retina, and gritted his teeth as the optometrist used a small buttonhook to unearth the underside of his eyelids. He squinted at the eye chart on the far wall and listened to himself failing miserably, seeing nothing but the enormous E on the very top,

which gradually came to represent the letter grade for his pitiful performance. When the examination was finished, and the optometrist took a moment to write down and tally the results, Walter collapsed back into the chair in giant heap of defeat, realizing for the first time that his sight was quantifiably much worse than he had at first thought.

“All right, Walter,” the optometrist said finally, standing up. “Here’s the deal. What you have is something called macular degeneration. It’s pretty much the leading cause of blindness in men your age. This isn’t something we can catch until it’s in a fairly advanced stage, but there’s still some things we can do. What happens is there’s a layer of cells that line the back of your retina, and their job is to transform electrical signals so that the brain can decipher them. When you have this particular disease—most doctors think it’s genetic—this membrane starts to deteriorate, so that after a while it looks as if there’s a hole in the middle of your vision. Are you seeing a big black spot in the middle of your vision right now?”

“What?” Walter shouted. The optometrist had to repeat his question. “Oh, yeah.”

“That’s what I mean. I’m gonna write out some prescriptions for you now, so we can get you started on some pills and vitamins. And then afterwards I’ll recommend an eye-specialist to you, someone who deals specifically with this type of degenerative disease.”

“What?”

“An eye-specialist, Walter.”

“I don’t need another doctor.”

“But I’m just an optometrist. There isn’t a whole lot I can do for you.”

“How much would this other doctor cost?”

“It’s hard to say. What’s your insurance plan like?”

“Insurance plan?”

“You have an insurance plan, I take it.”

“Calcite never offered any insurance plan.”

“Walter, you have to have insurance. There’s no way you’ll be able to afford all this without it.”

“You said vitamins, right? I can buy those in the store.”

“Walter, it’s not that simple. You need more than vitamins.”

“Isn’t there some operation you can do to fix this up in one shot?”

“There’s no known cure for macular degeneration. All you can hope for is to delay it.”

“Well, Jesus Christ. What the fuck am I sitting here listening to you for?”

“There’s plenty we can do, Walter. Let me just write you out these prescriptions and we’ll discuss payment later.”

“Keep your fucking prescriptions.”

“Walter, sit down a minute. Don’t you want to try to save your eyesight?”

“What eyesight? I came here because I can’t see, goddamn it.”

After attempting to calm him, the optometrist finally succeeded in making Walter accept the prescriptions and referral, which he crumpled in his fists and stuffed into his pockets. Groping along the walls, Walter set off down the hallway unaided—much to the protest of the optometrist—until he came out into the waiting area, where he did not bother to stop, telling the receptionist mid-stride to mail him the bill. He felt the optometrist lurking behind him as he pushed through the glass doors outside. By the time he was standing on the sidewalk, he had grabbed a handful of Walter’s shirt.

“Walter, you can’t drive home like this.”

“Oh, yeah?” he replied, prying the optometrist’s fingers away. “Watch me.”

When Walter pulled into his driveway, it was nearly two o’clock, and already it felt as if he had traveled halfway across the world. Walking in through the front door, he found Ida tearing through the entryway closet in a great, exaggerated panic, stuffing random items into what he knew was an already overstuffed purse, narrating her progress so that she would be certain to miss nothing. Backing out the front door, it was all Walter could do to keep from getting sucked into the fury.

“I thought I told you to be home by noon,” she said. If there was one thing Walter could be thankful for, it was that when his wife talked, the walls shook. “Have you seen my good athletic shoes?” In the time that it took Walter to decipher these few words, Ida had already forgotten about the shoes, grabbed him by the shirtsleeve, and pulled him to the driver’s side of his pickup, the place he had sworn only five minutes ago never to set foot near again. “We’ve got ten minutes to get to Peter’s house,” she said, ducking into the cab.

As he slowly backed his pickup out of the driveway, with Ida adjusting all the vents in the passenger seat so that they were just so, Walter regretted not having protested. He watched the apparition of his house drift away and considered the dreadful possibility that he might never see it again.

“Refresh my memory. Why are you making me drive all the way to our son’s house?”

“Because, Walter. You absolutely *refused* to drive me to Cheboygan for my Tops meeting, so now you’re watching the

kids while Peter takes me in his minivan. He had to take off work at the hardware store for this, I hope you realize. Why are you going so slow?"

"I think it's about time you got over this ridiculous fear of driving."

"Maybe you should have thought of that before you started calling me fat. It's your goddamn fault I've enrolled myself in these weight-loss classes."

As Ida spoke her next few sentences, Walter concentrated on the road ahead of him. He followed the thick white line on the right side of the road, riding the brake so that with any glimpse of red—either brake lights or stop signs—he could ease the pickup to a halt. Within five minutes, he had reached his son Peter's newly acquired two-story home on the other side of town, having drawn a cognitive map in his head a few months ago, when Peter had signed the mortgage and officially put his ex-wife behind him. Stepping out onto the gravel driveway, however, he felt a flood of panic considering the possibility that he had gone one driveway too far.

"Jesus, Dad," he heard his son shout. "Nice parking job."

Since he had no idea which direction the voice had come from, he returned a generous wave that included the entire neighborhood. Offering his arm to Ida, he allowed her to lead the way to his son's porch.

"Thank you," she said when they reached the steps. "That's the sweetest thing you've done all day, Walter."

Once inside the living room, his son unleashed a long list of mandatory duties and crucial responsibilities. Nodding, Walter could make out little save something about not letting the dog out and his grandson Ricky's allergic reaction to milk.

"Got that, Dad?"

"Yeah," Walter said, taking a seat in a chair.

Two minutes later, Ida and his son were pulling away in the minivan, and Walter was stuck in a dog-smelling ottoman in which he had no way of orienting himself. He couldn't remember if he was in the living room or the new addition Peter had been telling them about, which he'd simply referred to as "the family room." Whatever the case, the chair was comfortable, and he was not moving. He put his head back and closed his eyes.

From downstairs came rumbling two sets of feet that were loud enough on the wooden basement steps to stir Walter from his nap. When he heard them stop, he sat upright and peered into the room as if it were a dense, dark forest full of horrifying sounds. He could see one of them sneaking up on him, which made Walter act all the more serious.

"Well, Ricky," he said. "How's school?"

"I'm Gretta," the child said back to him. "What's the matter with you, Grandpa?"

"Grandpa," the other one shouted, coming forward with something in his arms. The object was long and skinny, with black ends and a brown middle. "Can we play with this? We promise not to break it."

Walter waved the boy forward so that he could run his hand along the surface of the object. Even after examining it and handing it back to the boy, he still had no idea what it was.

"Sure," he said.

The two of them scampered off down a far hallway, where their shrieks died away up an ascending set of stairs. Above Walter's head, the ceiling started to thump and quake with an assortment of misbehaving sounds he felt more than heard. He noticed the light fixture jingling, a light sort of tremor in the seat of the ottoman. It was at around this time that Walter decided he'd better go see what his grandkids were getting into.

Halfway down the hallway, he realized he had to piss—that he had, in fact, been holding it ever since he'd stomped out of the optometrist's office three long hours ago. Suddenly every volition in his head was wiped clean and replaced with this one insane urge, this violent will to open the floodgates on his weak bladder. If he didn't find the bathroom quick, he knew he was going to wet his pants.

Feeling along the hallway walls, he couldn't quite remember where the downstairs bathroom was located. He opened up the first door he came to, and felt nothing but winter coats. The next door down was the kitchen, which he knew by the smell of bacon and the greasy skillet he accidentally dipped his fingers into while groping along the stove. The next few minutes he spent finding the sink, washing his hands, and locating a towel to dry them. Afterwards, it took every ounce of will to keep from pissing right there in the kitchen sink.

The moment he stepped into the hallway, he smelled the fresh outside air pressing in through the back screen door. With little time to spare, he kicked it open and emerged on the back porch to a blinding tidal wave of early afternoon sunlight, unzipping his pants. For close to a minute, he was lost to feelings of the most sublime heavenly ecstasy he'd ever thought possible. It was as if by the mere act of pissing onto his son's new lawn he had become reinvigorated, emptied of all that had been weighing him down all day. In the middle of the act, he realized that he not only did not want to stop, but would have given anything to keep on going. Only when he was moments from finishing did Walter discover that he had been moaning with pleasure the entire time, and that what was undoubtedly a neighbor of his son's had been staring at him from an adjacent yard, sitting on a bright red riding lawn mower that Walter hadn't even heard running. For lack of a better explanation, Walter

gave a curt wave, zipped up, and returned promptly inside his son's house.

Although he had been gone for only a minute, the moment Walter stepped foot inside the door he had a feeling that something expensive had been broken in his absence. He heard nothing but the yip of their Jack Russel terrier, which made its first appearance of the day by nearly taking out his legs on a tear down the hallway. The kids soon followed, skidding across the hardwood floor in their socks, trying not to bowl over their grandfather. When they had come to a stop, panting, in front of him, Ricky pointed and shouted: "Grandpa, you're not supposed to let the dog out!"

Rather than give in to the impulse to go running after the dog, Walter simply glanced behind him and shrugged.

"Let him go out if he wants to go out."

"Grandpa," Gretta said. "Last time Gatsby got out he was gone for a week."

"All right, all right," he said. "Go get the dog."

"You let him out."

"That's it. Both of you go to your rooms and read."

"You have to help Ricky read," Gretta said. "His teacher says he has dyslexia."

"I'm not helping anyone read. Just go to your rooms."

"I too can read!"

The kids began bickering, and Walter suddenly didn't know who was who, what they were saying, or why they hadn't gone to their rooms like he'd ordered them to. As their shouts turned into fistfuls of hair and shoves, Walter glanced behind him and saw all hopes of recovering the dog lost in the bleary ebb of the settling screen door. He remembered the last time he hadn't followed his son's instructions—two months ago, when he'd let Gretta and Ricky sit in the living room while he watched a particularly gory war movie, which gave both of them nightmares—and dreaded the ripples this would cause in his relationship with them, the ammunition this would give his son in labeling him a "bad influence." One of the kids was already crying, screaming for his help.

"That's enough!" Walter cried, lunging at them. When he had each of them pushed up against opposite walls, to his horror he realized that in grabbing for Ricky's shirt, he had taken instead a fistful of his hair and practically slammed the child's face into the wall.

"Oh Jesus, Ricky," he said. "I'm sorry."

The crying turned into a kind of wail that made it seem as if he could hear perfectly again. Seconds later both of them were gone, stomping upstairs and slamming their doors. He felt his way back to the living room and located the ottoman, which he plopped down into, hoping to gather himself and go over what had just happened. Burying his head in his hands, he didn't open his eyes again until he felt his wife tapping his shoulder.

"Walter, Walter..." she was saying. "Where are the kids?"

Once he was back safely inside his own home, Walter wouldn't have left his recliner had someone tried to drag him from it. Although TV was not much of a pleasure any more, the familiar solace of staring at it was enough. He didn't have to get up for the phone, since the cordless was located right next to Ida on the end table. If the doorbell rang, she would get it, since he'd long ago stopped trying to race her.

She hadn't said anything yet about the fact that when they'd left their son's house, both of the kids had still been crying.

After a while, however, he noticed that she wasn't rocking in her chair as much as normal. In fact, she had frequently been pointing the remote at the TV and stabbing a finger into the buttons.

"Something's wrong with the dish," she said finally. "It's acting up again."

"Try a different channel."

"Look, none of my aerobics come in. How am I supposed to do my exercises?"

Walter stared at the TV. He pictured himself digging his old hunting rifle out of the bedroom closet and filling the screen full of bullet holes.

"There's no goddamn way I'm getting up on that roof, Ida."

"Then I guess I'll just sit here and wait for my blood-pressure to go shooting up and kill me."

"Oh, Jesus. Just go for a walk outside."

"Why? So I can listen to those kids in their pickups ridicule me again, while I'm waddling my fat ass down the sidewalk?" With a loud mechanical noise, she lowered the footrest to her recliner. Walter knew he was about to make her cry, if he hadn't already. "I hate you, Walter. I hate you for making me feel like this."

He knew now that if he didn't get up, he'd be stuck in his chair until midnight, suffocating with guilt. Ida would make up the bed in the guest room, just to make her point.

Ten minutes later, he was on the roof, crawling over the asphalt shingles on his hands and knees, wondering if he had

completely lost his mind. With each small movement forward, he looked back to find the ladder drifting like a distant lifeboat being slowly swept away. Ahead of him somewhere lay the ridge, to which he had, three years ago, bolted the satellite dish in the hopes of never having to leave the house again.

Eventually—after groping along the ridge vent, burning his palms and knees on the asphalt—he stumbled upon the dish, which he nearly succeeded in tearing from its perch. Now that he'd reached it, he was at a loss over what to do next, as it occurred to him that he hadn't brought any tools along with him. Should he jiggle the wires? Point the dish in another direction? He wished suddenly that he had taken the time to think this through.

After a few moments spent weighing the different possibilities, Walter decided that it would be best to sit on the ridge and do nothing, hoping that something might come to him in the empty minutes of waiting that had only recently started taking over his life. If nothing occurred to him, he would simply wait until he was relatively certain that Ida would be appeased, and then climb back down the ladder. What did he care about cable TV? It was nothing to him now but a drain on his retirement pension, the steady whining background hum to the sightless hours he spent sitting on his ass.

A cool breeze was blowing in off the lake, and the sky above was such a rich, solid blue, Walter—for once—could be absolutely sure what it was he was looking at. Below, the town of Ward Branch sprawled out before him in an amorphous haze, a circuit board under filmy water. Even the distracting noises his ears still picked up were absent up here, so that Walter experienced for the first time the thunderous ocean of silence, total deafness.

And then he heard Ida shouting below.

“What?” he yelled down.

“The DMV’s on the phone.”

“What the hell do they want?”

“They’re trying to tell me that they’re revoking your license. They got some eye doctor on the other line. You’d better come down, Walter.”

When Ida had gone back inside, he thought he'd better start making his way off the roof, but nothing—not even the pebbles giving way beneath him—compelled him to move. In fact, the more he thought about it, the more he realized that this was the only place on earth he wanted to be at the moment. He tried smelling the lake water in the air, but could only pick out the scent of the meatloaf the Gustafson's were cooking next door. He wondered how long he could last on the roof, having eaten nothing since morning. Peering over the lip of the roof, he squinted down at what he first took to be a gathering crowd of onlookers, but with a liberating sense of relief realized that what he found staring back at him was nothing more than Ida's carefully arranged collection of gnome lawn ornaments.

Anemone

Liz Melly

*“Of all one colour with the blood a flower she there did find
...Howbeit the use of them is short
For why the leaves do hang so loose through lightness in such sort
As that the winds, that all things pierce, with every little blast
Do shake them off and shed them so as they cannot last.”
-Ovid, Metamorphoses*

There's a train ticket to Nowhere, Nevada mounted on her wall, just above a bottle of Glenlivet. Most days she gets through the apartment without looking at it. But occasionally her eyes are inexplicably drawn there, in that way that you don't mean to watch the shower scene in *Psycho*, but you do, even though you won't be able to sleep for a week without double-locking all the doors and leaving the bathroom light on. When that happens, she pours herself a shot of scotch, salutes the bit of paper, and writes a sonnet. That's why the ticket's still on the wall. For the poetry.

She's not very good at this—either narrative or regret. But telling it might make it more real.

She met her Muse at the bar of the Boarshead Pub, exactly when she wasn't looking for him. It was one of those electric summers, when even the air was tense and waiting to spark, and she was following the storms again. This one had ended outside the bar, and she stumbled inside, wrapped in a white sweater more rain than wool to continue to drown in scotch.

The Boarshead was one of those old little bars that vanished into the street—a Cheshire cat sort of place that wasn't really there until you walked into it. Inside, it was infused with a smoky red glow from stained-glass lamps, with pseudo-English Gentlemen's Lounge cracked leather, and a fake mounted boar head that grimaced above the neat rows of whiskey bottles. It was usually empty, always quiet, and owned by a small pale twisted man. It was not the kind of bar you go to when you want to meet a man to take home that night. It was the place you go to for strong scotch, and she always drank hard after storms.

Two middle-aged middle-management types loosened their ties over drinks in the corner, and another man faded at the end of the bar. She curled onto a stool at the other end and ordered a scotch on the rocks, watching the wizened little bartender in his strictly starched button-down shirt and interlocking arrow-point tie pour her drink. She drank after storms because it was like extending the rain; eventually everything became blurry in the way that it was during a downpour. She liked the rain because it made her calm, and she was not calm very often—not when she was sober, anyway.

It was also about the poetry, of course. Or about there not being poetry, as there rarely was anymore. It wasn't about Mark though, except when she blamed it on him after too much alcohol. At least — it wasn't about the fact that Mark left. It's that she got over it. He walked out a year ago, in a way that was neither amicable nor grand tragedy, though she could make it tragic by filtering it through a haze of scotch. Which is what she did, for the sake of the poetry. Except now — it was as if she had bled herself to health and the leeches were full, and even drinking didn't make her write.

She had finished her drink, but before she could signal to the bartender for another, he slid a glass over to her, the ice clinking in the amber liquid. “It is from the gentleman at the end,” he said, his eyes darting cryptically over her face before he

melted away to dust the shelves behind the bar. She glanced down at the stranger, raising the glass in acknowledgement, but hoping that would be the limit of his interest. However, he unfolded himself from the shadows and made his way to her seat. He was more angles than flesh, his limbs hanging as if strung by wire, but he moved as if that slight awkwardness could snap into sudden grace. She kept the glass of scotch between them as he sat down.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hello,” she said. “Thanks for the drink and all, but I’m not particularly in the mood to be picked up tonight.”

“I didn’t send you a drink, actually.”

“You—oh.” She glanced around for the strange little bartender, but he had vanished.

“We can pretend that I did, though,” he said. “And I won’t try to pick you up. But I’m not from here, and you’re alone...” He paused. “I’m Dominic.”

She took a drink, the scotch burning its way down her throat. “Cate. With a C.”

“Catherine?”

“Catullus, actually.”

He brushed Titian-rust hair out of his eyes. “Not your real name, I assume.”

“No.” She smiled a little, self-mockingly. “I’m a poet.”

“What is it then?”

“What?”

“Your real name.”

She paused, turning her drink and watching the liquid swirl and the light hit the amber. “Julia.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Poems get written *to* Julia.”

“So who do you write poems to?”

“I don’t usually discuss my aesthetic theories with men who pick me up in bars.”

“I know. Another drink?” He nodded towards her near-empty glass. She considered him, finishing the scotch. He was angular close-up as well, planes and sharp lines fading into shadows that pooled like liquid mercury, congealing into his eyes. He looked rather more like a classical idea of a man than a real man. And the scotch was reminding her of Mark, and if she couldn’t write, she’d really prefer not to be alone right now.

“Alright,” she decided, sliding the empty glass over to him. “So, you’re not from around here?”

“No.”

“Where then?”

“Nowhere really.”

It made sense, in a way. He was too—aesthetic—to have come from any definitive physical place. But still—“You must have come from *somewhere*.”

“Not that is really worth remembering.”

“So are you visiting? Moving here?”

“You could say that, in a way. I’m never really not moving.”

“What does that mean?”

“I follow trains.”

She met his eyes at that, tensing in a moment of unrecognizable familiarity. His eyes were golden like the scotch that filled her glass again, and they sparked, imprisoning her breath in her throat the way that close lightning does. “I follow storms.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.” She hadn’t thought about that in a long time. It was just—what she did. “I might be inspired, I guess. Sometime.”

“Does it work?”

“Not really.” She had started following storms when she stopped writing, when she got over Mark. “Not yet.”

“What would inspire you then?”

“I don’t know. A Muse maybe. Every artist needs a Muse.” She had tried to make Mark her Muse, Mark with his plated metal expressions and belligerent executive suits. It had been easier after he was gone.

Dominic considered this. “I could be your Muse if you want.”

“You can’t just offer to inspire someone.”

“Why not?”

“It doesn’t work that way. A Muse has to be unreachable.” She paused, taking a drink and swirling the scotch over her tongue without really tasting it. “Why do you follow trains?”

“I don’t like being static.”

Nothing was static anymore, actually. It’s like everything was magnified a million times over so that she could see the individual atoms and protons and quarks and if she wanted she could pass her hand through the bar. She was almost afraid to touch it for fear that it might be insubstantial. She was almost afraid to touch him for fear he might not be real.

There must have been a fifth drink and maybe a sixth because the atoms and quarks and things *spinning* faster in some frenzied tarantella!

but I don’t remember leaving the bar
and I don’t remember leaving
and only barely standing

on the
steps

to my apartment and him saying:
“I don’t usually go home with…”

and me saying:
“I know.”

and then it didn’t matter what we didn’t do

I remember the edge of the s

t
e
pressing into my back

although im not sure why or how i

fell

and he smelled like myrrh and sweat and travel

and then i was *flying* or maybe he just picked me up

and then we were (inside)
and he was peeling off my sweater
and we were laughing because

it was wet

and tangling my arms

and we were on the
floor then

in the spinning
room (inside) and

flying
i—(ob!)

She woke the next morning feeling like Zeus with the fully-grown warrior Athena hammering in her skull. She tried to open her eyes briefly; the blinds must have been closed because the room was dim, although it was still too oppressively bright for her fogged eyes to see clearly. She was in her own bed; she could tell by the feel, but she didn’t know when or how she had gotten there. Trying to remember hurt too much. She felt as though she were grey and suspended on needles, but there was a finely sculpted face on the edge of her brain that was kind of nice, and she wanted to hold onto it a little longer.

She turned, stretching, but her arm collided with—no, it couldn’t be the wall, because it was softer than the wall should have been, and shifted, moaning, and when her eyes finally focused in the light it was the tense marble face of Dominic that blinked tiredly up at her from the bed.

“Morning,” he said, and pulled her down to him. He tasted like ambrosia, and she forgot for a while the war drums in her head.

Dominic never really moved in—he just didn’t leave after the first night. He brought a suitcase full of maps, two changes of clothes, and half a bottle of Glenlivet.

It was the third night sleeping with him that she woke up in the early morning with no one beside her. He was standing at the window, the light from the moon casting shadows of the branches outside over his shoulders like bruises. She watched the planes of his back shift under the skin, the shadows rippling down his spine and the red of his hair now dark like blood. He was perfect, and almost…unreal.

She moved closer to him across the bed. “Hey, what are you doing?”

He held up his hand for her to be silent, and a moment later, there it was—low and mournful like the baying of a hunting dog.

“The 2:00 train,” he said.

“Why are you still up?” she asked.

He waited until the howl had ended before coming back to bed, where he lay with his arms under his head, watching the shadows disappear into the cracks on the ceiling. “I don’t know,” he said finally. “I’ve always listened, for all of them. I never know which one I am going to leave on until I hear it.”

“When are you leaving?” Her heart clenched suddenly, like a frightened horse pulling on the reins.

“I don’t know yet.”

“Stay awhile,” she dared to say, wrapping an arm over his chest.

In the darkness she couldn’t see his eyes, but she could sense them contemplating her as his hand trailed down her arm to rest around her waist. “I can’t promise, Cate,” was all he said.

She could hear him breathing evenly soon after, but she couldn’t sleep, so she unwrapped his arm from around her, slid on his discarded shirt, and wrote a poem on the back of a take-out menu as she paced the kitchen. She couldn’t get his face out of her mind, and it was only when she looked down at what she had written that she saw that the lines paralleled each other into train tracks.

She’d meant it about wanting him to stay; she was writing again now for the first time since she had gotten over Mark, and quite simply, Dominic was inspiring. She was watching him from the couch as he stretched languidly along the floor, golden in the sunlight. He had been intriguing in the bar, though the fog of the scotch, but in the clear light he was beautiful. Not cologne-ad beautiful with airbrushed perfect muscles and dark sensuous eyes, but beautiful like the classical heroes of Renaissance painting. A very human beauty, of living flesh and quick intelligent expression. He would not be incongruous in a leopard tunic confronting the Hydra, but he also belonged exactly on her old worn beige carpet. He was fluid like smoke, blending into her life and her body and her art as Mark never had. Steel is too hard, too practical to be an ideal canvas.

I sing of arms

and of the man

wrapped around me on the living

room floor

“What are you thinking about?” He turned on his side to face her.

“You’re beautiful,” she said.

He smiled, his hair turning to flame in the light. “Am I?”

as the chariot rain thundered down

and the calico cat

dashed

underneath the sofa to peer out

at us with slanted owl eyes

from the shoulder of Athena--

“Very,” she said, and wished that she could find a way to really immortalize the way the tension rippled beneath his skin, giving him a constant aura of electricity.

tell me, Muse,

am I Greek or am I Trojan,

shall I fall with Ilium

He stretched off of the floor and came over to her. “So are you,” he said, taking the pen and notepad out of her hands and setting them aside before wrapping himself around her.

or plunder the temple and snatch

the Palladium from its pedestal?

“What?”

“Beautiful.”

May my life be short

and full of glory—

Two nights later Dominic came back at 3 am. It was the first time he had not been there when she returned from running errands, and she waited up, finally finishing a good portion of the Glenlivet. She attempted to finish the poem she had begun a few days before but abandoned it after crossing out all of her scrawled attempts. She picked up Petrarch’s *Canzoniere*, staring at the page without really seeing the words.

She didn’t notice that he had come back until he shook her gently. “Cate. Why are you still awake?”

Her eyes were heavy with the scotch and she wasn't sure which of him to address, so she decided to talk halfway between both of his faces. "Where were you?"

He sat down on the floor in front of her and she had to close her eyes because his movement upset her perception. "I was at the station."

"Your stuff. Still here." One of his eyes was making its way up his forehead, and it was very hard for her to concentrate on what he was saying.

"I know. I was just watching."

"I thought you would stay here. With me."

"For now, yes."

"I'd like you to stay." She reached out towards him, but her hand passed through one of his faces, so she tangled her fingers in the hair of the other one. "I want you to stay, Dominic."

"I can't, Cate."

"Why not?"

"Look—I came home with you that first night, ok, because you wouldn't have made it back on your own. Afterwards—well, I've been traveling a long time, and there was the alcohol, and—I'm not saying that it meant nothing, Cate. I just didn't mean that I can stay forever."

She tried to reorient his face. "You inspire me."

He tensed, even through the fog she could see all the wires inside him snap to attention. "Don't. Please don't idolize me like that."

"You're my Muse," she said stubbornly, as if saying it could make it true.

"I can't stay," he said again.

"Why not?" She watched the faint veins in one of his necks shiver as the blood moved through them, making him alive. She moved her hand down to cover it, to stop the flow or at least to hide it, as if by not seeing it she could pretend it wasn't there.

He caught her hand in his—strong, cold and pale like stone—if she hadn't felt the muscles contracting underneath. "Have you ever just known that you were leaving somewhere?"

She'd never felt that she *was* anywhere, but telling him that would let him go. "How do you *know* that you're leaving?"

"I've never stayed anywhere."

"Maybe you will this time." She reached for her glass, there was still a little scotch left.

He pinioned both of her wrists in his hand, grabbed the glass, and downed the last shot himself. "Listen to me. *Julia*. Stop drinking. You need to understand this—I'm restless. It's not something that I can change."

She kissed him without deciding to, tasting her name on his lips. It was a different kind of truth, one she had not made for herself. It was tinged with salt like rain, sliding into her blood. "Then I'll come with you."

He let go of her wrists and raked his hands through his hair—white marble against rust. "When I say I'm restless—it's not about places."

"So it's about me."

"You're still beautiful, Julia. That doesn't mean that I can stay with you."

"It's *your* beauty that's important."

"I know." He stared at his hands for a while, and she watched with him. "Come with me. I want to show you something." He reached for her; she caught onto him a little unsteadily, blood and scotch and fear wavering behind her eyes.

She must have passed out on the cab ride because she doesn't remember when it began to rain, but it was raining when he lifted her out onto the grass beside the station, quicksilver rain that laced its way through her hair and over her arms and slipped beneath her skin. She lifted her hand to her face and watched it idle over the lines in her palm.

Dominic wrapped his arms around her waist, turning her to where the tracks faded until they became night. "There's so far to go," he said.

The rain breathed down their sides and over their hands, seeping into the cracks between their joined fingers. He shimmered in and out of focus, whether from the scotch or the water gilding her eyelashes she was not sure. She pressed into him, closer—I *never see the wandering stars move through the calm air after night rain, flaming more brightly among the dew and frost*—assuring herself that he was still there and not a mirage.

"Do you see it, Julia?" he asked. "Why it is beautiful?"

"Stay," she said.

He brushed the hair back out of her face. She looked up at him, so lovely and misplaced—as *I saw the sky ablaze that day with their beauty, so I see them still sparkling through tears, so that I burn forever*—with his angular classical face in relief against the stark cold metal of the station. The rain streamed over his face like drowned Narcissus, and she reached up to claim

him, to draw him back.

“No,” he said, but the way that he pulled her down under him to the side of the tracks sounded like “yes”—*if I see the sun rising*—so she held onto him as they fell—*I feel the light appear that enamoured me*—twisting together like shards of smoke and the rain pulsed their heartbeat. The train howled by somewhere above—*if slowly setting*—a Colossus which shivered the earth beneath them—*I seem to see it turning elsewhere, leaving darkness behind as it goes*—

“The 4:15,” he whispered into her kiss, and the rain melted her into him.

She knew that he was gone when she woke up that morning, because of the stillness in the air, flat like a deflated balloon. She wrapped the blankets around her, but as she turned to burrow into the pillow and try not to think about him, something rustled under her head. It was a state map of Nevada, still smelling faintly of myrrh and smoke, and she held it close to her face to inhale the scent.

She went to the station that afternoon and bought a ticket for the 12 am train to Nevada. She stood as close to the railway as she could as the train approached, stiffening against the wind that it forced ahead of it and listening to the melancholy bay of the great black dog-faced engine as it stumbled to a halt in front of her. It smelled like the map and like him, ash and travel and faintly of myrrh. The hull looked cold and smooth, although she could feel the heat pulsing inside.

She waited until the train had filled up and barked its final warning to get on. She tried to picture his face in her mind, but could not: he was fragments of marble and paint and a glimpse of rain on skin. She stood next to the stairs, watching the light glance off of the black hide, and trying to recreate his image as the train pulled away, rescinding into the distance and fading until it was nothing but smoke.

She meant, of course, to write a poem. But he was too real to be bounded by poetry, though too indistinct to be present. It took more than a shot of scotch; the bottle lay nearly empty on its side, but he is still as far away as Nevada—*further? He never stayed anywhere for long, he had said*—and she is still making truth and not art.

The first arrows of the storm pierce through the sky and she watches at her window as the rain smears over the glass, obscuring her view outside. She doesn't leave to follow it; she knows where the storm is.

Petrarch was lucky. At least for most of the time that he was writing sonnets to her, Laura was dead.

(poetry quotations on pages 14 and 15 are excerpted from Petrarch's Canzoniere)

Minnow

Michael Estes

Blue pitcher shining with its own sweat under sky sun and wind with spruce too thin and grass nearly high enough to give it shade and my father, leaning on the chair back with a hand heavy enough to make the rusting Plymouth across the yard remember. We are setting up a picnic.

“You go on and get the potato salad. I’ll be in to get the rest in a minute.”

He is puffing. Rest is what he’s standing there to get, but I don’t point that out, just run across the yard to the front steps, grass tickling half-way up my shin. I wouldn’t have let him drag that big oak chair out here by himself if he hadn’t insisted today and for the past three weeks that he could do it. Four weeks straight now: he snarls, we both wince as he lifts, he puffs.

Thump thump thump thump maybe the reason these steps won’t hold paint is because I beat them so badly. If I thought I could without getting splinters, I’d go up them barefoot. Down the hall past the room where Mom used to do her stitching and the dark dining room to the smooth-worn wood of the kitchen. With socks and a good run I could slide right across to the table where the potato salad is. In beat-up Payless specials it’s 8 steps, and I pick up Dad’s glasses too, since he’ll want to read the sports outside. I try to be a considerate daughter.

He is on the stairs, on his way up. If I were his scalp I’d sue for a hat on days like this.

I hold the bowl out to him. “Handoff?”

“No no, I’m all right. Two more and I’ve got it. I’ll be there before you can steal my chair.”

He smiles with his right hand reaching across to hold his left pant leg up, to make the swing easier, and I thump past him. It’s been two weeks since I had the gall to jump into his seat when he had to go back in to get pickles for his sandwich, but he still likes to kid about it. As soon as he saw me he grinned and asked me which I thought artists should get used to sitting in, heirloom oak or aluminum folding? I said I didn’t know, maybe sometime we should invite an artist over to see which one they’d pick. He laughed.

Thud goes blue bowl down on the table, matching pitcher. Mom sure did have some country taste sometimes. Bowl, pitcher, plates all blue with flowers and the birthmark of her initials tucked somewhere.

The ant on my ankle is doing his generous best to replace the tickle of the grass. He deserves a medal of honor. He deserves potato salad.

My seat is the one that faces out toward the road, so it’s out of the corner of my eye that I notice something gray coming out of the house. It’s Dad. In his one hand he’s carrying more than I could in two, leaning the stump of his left arm against the railing and sort of hopping to keep the weight off his left leg. I’ve learned not to try to get up and help, so I watch as he makes his way across the yard, slow and loaded like a barge but jerkier. When he gets close enough he takes a swing at me with the chips with as much force as the balanced jar of pickles will allow, and then dangles the bag in front of me. His eyes looking down are dark as burnt raisins.

“Could you?”

I grab them and lay them next to the potato salad. He puts everything else in its spot, sits, and reaches his hand out to me. A minnow never knew such a shark, but I’m used to it, and I let my thin pale minnow be engulfed. He squeezes hard and closes his eyes. When he opens them again, I am waiting. Napkin in lap, pours his lemonade. Would I like some yes please. Pitcher down, eye the meat but then decide for potato salad first and What in God’s name -

“What in God’s name?”

He is leaned in so far that with another couple of inches my medal-winner’s antennae would probably pick up the

scent of its looming death. If it knew, it would scamper. The bulldog that has become my father's face means business. My giggle escapes, and the bulldog turns my way, sniffing out the source of his puzzlement. With a new scowl and not a hint of smile the ant-dollop of salad is plopped onto my plate. Ant writhing in chunks of mustard-yellow with bulldog huffing red, and the sun and I are laughing.

“How that bed and Leah are both going to fit in there when she gets older is a mystery to me,” my mother said once. Mystery: the bed feels like it shrank, but I know that it was me growing. At six I wasn't able to draw the obvious comparison between my room and a closet, but now the high shelf that runs the length of the slanting roof line begs for Pine-Sol and the narrow bed is a horizontal broom. Since the stairs and my father's leg moved him downstairs after his wreck, I could sleep in their old room, but I'm a careful businesswoman and the trade would be uncertain. In exchange for the cramp of an old boarding house, I would receive.

Mine is a closet among closets – it has a window. Right under the middle of what could be the Pine-Sol shelf, small and square. The moon fills it to bursting and pours through, landing in its spot at the base of my dresser. Tonight my ankles are in that spot because I'm standing in the mirror, trying to decide which to rearrange, the assortment of brownish-silver brushes and hand mirrors that live on the dresser-top or my hair. There is only so much you can do with shoulder-length brown-red that refuses even in July to strawberry anywhere near blonde. Boldness. Glamour. I twist it all in one hand and smash it against the back of my skull, puckering. A porcupine-fish with freckles and arms slightly thick in their fillets looks back at me in the mirror.

Dance two three away from mirror sweeping waltz-step once around the room, frenzied wall-papers waving, fans of admiration and envy waving me back to dresser, curtsy. Glamour is not to be but the moon would never say so. Its window is an unglamorous smudge of light, the only part of the wall not covered in either color or black and white. Mostly black and white: my charcoals. Faces, beach and mountain scenes I've never seen, details of the Plymouth, and most recently a portrait of this afternoon's hero, an ant among potatoes. The pages are layered five, ten, fifteen deep in spots, with every night bringing evolution in me covering one I'm tired of seeing. Which yes evolves the room smaller. Which yes they will one day squeeze me out.

Which yes you could say is what happened to my mother. The colors on the walls are hers, in caves of single-plyness among the stacked charcoals, little wood-framed oil paintings and magazine collages. Some, early, trying to be from Monet calendars, and the late ones just trying to be. First the colors, then the shouting, or vice versa? “Can't you do something productive while I'm at work? I didn't buy this house to watch it rot,” my father would say, and most days she would spend a couple hours after my lessons stripping or sanding before she ended up in the stitching room. Stitching is what her mother had done to get away, and even though there was no cloth involved and sometimes my mother wasn't getting away from anything in particular she kept the name for the place where she did her making. Then the shouting moved in with them, not just downstairs when he came home but waiting for them to turn on the bedroom light. His voice hot and for the first months hers low and trying to bring his lower, then fierce, then silent. He would shout, and shout, and shout things all three of us had heard before and she would be a wall, and then her steps on the stairs going down to her room. Thump thump thump thump.

Four years ago when her feet found the momentum to keep thumping and not come back, they took part of his heat with them. They were helped in this by the wreck. To celebrate his new-found freedom, he took some whiskey on a road-trip and got his left side crushed. The left hand they amputated, and the rest he limps along with, half of his body straining to keep his eyes away from half-done repairs on the house and his old cars. Sometimes he is too half-done or has undone too much, and I try to keep my eyes away from him. Sometimes I give him my hands.

If I could pick one conversation to have in this room, it would be with the floor, since every board is different and each one has enough texture to tickle like caterpillar hairs. It's so much that it makes my fingers timid. My feet might be timid too if it weren't for the calluses, and any timidity was squashed out of my butt a long time ago. I am sitting on my untimid butt in a closet of squeezing charcoal, asking the moon and floor how much momentum is in my feet.

The next morning it is Aunt Kay Day, a.k.a. Saturday. The menu calls for a fragrance that won't stop until Tuesday. Rigatoni with Italian sausage, diced tomatoes, fresh basil, spinach salads, and garlic bread that will be torn from the loaf, not sliced. It's something Kay got used to eating before she was an aunt, when he was cooking after their mother died. She never gets tired of it.

I never get tired of her, or her key lime pie. It cuts through the heft of garlic and sausage to remind you that there is

still a tongue above your stomach. Also cutting through the garlic and sausage of my week is her topic. She always asks about me and school. She thought my mother should have tried to get into an art program, and she's seen my sketches. It's at least as much of a part of the meal as dessert, more fun because you don't know when it's coming: she tells me she's not going to let me get away with not applying, and my father makes it clear, each time with a different arrangement of his every vocal cord, that her approval is not the issue.

He is scrubbing the kitchen counters down, and I'm sweeping. It takes hours to cut up enough tomatoes and cook them with the right amount of slowness, so the cleaning starts early. The broom is asking for the next dance but I have to be careful, because Dad has an eagle eye for stray Cheerios and the hairy cults they attract.

"Leah?"

His back is to me, shaking with scrub.

"Yeah Dad."

"Once you're done there I might have you go after the bathroom. My scrubber's about tired out."

Who let the joke in on cleaning day?

"I'd love to, really, but I think I left my scrubber in my other pants."

He stops scrubbing and turns around, twirling the rag he's using into a solid rope. "I think we've got time for you to go upstairs and get it."

A step toward me with his good leg and me and a crack in the air as I jump away from the snapped rag. Play in the presence of Comet. Our house might soon be hit by one.

"I guess you're right. I'll get right on it."

He is backlit in the window, and his shoulders seem to remember their time in a hockey goal-tender's jersey, stretching wide to fill the frame and keep the sun from getting through. The shoulders are not the only part that have stretched wide since his hockey days, but they're what you notice first. Tough denim with the color of dark ocean is what he's picked as dress-up, with the tail untucked now for work. I don't ask him why he's wearing his dinner shirt for cleaning, just amble to the bathroom with my scrubber.

"How's it going in there champ?"

The champ of cleaning day. It's been 20 minutes, and the dirt in here is gone, not going.

"All done."

"Then I've got one more favor. You were so great with stemming the spinach last week that I think you graduated. How about some tomato-cutting?"

My hands have applied for a promotion without my consent. On Saturdays, at noon, tomatoes are my father's replacement for car repair. For me they're just tomatoes, but they mean too much to him for me to refuse.

"Do you realize what you're asking for here? You remember that I've never done it before, right?"

"Yep."

"Okay. And you remember that Kay is coming over? This is going to be a public dish."

He hands me the cutting board and the medium-length knife that know this process better than I do and I am pointed to the counter opposite the sink.

"Somehow I have faith. Just try a couple."

In the basket of tomatoes are 18 or so round red tongues waiting to tell me that my father made the wrong choice, that I should never stray from my spinach again. I'm waiting to listen. There is one clearly at the top of the pile, probably the champion of the bunch, the one specially chosen and trained to cause my downfall. Its skin is tight against my palm, stiffer than most – the skin of a champion. Past the skin is softness and the first plunge goes almost all the way through, but I start over and recover, and soon the core is out.

I flop the tomato over on its flat top and slice it lengthwise, giving two halves that would attract a lot of attention in the upper rear part of a pair of jeans. Smirk and my next cut is careless – the idea is to make wedges, and my first wedge is way too big. Two cuts to the right of my first and three to the left and some things resembling wedges appear. My hands start to get loose and the knife feels like an overlong piece of charcoal. Wedge wedge dice, core slice wedge dice, and two red tongues have been carved. They don't mention anything about spinach.

"You want to look at my first two victims?"

I pass the cutting board across the room, and he examines. Hard. Finally he looks up at me and hands the board back.

"Just be careful with the wedges and I think you've got it. There's half an hour before I need them in the pan, but you'll probably be done in half that." He winks.

The knife is pure charcoal after his endorsement, and I am sketching. Cores are the peaks of mountain scenes and each half before I wedge it is a round portrait forehead. My hands are invisible but the knife is flowing, making rivers of the tomatoes' strange two-part blood, clear water and rafts and islands of red. Core slice wedge dice Dad has stopped humming at

the sink but the knife's song will carry –

“Leah!”

Hot breath on my neck eyes lock forward. On the cutting board a tomato-half carved into a star with two scars across its face. Rafts and islands of red cover the counter and slick juice is between my toes.

“What the hell do you think you're doing? Does that look like a wedge to you? Look at me!”

His hand covers my shoulder and now I am facing him still holding the knife at my side. It catches his eyes and they get wider. His face is not a bulldog, something else.

Shouting. “What the hell got ahold of you? Do those look like the first two to you? I know – you got bored and had to get creative. Well I hate to break it to you, sweetie, but this isn't an art project.”

My throat is gripping me and my hand is gripping the knife handle because I have to grip something. For balance.

“Well?”

I don't know who you think I am but the fact that I am your daughter does not mean that this is a conversation I can have with you. I have tried when you are not red and my throat is not closed. My eyes are telling you that the conversation is over.

“Look, Leah.” His red is fading a little. “You know how much this stuff means to me. Kay and I have been eating this since way before you were around. I like it to be the way we remember. It never had stars in it.”

It never had me in it.

My shoulder is in his hand again. “If it was as easy as getting more tomatoes, it wouldn't be such a big deal, but the market closes at noon on Saturdays and all we've got here is cans. I'll be damned if I'm going to use canned tomatoes for my rigatoni. Understand?”

His hand smells like spinach and in the layer of hair there are bits of green. It's lighter now, like he's afraid of being too rough. He is not sure what he's holding, but he doesn't want it to break. If I were his son he could put his hand on a ball or a car and squeeze his apology out of that. But the last time he squeezed something like me, it ran.

I nod.

He squeezes a little harder, briefly. “You want to switch to the spinach?”

We switch, and after the spinach is done I set the table and leave him with the cooking. The knives and pots do the only talking until Kay gets here, and once she gets here and we're at the table, the melody doesn't change much. Her questions about when she can take me to visit my favorite design school clatter against his “she doesn't need to go to Rhode Island to do art. There have been a lot of artists who never went to school,” and, more loudly, against his shrinking and making the space hollow – he silently leaves his eyes in the middle of the table as words of encouragement from his sister to his daughter, with the look of a man who's already been left.

I'm conspicuously quiet, and later that night in my floor it's conspicuous why Mom had to use colors. It's hard to make red with charcoal. Lines to make roundness and blend toward flatness, lines to make wrinkles where skin looks like it's been cut. Lines to make shadow. But tomato or portrait, it's hard to make red.

Buried

Greg Ruehlmann

He sat alone in the train compartment wearing a long beige coat and a white scarf which curled loosely around his neck. He had opened the window a sliver, and the room was cold. Casually he browsed through the pages of an old newspaper that had been left under the seat. From time to time his attention froze upon something moving past outside the window: bare fields whitewashed and desolate with crusted snow, a flock of geese on an icy pond, startled into flight by the roar of locomotion. The muffled wind moaned and moved vainly against the side of the train.

He looked back the other way as a conductor in a green uniform and a green cap walked down the aisle past his sliding-glass door and the empty compartment on the opposite side. At the entrance to the next car the conductor said something in Czech, turned around and began to come back. From inside the compartment he slid open the door and asked the conductor if all was well. In his green cap the conductor paused, then shrugged at him.

—*Perhaps there was a misunderstanding*, he thought. He looked at the conductor and said that he was doing quite well himself, thank you. The conductor shrugged again and finally walked back out of sight the way he had come. *There was no understanding.*

He closed the door once more. A sheet of paper on the other side of it announced three reservations for the trip to Vienna. Looking out the window, he thought of his mother. They had laid her to rest on such a day when he was in his first year at the University. Briefly the wind raised a snarl before falling silent again with the rest of the winter-heavy world outside. He returned to his newspaper.

The train made its first stop in Ceske Budejovice. The city was announced by a plain white sign with blue lettering which hung from the covered ceiling of the binary in front of the station. A huge jutting icicle grew out of it like a stalactite towards the concrete below. He didn't see anyone outside at the station.

As the train pulled away he heard steps approaching in the aisleway. Two women came past his compartment and looked in. One of them opened the door, and gestured at the empty seats around him. He nodded emphatically. They came, each carrying a large suitcase, which they helped each other to lift onto the shelf above their heads.

They sat down next to each other opposite him and talked in English. He stared at his newspaper but listened to them.

—*I should speak to them. Perhaps they will hear.*

After a long time he broke away from his newspaper and spoke.

“Where are you from?” he asked. His voice shook.

“Oh, you speak English,” said the woman who had sat down across from him. “We’re visiting from England on holiday.”

“You both go to Vienna?”

“Yes. We flew into Prague, then we saw Ceske Budejovice for a day, and now we’re heading to Vienna.”

“And have you ever seen the city?”

They looked at each other and shook their heads. “No,” said the other woman.

“And with whom are you staying?”

“An old friend of ours is a ballet instructor in Vienna now and she invited us for Christmas. It should be lovely.”

“Oh that is nice. I like so much the ballet, I saw a performance in Prague. Do you like ballet?” He smiled. They shook their heads and laughed uncomfortably. There was a pause that turned into another prolonged silence. Eventually he

spoke again.

“The journey is not too long. Perhaps another few hours. I am coming from Prague for research. I am a University student and many times I go there for research.”

They nodded. The one across from him had dark hair, nearly black, and a pretty face. She was wearing a large down coat. He watched her play with the sleeves. She had on a white sweater underneath. The woman on the left had pale skin and short blonde hair. She was wearing a peacoat. She was looking down at her hands, which were folded together. With one index finger she traced back and forth along the edge of her thumbnail.

“I have lived all of my life in Vienna. It is a beautiful city. You will love it.”

The woman across from him raised her head, and he noticed that her eyebrows climbed gracefully up her forehead as she grinned slightly.

Looking at her, he said, “I do most of my business in English. The companies I work with, they are all speaking English now. And when I am not in Germany or Austria, all of the talking is English. I learned it at the university, but I have forgotten many things. It is good to know. I like English. I hope you can understand me.”

The woman opposite, the one he was watching, reassured him. “You speak very well. We can understand you perfectly.”

“That is good then,” he responded. “Sometimes, you know, it is hard. And other times it does not matter what you are speaking because they are not listening to you anyways.” He began to laugh.

“You speak English very well,” the woman told him again. The man peered into her eyes. They were dark too, and they caught ever so slightly the dim light in the compartment. He smiled at them. He felt new color in his cheeks. He turned to the other woman, the one with the peacoat. She was staring down at her folded hands. Sometimes her face tilted up to look around the tiny space and out the window. He redirected his stare to the woman who had smiled at him. He noticed that there was a small grayish feather resting on her knee. He reached forward and picked it up delicately before letting it float to the ground.

“I am sorry, this was on your leg.”

Her eyebrows heightened. “Oh, thank you,” she said smiling slightly. “It must have come off of my big coat.” The other woman was still running her finger along her thumb.

The train stopped again. A haggard man with a twisted beard rocked back and forth on a bench at the platform. He scoured the cars of the train with his eyes till they froze upon their car. Then he screamed with his hands cupped around his mouth. His scream echoed, and rose up in the cold morning air to become one with the steam from the departing train.

“Did you understand that?” the plain woman asked him.

“No. It’s nonsense. He is probably crazy and sits there all day.”

“Why would somebody do that on such a cold day,” she asked. “I wonder what he had to say that was so important.”

“Sometimes all a man wants is for someone else to hear his voice.”

He closed the window and the compartment grew warmer. Slowly he unwrapped his long scarf and rested it on the empty seat next to him. The women did not say anything.

—*I might lose their interest, they are growing bored. I must think of what I might talk about.*

“Do you speak any German?” he inquired of them. Both shook their heads. “I was merely wondering. Because... here is a newspaper and I am finished with it, and I could give it to you. Perhaps,” he added, “I could translate it for you.” He laughed again and pressed his gaze upon her. Brief smiles lifted and fell, as the wind announced its harsh presence once more against the glass.

“This main story here, you see, it is about the anniversary of finding a prehistoric body in the Alps. It is still in a museum, I saw it as a child.”

“Really?” asked the woman opposite him.

“Yes. There was this man, this was many thousands of years ago. He was trying to cross a section of the Alps. And he was probably hunting and looking for food or water. It was probably the springtime, because when the sun gets stronger against the snow there are these very big, em...

—*Lawinen... Lawinen, how does one say Lawinen?*

“...It is where there is a lot of snow coming down the mountain.”

The dark haired woman looked at her companion. “Avalanches?” the other one asked uncertainly.

“Ah yes. Avalanches.” He smiled. “I have forgotten much. There was a very big avalanche on the side of a mountain in the South of Tirol, and this man he was trapped in the snow. He could not move or shout something for help. And so he was buried alive like a mummy and nobody even was knowing he was gone. And he died alone frozen there. And he stayed in this way for many thousands of years. He was stuck in the cold and the ice.”

The man looked back at the window and caught high above the flight of another flock of geese. They were following

each other in loose formation, looking almost like a fluid arrow moving in the opposite direction. A film of frost was growing on the outside pane, and it was becoming harder to see through it. As he spoke again his eyes moved back and forth between the women there.

“And then one day,” he continued, “fifty years ago, there was a skier who was going past the spot and saw something, and he stopped. And there was something frozen in the snow and ice but it was beginning to stick out. He told his friends to stop and they all looked at this thing but they did not know what it was.”

The woman in the sweater interrupted him. “So they found this body while they were skiing?” she asked. “How dreadful.”

“Yes,” he continued. “And eventually the body of this man was put in the history museum in Bozen. The Italian name for the city is Bolzano. It is in South Tirol, just over the border in Italy. Because he was found in the Letztal, they began to call him Letzi and that is still what he is called.”

Once he saw again the brief bend of an amused smile he began to laugh, now more comfortably. They seemed interested in his story. His heartbeat was rising. The woman across from him removed her jacket. Down feathers rested in places upon her shoulders.

“My mother, she is dead now four years. But this man in the museum, my mother took me to see him when I was a little boy, when I was young she took me. ‘We are going to see Letzi at the museum,’ she was saying. It was only my mother and I at home. And we had never traveled anywhere, because my mother she was always working and didn’t have time. I was so excited to go.”

The women were both looking down.

—*But they are listening to me, I know it*, he thought. He struggled to conceal his excitement. He thought of his mother, now long dead and cold.

—*She never had time, never had time. Nobody ever had time. But they, they are listening.*

He continued speaking: “And we went to Bozen and we went to the museum. And all the time we were walking in the museum, all I was saying was, ‘Muti, Muti show me where Letzi lives. I want to see the man in the ice.’ Finally we came to the last room. They kept the man in a glass box. It looked like a big block of ice, where they kept him. Our mother helped push me up to look over the top. I was looking at Letzi over the top, this poor impossible man. And Letzi was looking at me. His skin was brown and folded, and parts of it were covered with a wrapping like a...like a mummy. His mouth was open like he had something...screaming! Like he was trying to scream but there was the ice and no noise. He couldn’t scream what he needed to scream. And no one, no one would listen. And I looked at my mother, and I tried to tell her...”

“I think this is the border,” the girl in the peacoat proclaimed, tracing her thumb and looking indifferently out the window.

He stopped. In silence he gazed out the window at the horizon. The train was slowing. Soon it came to a halt. They were at a small checkpoint. Outside the day had darkened with thick smoky clouds. Great floodlights dumped yellow beams downward, and great bright flakes of snow swung and whirled aimlessly in the light. The wind carried them onward powerless across the sky in flowing waves of white.

Two guards in black jackets stood on the platform. Under one of the floodlights sat a dog on a leash connected to one of the men. A muzzle covered the dog’s snout. Tufts of regular, icy breath emerged from its silenced mouth. Another guard boarded the train, and shortly entered the compartment to check their passports. He inspected each one closely. Then without a word he returned to the platform and blew a whistle. The train shifted slowly back into life.

Eagerly he looked first at her with the dark flowing hair and then the other woman, whose eyes were always looking somewhere else. They discussed between themselves meeting their friend at the Vienna station.

—*They are interested. They want to hear me and know what happened. I will wait until they ask, I will wait until they tell me to continue. It is the proof that they are concerned. It will come.*

He said nothing, simply waited and sat. His breathing grew louder. He kept waiting. His eyes shifted back and forth, looking for something. But the women did not speak to him.

—*I will remind them. But only hint at it. I will not directly mention the story. They cannot have forgotten. Surely they will recall. They will recall of their own, because they are interested, because I must tell it. I must tell them.*

He leaned forward towards his company. “You know,” he began, “there are many fine museums in Vienna.”

They looked at him for a brief moment—puzzled—and nodded.

“Many fine museums...” his words faded into quiet. He leaned back.

The sound from below of the train on the track grew stronger as they were pulled through the gray afternoon. He began tapping nervously, squirming and twisting in his seat. And waiting.

—*Say something. Ask me. Speak, tell me to speak.*

Absentmindedly he took his scarf and idly wrapped it around his hand.

—Do not fail me. Please. A lifetime of silence, I am howling. You cannot ignore me. It is not possible. Speak!

The women did not speak but once, when the dark haired one asked the other what they had been discussing earlier. He raised his head with widened eyes.

Neither said they could remember.

Silence filled the room again and took up residence for a very long while. The window was glazed over with ice, but he could make out the snow flying past the glass in every direction, catching and covering cars, giving a frosted burial to the hardened remnants of an earlier blanket on the fields.

—Years of silence, years of silent tremble and suppression. She forgot me, forgot my every word, too busy and me too unlistened, too disappeared in every world but my own. And there, in my space, I spend a lifetime of wasted breath on cold dead air. Where do these words reach, who hears, who looks, who remembers but me? Oh, I am waiting for you, I stretch at your beauty, your curiosity, my curiosity, your potential to hear. I am howling.

The train pounded out its loud cadence on the tracks.

They traveled through a long black tunnel. When they emerged on the other side, he began to wrap the scarf once more around his neck and down around the top of his shoulders. Twice he opened his mouth to speak, but said nothing. He cleared his throat instead.

Near Vienna the conductor walked once more past their compartment, then back up the aisle. The man managed to bring forth words again.

“I spoke to him earlier, that conductor. And I don’t think he speaks any German. I don’t think he understood my meaning. They don’t seem to understand my meaning at all.” As he talked his fists shook, and he looked out the window.

—You do not understand.

“We are here.”

The train groaned and came to a stop. He moved out of the compartment while the women worked to pull down their suitcases. At the end of the aisle he muttered “Goodbye,” almost choking on the word. He stepped out of the train onto the platform, then from the station out into the gray afternoon.

Outside the man walked past the flow of milling pedestrians and streetcars as hapless solitary flurries of white spun frantically to the ground. The wind was harsh and steady. Down a block, around a corner, along the edge of the street he meandered, sending quick glances from side to side. He kept going until he reached the dead end of an alleyway where the silence was complete. No one else was there.

All of the buildings which rose up around him were painted white. The man put his hands to his scarf, then raising them upwards, he pushed forth all the air from his lungs as if he were screaming. No sound came forth. Snow fell and came to rest upon him. He fell to his knees on the cold hard ground and watched as his frozen, forgotten exhalations rose for a moment before dissolving into nothing.

At Night

Larry Bailey

When the sun sets behind the hills you'll know that it's time to get in the car. When it's dark out people are scared to drive; in this way they're stupid because this empties the roads and makes it the safest time of day to hit the roads. You'll be alone, for the most part. No minivan moms on cell phones, no hippie wagons with poorly proportioned flower stickers on the back, fewer big rigs downshifting as they maneuver in and out of traffic with each other. The road will be yours and his for most of the trip. When you stop for gas, you'll watch the digit readout tell you how much they're taking off your credit card in much the same way you'll watch the mile markers roll by as the clock changes from three digits to four and then back to three. You'll spend a lot of time glancing back at him, sound asleep in his little car seat.

He'll sleep most of the night without making a peep. He's so good at that, never crying, waking up only enough to flail his arms a legs a bit to try to change positions. You hope that when he grows up his childhood won't have been defined by these journeys that he makes every month, back and forth, back and forth like a pendulum that somehow increases the distance of its swing with each repetition. She lives in Colorado in the home you built, with the bay window in the living room and the breakfast nook. You moved to Montana to get away from her. You were worried that if you stayed in the city near him and her or even in the same state the separation would never really sink in and you'd find yourself living for something you couldn't have any more. So you called your sister and she told you she could fine you a place in Montana's second largest metropolitan area. She also found you a sitter and a job, because she said she cared. And this is why, every thirty days, you grab a bag of chips and two bottles of water and the car keys and speed off into nothing, into the prairie. A trip made with purpose of bringing him back always feels fast; dropping him off tends to make the journeys both to and from her place take an eternity. And this is what you're doing now. It's time to go back.

You'll hit the interstate, with its neatly placed lights for your safety. But you don't need the lights, you need a radio and a beer. Open container laws and common sense will prevent you from obtaining the second and an unsolved crime, committed three weeks ago to the day, will prevent you from doing the first. You remember what it felt like to wake up that morning and see the glass shattered on the driver's side seat. The radio was gone, so was the airbag, so was your Rod Stewart CD, so was the ice scraper. The ice scraper? You stared at the damage for a while and then simply opened the door and brushed the glass to the floor. You put your lunch on the passenger's seat and sat down where you always sat. This was how you dealt with the break in.

But you don't need that window anymore. The freezing white quilt of a Northern winter is melting away from you and you've just started dating your checks with a four for the month instead of a three or a two or a one. The dead grass reappears on the front lawn and in City Park where you take him to chase the geese. The melted snow will revive the grass when the month number is five. But this fourth month will be odd, and you'll be living alone again just like you do for months two, six, and eight, etc.

You won't need the ice scraper because you have one less window to scrape, because a piece of plastic your couch cushions were wrapped in, when duct taped to the window frame, doesn't need any scraping at all. It demands your attention differently, hissing in your left ear as you fly across the center stripe and pass a hatchback going fifty-eight in the left. You're going seventy five in the right now but it feels more like seven point five. The makeshift window isn't translucent enough to give you a good look at the hatchback on the left.

Life feels slow because the hills are barely moving, rolling past the corner of your right eye in slow motion. Your trip is

regulated by the hills. They will stay there, dark but visible until morning when the sunrise will light them up like giant jack o' lanterns with odd shaped cuts that add up to nothing discernable. Sometimes you think they might be creeping closer, a silent army to overtake the highway. You can see these hills through the passenger's window which is actually still a window. They're always there for you just like he is in the rear view mirror with his head tilted to the side and his eyes closed. Between the road in front of you, the baby behind you, and the mountains on your right, everything you need to see is visible now.

A slight hiss is irritating your left ear because opposite this piece of functioning glass the duct tape/plastic window is showing signs of its imperfection. The designer and chief engineer of this window, you, waited until the last possible moment (exactly six minutes before you started this trip) to make the repairs. You didn't want to do it at all, out of stubbornness, out of spite for whomever took his or her crowbar to the glass that had previously occupied the space. You also didn't want to do it out of spite for the rapidly departing winter, a thumbed nose and an extended tongue at its feeble effort to get you to replace the window. You liked the car just fine without it. But there's the plastic.

You called her just before you left, making sure she'd be there when you arrived. You made the mistake of telling her about the window. It had nearly slipped your mind, having happened so long ago and without having talked to her since. But her concern was immediate and overbearing. She was worried about him. Have you been driving him around in April without a window on your car? She screams. You calmly explain to her that it's been warm, that he's always bundled up, but she won't have it. She thinks you're crazy and negligent. He likes it when the cool wind blows in his face. But if you didn't tape up the window, she'd call child services or her lawyer when you arrived. So the window is well taped and the wind is reduced to a whisper, an almost static-like hiss. You glance at the missing radio again. There's no tune in your head, nothing to think about but the fact that you're giving him back to her again, and she seems to hate you more and more every time you see her. You check the mirror again. He's still sleeping, in a new position.

Money is the root of all evil, as they say, and they didn't even have to marry her to find out. When you dated back in grad school she seemed to have curious cash-related habits. She got them from her parents, she later discovered. When she was growing up her father and mother had split everything right down the middle. They had separate checking accounts into which they deposited their own separate paychecks. No family expenditure, however, was made unilaterally. A fifty-fifty split, with less than 5% error, was required for each and every purchase. Often you would be writing a check for the full cost of dinner as she wrote the first a check for their half of the meal. You bought a ride-on lawnmower; she wrote you a check for half. She bought a package of gum at the supermarket, you tossed her a quarter from his back pocket. And so it was with them, and so it was with their daughter. Her ideals were unchangeable, no matter what he suggested. When you got engaged you suggested a joint account but this was unfathomable to her. You argued about it until the sun came up and she kicked over the potted plant in the corner of their dingy apartment. And on that day you dropped the issue. You hoped it wouldn't matte in the long term.

Then you lost your job at the collapsing tech firm. You had saved away enough to get the two of you by for a certain amount of time but jobs were scarce and your credentials were common in the field. You hoped that her money would be able to get the two of you through the tough times. She still insisted you pay half. Eventually she became your bookie, even keeping a small notepad with exact debts in dollars and cents which she could reference at a moment's notice the second you asserted yourself on some critical matter of the marriage. You began to feel alienated, even as you worked part time as a temp to pay back some of the interest you owed her. The relationship fell apart around you as she stood in her tower, watching the money pile up.

His birth was not enough to bring you back together. She considered him hers as you were in a financially subservient position. You felt inferior, unloved. And so on the day that she stole the TV remote because she told you it was time to pay up or start looking a little harder for a permanent job (a pursuit that already haunted every waking hour not spent with the baby, eating, or working the temp job) you packed up and left. Your disadvantage in the job market became her advantage in the family financial market. When you called her from your parent's house, she was far from hysterical and told you she hoped you weren't just trying to escape your debt. You told her to fuck off and had the divorce papers sent to her office.

It's been three and a third years and you've paid back most of what you "owed" to her; a friend of yours who went to law school for a painful year suggested that legally, she could have grounds for extracting the money. So when you won part of the custody battle, enough to split months until the child was old enough to choose a parent himself, you considered it a victory enough to slowly pay back what she demanded. The money became unimportant; he in the back seat, he is what matters. At least for the sake of the argument.

The drop off goes as planned, in the morning before she goes to work. She looks with disapproval at your makeshift window and makes a comment about putting your son in danger. You've eaten your chips and drunk your water but you know better than to ask for a little grub for the long trip back. The stubble on your face feels rough as she, clad in her business woman attire, shuffles into the house with him on her shoulder. He's still sound asleep but you think you can feel him waving goodbye. The sun is rising over the plains east of Denver and you have an enormous drive in front of you. It will take you

hours to return and days to be comfortable alone again.

The incoming drive is disturbingly unlike its outgoing counterpart. The sun shines brightly on the empty part of America and fills the empty spaces of your backseat. The car seat is unoccupied in your rear view mirror and its harness, unattached, dangles awkwardly on one side. The plastic window prevents you from feeling the detached comfort of the mountains. Their form is visible through the cloudy membrane, but it's nothing compared to seeing them through glass at night. The road in front of you is daunting and filled with more cars, trucks, and big rigs than one would expect in Wyoming. The miles tick by slowly and the radio is still missing. You need to feel the air in your face again, so you make a fist with your right hand and punch the plastic. It gives. You rip and tear, keeping the left hand on the wheel, until the duct tape around the edges unsticks itself and your window becomes nothing but another piece of highway litter. The noise of the orifice is instantly deafening. And back you drive.

Tomorrow

Michael Busk

I am sitting with him now on his veranda, looking out over the brush, drinking the sweet lemon tea that his maid brought to us. The colonel is old now, as I am, and listens as one who has heard the monologues of the politicians and speaks as though telling tales to the grandchildren he does not have.

"It has been a dry month," he says quietly. "But I have been drinking honey wine and dreaming strange dreams."

"What do you dream?" I reply cautiously.

"My dreams feel like flame and smell like saltpeter."

"But what do they look like?"

"I do not know. I cannot remember. But I know they must be strange, for whenever I awake I find myself thinking of places I have never been, and sometimes I awake imagining eyeless fish and large mazes full of people whose faces I cannot see

... Do you dream?"

"Occasionally," I respond.

"What do you dream?"

"I sometimes dream of Miranda or of visiting our children in the city, or of picking tomatoes in the garden."

"When you dream of Miranda, is she old, or is she young like she was then, with the eyes that would eat men whole?"

"Old, usually, though occasionally she is young, as she was then."

"You never dream of the revolution?"

"No, never. I consider it a blessing."

"I can smell the rosemary," he says after a long pause. "Do you grow rosemary in your garden?"

"No, just tomatoes, parsley and basil, and sweet peppers."

"You should grow rosemary. It seems fitting that old men should grow rosemary." I did not know what to say, and so remained silent, hearing the raspy buzz of the copulating dragonflies and the distant, rhythmic clanging of the mission bells.

"Let us go to the piano," he whispered, breaking the silence. "We will sing and remember. Music is a solace for the old."

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The first time I met Colonel de la Cruz, he lay prostrate before the altar on the hard-packed dirt floor of the little mission church outside the imperial city of San Fernando, his body racked with violent sobs. Minutes before, he had heard of the death of his faithful comrade and dearest friend, Colonel Juan Jesus Arroyo, a man of staunch courage and tireless support of the cause.

"My Lord and my God, my Lord and my God," he whispered, sucking air through his teeth between gasps. Slowly shuffling down the aisle, I heard the whistle and crash of cannon shells in the distance, on the other side of the valley. A small, carved wooden statue of the Most Holy Virgin gazed down upon him with large mournful eyes, her feet surrounded by a burning host of small tapers, lit by desperate young soldiers just prior to their charges. I wondered if Colonel Arroyo lit a candle before his last mission. Looking back down at Colonel de la Cruz, I noticed his saber lying at his side, notched and rusty, next to a pistol with a well-worn mother-of-pearl handle, and I wondered if he had lit a candle for Colonel Arroyo before mission. As I approached, I saw his back rise with small, child-like breaths, and but for the faded green short coat that he always wore, I would not have believed that this weeping, trembling form was the legendary Colonel Jose Maria Ignacio

Trujillo de la Cruz.

“Colonel, Colonel de la Cruz.” My voice sounded hoarse and hollow to my ears. He suddenly grew quiet, and with what seemed like a titanic effort, rose to his feet and faced me. Even with bloodshot eyes, disheveled hair and tear-stained cheeks, I was struck by his beauty, but it was no longer the beauty of youth who I imagined spent his days reading literature and his nights laughing and tangoing with blushing, moonstruck girls. From his eyes, I decided he was a man for whom such things no longer mattered, a man who had not laughed in a long time.

“I have seen you before, but I do not know your name,” he said, in a quiet, surprisingly composed tone, his large, gaunt frame looming over me.

“Aurilla, Captain Aurilla, sir,” I said, almost forgetting why I had come to the church in the first place.

“And what is your christened name, Aurilla?”

“Carlos, Carlos, sir, I replied. I am a blacksmith, sir, from, from a small village in the highlands.”

“And why have you been sent here, Captain Carlos Aurilla?”

“The General, General Cortez, he, he told me to request your presence at his quarters at the tavern, sir, to tell you that it was urgent, that you were needed, desperately sir.”

“Did he tell you to urge me to avenge the death of my fallen brother, to lead my band and charge the walls of the San Fernando, so that Juan Jesus’ death might not be in vain?” He asked with clenched teeth and a raised eyebrow. “Did he say that?”

“Well, it was a bit like that.”

“Do not pander to my emotions,” he spoke coldly, his voice beginning to rise. “I will not let the death of a man I loved more than life itself be used as capital to bargain with me. He died with valor. Do not dishonor his name with such haggling.” I shrunk, trying to appear small and innocuous, trying to fight back tears. I had not cried since I was a small boy.

“Colonel, please, I have heard of your friendship with Colonel Arroyo. I know he was a man of unmatched courage and pious virtue. His death was a tremendous loss, a terrible loss.”

“He was worth a thousand men, Captain Aurilla,” Colonel de la Cruz replied. “I have never met a man his equal.” I deliberated carefully about how to respond, glancing up at his face, trying not to stare at the long scar that cut along the right side of his jawbone. I once heard that he had received the scar during an accident while playing with Colonel Arroyo when the two were but boys, the wound he bore on his bore, for as legend had it, Colonel de la Cruz had never been wounded in battle. After a brief pause, I decided what to say. “I am not an eloquent man, sir, and I have not been well educated, like you have been, and so I will not try to seduce you with the whimsy of the poets or convince you with the lies of the philosophers. But I know this. I know that our cause is true. I know that we have right on our side, that we have God on our side. We are the force of the people. We are the force of freedom. We are the hope of those that have been taken from us ... And I know too, that you are the greatest warrior that any of us have ever heard of. Your men comprise the strongest brigade, and you know well that they will not fight unless it is under your standard. The beloved colonel might have indeed been worth a thousand men, and if he is worth a thousand, then I am sure that you are worth two thousand. But think, sir, of those that will come after us, the children of our children, and they will be a thousand thousand, a thousand thousand who will be free because of this revolution, because of what you will do if take the field of battle. If you will not let yourself be moved by the grief of the past, allow yourself to be moved by the hope of the future.” All of that time, I had been looking down at my boots with the toes nearly worn-through, afraid that looking up to see his expression might shatter my concentration and deflate my courage.

“Words. Words,” he replied after a pause. “Future. Freedom. I can see that you are a good man, Aurilla, a loyal man, but I don’t fight for words. What if the hope for freedom is but a chimera? What if the future is but more misery like the dead bodies piling around us? Our reality is death, and words are just a white-washed mask. I will not let ideals flutter about my head like butterflies only to vanish when I try to seize them.” There was a long pause, troubled only by the scattering of mice and the windy flickering of the tapers.

“The General did mention one other thing. He spoke cryptically, saying only that someone named Hector had been seen near the walls of the city.” The colonel’s face remained expressionless, but I could see his black pupils dilating in the dim twinkling candlelight.

“How recently was he seen?”

“Only this afternoon, the general told me.”

“Hector, Hector ... I have not heard him spoken of for many years. I thought he might already be dead.” The colonel smiled. “If he is not dead, he will be soon. Well then, to the tavern, to the general!” he said with a barbaric vigor, snatching his saber and pistol. “There is much to do, and I mean to bloody the dawn!”

Colonel's de la Cruz's refusal to fight was obviously by that point already legendary. The first time I heard the tale of the event that caused his self-imposed exile I could not believe that it was true, for it seemed like an anecdote from some medieval romance. Later I asked him about it, whether or not the stories were true. "What stories?" he replied. "No one has ever told me these stories. Tell me, what do they say?"

Taken aback by his ignorance about his own mythic status, I began, "Well, they tell me that once, over a year prior to return, you held the city of Mauritania under siege, but had been unable to penetrate its defenses through conventional attack. And so, they tell me, you and a small band of your men disguised yourselves as Franciscans, and managed to pass through the city gates by claiming to be on a pilgrimage to the basilica of San Marco there." He was listening to the tale intently, eyebrows raised, lips pressed together. "And so," I continued, "they say you entered the basilica, made your way to the vestry, exited through the back of church and then stormed the barracks where the local garrison had been stationed, taking them by surprise and after a brief skirmish, obtaining their surrender."

"But the next day, after you had captured the town, they tell me you were taking a walk through Mauritania in the late afternoon and happened to pass the basilica cemetery. All alone on the far edge of the cemetery there was a young woman of surpassing beauty kneeling by a grave in her wedding dress, sobbing uncontrollably while clutching the tombstone. They say, and I'm sure truly, that you were obviously moved by such a pitiable sight, and so went over to her, asking her who died, trying to give her solace. She did not look up, but continued to weep and press herself against the newly cut gravestone. 'My Inigo,' she said. 'We were to be married today, but he was stationed at the garrison yesterday, where that rebel leader Colonel de la Cruz led a cowardly attack, disguised as a man of God, and killed my Inigo with his own hand.' They say then that you remembered the noble-looking young man with the green eyes, the only one brave enough to face you in single combat, the one who you killed with a single terrible slash of your saber. As you remembered the scene, the young beauty in the wedding dress recognized you by the scar on your jaw and by your green jacket, and in a mixture of terror and rage, her heart broke and she cried out, 'Never' and then died, and was buried next to her fiancé. They say that at that moment something inside of you was torn down, that your conscience could no longer allow you to fight, that you promised never to so ruin someone's happiness again, and vowed to the Most Holy Virgin that you would cease fighting. And not surprisingly, all of your men refused to be placed under anyone else's command, and so you lived for over a year, a man without a home, a king without a kingdom, as I have heard them say."

"That does sound like a medieval romance," he replied after a pause.

"Well, is it true?"

"What is truth?" he responded with a wry smile.

"Well, did it happen?"

"I don't believe so. I was there at the siege of Mauritania, but I certainly don't remember dressing like a monk and striding right in through the city gates. I wish I had though, that would have been brilliant. I'll have to remember that one for some time in the future."

"Oh, I don't think it would work," I quickly replied. "The legend is so infamous, it's almost impossible even for real monks to get into the imperial-held cities any more."

"How bizarre."

"Well," I continued, not wanting to pry into his past like an over-curious school girl, "why did you stop fighting?"

"I was young once, at the beginning of the revolution. I had heard the tales of General Cortez and General Juantano capturing cities with but a dozen men, I suppose perhaps not too different from the stories you have heard about me at Mauritania," he said smiling ruefully. I left the university, with Nino, Colonel Arroyo, to join their fledgling band, for democracy, for equality, and I, we, the two of us were successful and were put in command of many men. And there were victories and defeats as there are in every war, and in our cities I saw families were no longer crushed by tyrannical taxation. I saw farmers whose crops were no longer stolen and flung across the sea to a foreign power. I saw men free to choose how they would live for the first time. And it was good. I was happy, happy for the cause, and so was Nino, who had been raised in my house as a brother, and yet time and again, I saw mere boys, ours and those fighting for the imperials, with arms cut off, with legs crippled under the fall of a horse, boys with gangrenous wounds, boys being destroyed by dysentery. I remember once seeing one boy in the heat of summer, I believe it was August, and I think he had been conscripted by the imperials. He was lying in a tiny cot, one eye bandaged, and he had been shot in the throat, and was thirsty, and kept begging for a drink. I sat by his side, and continually gave him water, but because of the wound, I don't think any of it ever reached his stomach. He had a fever and was overheated, but because he could not hold any water, he did not sweat and was unable to cool himself. He grew confused and delirious, and thought we were maliciously refusing to give him a drink. I still remember the way his eyes looked at me, as though I had been a father giving his son a stone when he asked for bread."

"What happened to the boy?"

"He died in my arms. Others did as well, boys and soldiers – civilians, too – women and old men, girls with pigtails. And

after each day was done, I would go back to my tent and weep for them, and I would cry out to God and ask him why such evils could come from a just cause such as ours. And every night, I would say to him, 'Lord if I am no longer doing more good than evil, I will no longer fight.' I would often ask Nino, Colonel Arroyo what he thought of my vow, and he told me that he agreed. I remember him often saying that nothing great happens without great sacrifices. And so every night, I was able to convince myself that I was doing more good than evil, that in the long run, freedom and equality could be laid on the scales with the death and the pain and would not be found wanting. But then, one night, I realized that I could no longer convince myself, that the weight of the suffering, the widows and the orphans – on both sides, you must understand – that it was too great, that my conscience would no longer be persuaded by the hope of future freedom. I was overwhelmed in the face of the reality of the present suffering. It leered in my face like a demon. It wove itself into my dreams. And after that point, I no longer fought. I told my men of my decision, and told them that they were free to follow their own consciences, free to fight or remain with me."

"And they all chose to remain with you."

"Yes, and I was greatly moved by their loyalty."

"And they say that you began working in the hospitals twenty hours a day, seven days a week, caring for the sick and the wounded."

"I doubt I worked quite that much, but I did spend most of my time there. I decided that after all of the pain I caused, whether justified or not, I ought to do whatever I could to alleviate it. So I learned how to clean and dress wounds, how to set broken bones, how to treat concussions. There was a shortage of doctors, and my newly-acquired skills were often of use."

According to the legends, his work at the hospital was not nearly as uninteresting and pedestrian as those stories. I heard that they would bring to him boys whose chests had been ripped open by bullets, and he would merely touch them, and the wounds were disappear. I heard that they once brought him a man whose lower right leg had been blown off by a cannonball, and he put his hand on the man's stump, and the leg came back. I even heard that he once brought back to life a young boy who had died of brain fever.

I never discovered if the colonel really did perform those miracles or if the legends were just old wives' tales. All I know is that I would rather believe the legends.

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Once, shortly after I met him, our troop was ambushed by an imperial brigade in the highlands, and though the two of us managed to escape, we were separated from the main body of the army. We found shelter for the night in a frog-infested cave behind a waterfall. We had run for hours that day with all of our baggage, trying to stay ahead of the Spanish brigade, and by the end of the day my feet were raw and my lungs, bred in the plains, were desperately trying to drain all the oxygen they could out of the highland air. I was exhausted and would have fallen asleep instantly had it not been for the continual warbling of the frogs. Colonel de la Cruz, on the other hand, was as impervious to weariness and distraction as ever, and was on his knees in a corner of the small cave, praying the Divine Office as he did every day. Occasionally, moved by the beauty of the words, he would stop and drown his face in his hands. On this particular night, the first time I could no longer hear the lyrical stream of prayer, I assumed that he had been halted by his own emotion as he often was, but then he rose to his feet, dry-eyed, and turned his head as though listening for something.

"Do you hear it?" he asked.

"The frogs?" I replied, sounding more sarcastic than I had intended.

"No."

"The waterfall?"

"No. No, it sounds like music." I could hear nothing but nonetheless followed him to the edge of the cave, where the roaring of the waterfall grew louder, drowning the croaking of the frogs. Still, I could hear nothing.

"It's coming from down there," the Colonel replied, gesturing towards the small village we had seen as we made our slippery, precarious hike up to the cave behind the waterfall. I followed him along the few narrow rocks that made a small footpath to the right of the loud cascade, and he pointed to a small hut on the outskirts of the village in the valley below. A small ribbon of smoke was trailing from the chimney.

"Do you hear it?" he said.

"No. I still only hear the waterfall."

"Listen. They're singing." And so, I stood there with him, inches away from a fall to my death, from nothingness, surrounded by stars and rocks and the valley below. I listened carefully, trying to hear the singing as he did, and eventually did.

I heard simple melodies and young voices that sounded like they had not yet been tarnished by tequila or despair.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"It's pure," he replied. A long silence passed between us, filled by the music we shared.

"Did I ever tell you how Nino and I spent our last night together at the university?"

"No."

"During most evenings, Nino and I would have a supper of cheap wine, hearty bread, and goat cheese," he replied, his voice rippling against the tremulous background of the waterfall. "When we first arrived at university, we decided that we ought to spend our evenings in pursuit of Dame Truth, so we discovered taverns where older students would gather, and we hurled at them outrageous declarations like gauntlets, testing to see if they were worthy of the label 'intellectual'. Nino and I would corner the conservatives and proclaim man's natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and we condemned all those who disagreed as cowed medievalists.

"At the corners of our words was revolution, though we did not know it yet ..." His words trailed off.

"When we could find no one who would argue with us, Nino and I would amble about the alleyways of the capital, smoking our newly-bought pipes and passing a bottle of cognac between us. As much as Dr. Locke taught us of the need for democracy and freedom, those walks about the streets taught us infinities more. We saw babies abandoned on the steps of the cathedral, tiny tongues shrilling screams between bare gums, feverish faces pelted with bullets of rain, and we blamed it all upon Spain. We saw old men with canvas cheeks and hollow, pleading eyes, bent over old guitars, begging for pesos by singing songs about carefree young maidens who fall in love, and we blamed their plight on Spain. We saw the sixteen year-old girls, eyes dark with bruises and mascara, cooing at the drunk farmers come from the market. The girls would take them into backs of the alleys, sometimes three or four at a time, and the farmers' skeleton eyes would leer out of the holes in their black faces, and they would take turns splitting the girls open, their bare ribs hard against their girls' soft, child's stomachs, clawing at their innocence with their dirty fingernails. The girls would moan, too young and too small for such devilish work, and try to pretend, for the sake of business, that they were screaming for pleasure and not for pain. We saw it all, and we blamed it on Spain.

"Nino was very sensitive to the sight of such horrors, very empathetic to the girls' pain. After the farmers had walked off, hissing vulgar jokes and grinning at each other, we would often find the girls leaning half-conscious against a rough, white-washed wall, a few small copper coins scattered around her body. Trying to comfort a poor girl like that, he would gently throw his coat over her so as to cover her nakedness, and would whisper soft words like he had done for my sister when we were younger and she had fallen and bruised a knee. He would give the girl whatever money he had on himself, which was sometimes considerable, and she would act as though Christ himself had come down and blessed her. I was always so proud of Nino for acting with such chivalry. It was as though he were doing some small part to right all of the wrongs that our mother country had inflicted upon us.

"That is very sad, Colonel," I said, trying to speak up over the raucous showering of the waterfall. "I have sister, and she is about that age." He continued. "Throughout those first months of nights at the university, we far too concerned with drinking down those bittersweet cocktails of Truth and Reality to see much else. Our favorite place to drink and argue about philosophy and politics was a small, well-worn restaurant owned by a giant named Jorge with a glass eye and a tattoo of a pineapple upon his right shoulder. Some of the older customers said he was a retired pirate, while others said he used to be a blockade runner, smuggling rum from Port-au-Prince across the Caribbean on moonless nights. Whatever his past, his restaurant was famous for its salty company and cheap beer.

"Most of those who frequented the place were students or old men with white stubble like sparse grass," he said, his eyes still following the vapor of smoke as it rose up and disappeared into the dark night.

"There were the old matrons who dressed in cheap calico and served the tables, and they were the only women we saw at the tavern until one hot night in late September. Nino and I were remembering tales from our childhood and drinking cold beer to stay cool, when suddenly into the bar marched a dark Amazon with gypsy eyes and crests and troughs of black hair that cascaded all the way down her back. She was as tall as Nino and nearly as tall as I, wearing thick boots and a pair of dark men's trousers bound with a large leather belt, her broad shoulders mantled with a sheepskin cloak. She strode by our table, thick boot heels thumping the ground, and as she passed, I noticed that she carried a long knife under the belt, and looking at Nino, I gestured at it in what I considered to be a subtle way. But instantly, she stopped her motion, grabbed her knife, and leaning down upon our table, slammed its point into the wood an inch from my hand.

"Is it your habit to gawk at passing women like peasants? I had expected more from students at the university.' Her hot black eyes seemed to jump out of their sockets and brand into our own as she turned her head from side to side to look at each of us. The restaurant's gaze was already trailing behind her as she walked in, and now, she commanded its full attention.

"Excuse me, miss, we, we were simply ... surprised to see a woman carrying a weapon,' I replied haltingly.

"You must not be from the highlands. Probably the sons of some ranchero whose women stay pale and ignorant inside the

prison walls of mansions and convents,' she retorted, wrenching the knife free from the table. My father was a ranchero," the colonel continued ruefully, "and all of the women in my family were wives or women who had taken holy orders. So I bit my tongue. Seeing we had nothing more to say, she turned her back, flung herself upon a low chair in the corner of the restaurant and rested her boots on the edge of an empty table nearby. Whistling, she gestured at waitress from across the room and called out, 'A pitcher of water, and your cheapest bread.'

After a moment's hesitation, I stood up from my table and impulsively shouted to her from across the room to come and drink with us.

"I have no money for wine,' she replied.

"We'll share ours.'

"Bring it over.' Arriving at her table, her long, trousered legs still stretched out upon it, she gestured for us to sit down. I set down the bottle of wine and pushed a small earthenware cup across the worn-smooth surface. Catching it, she took up the bottle of wine in the other hand and filled the cup to overflowing.

"To the Revolution,' she whispered, and putting the cup to her lips, slowly emptied it in one long draught. Having finished it, she wiped her large lips on her buckskin jacket and thanked us. 'So what do you boys do around places like this, look for other intellectuals to argue with about the Philosopher's metaphysics? Drink away nights that you have not found a better use for?' Perplexed by her scorn, I asked her what she was doing here.

"Eating. I'm hungry,' she replied, as though speaking to a child. 'I just arrived in town this evening, and I haven't had a bite since yesterday morning when I left home.' Just then the bread arrived, and tearing it in half with long, unkempt nails, she began to devour one half of the loaf and offered us the other half, which we accepted. After finishing the bread in silence, she drank another full cup of wine to wash it down.

"What's your name?' Nino asked.

"Maria. Maria Aurea. What's yours?'

"Arroyo. Juan Jesus Arroyo. But they call me Nino.'

"I am Jose Maria Ignacio Trujillo de la Cruz,' I declared.

"Sounds like the name of an aristocrat,' she interjected. Trying to be conciliatory, Nino quickly asked why she had come to the city. 'I'm starting at the university,' she replied

"Aren't you a bit late?' I asked.

"I had to bury my parents. They were murdered a month ago by Spanish troops on their way home from Mass." After a long pause, Nino asked quietly why they had been murdered. 'My father was a carpenter, and in July, as he was repairing the floorboards at the governor's mansion, he saw a note from the governor that implicated that he had been conspiring to redirect our tax money from Spain to himself. The governor came into the room as my father was reading the note, and though he pretended to be illiterate, the governor found out that the plot had been discovered when he tortured the priest to whom my father had confessed his secret. A few weeks later, my parents were surrounded by cavalry soldiers as they walked home from our little mission church and were shot down. They would have killed me as well, but I had stayed home due to an illness. Their bodies are probably not yet cold in the ground. So pardon me for not being sufficiently coquettish. I'm sure I'll be more so after the wine takes affect.'

"I'm sorry,' Nino said, wisely ignoring her sarcasm. 'My parents were killed when I was three, drowned when their ship was sunk in a storm near Trinidad.' She nodded, her long, thick eyebrows furrowed, her lips pressed white. I asked her if she had a place to stay, and she told us she was going to live with a cousin who was a seamstress and lived on the outskirts of the capital. After a pause, she said, 'Boys, I've been riding straight for over a day, and I am tired. I bid you good night.'

"As she left, I called out after her, 'What Revolution?' Walking out the door, she turned back to us, and for the first time that night, she smiled. 'Tomorrow,' she said. 'Tomorrow'.

"And did she tell you about the Revolution?" I asked, unable to control my excitement. "Had the Revolution even begun?"

"Be patient, my friend," he replied, still looking down into the valley below. "It will all come together. To resume the story. The very next day, as Nino and I arrived at our first lecture, she was sitting in the front row, still wearing the boots and trousers and buckskin even in the thick heat, and still with the knife in her belt. The university had very few women at that time, and upon catching sight of Maria, looking like fierce, untamed nature herself, the boys were dumbfounded. Since it was her first day, I expected her to remain silent and try to catch up with the material. But she didn't. From that very first lecture, she threw sharp-edged interrogations at the professor, who was flabbergasted and tried to stumble through answers, averting his eyes from Maria's, knowing they would be overpowered if they met hers. She had apparently already read Plato and Aristotle, as well as La Mettrie, Cabanis, and Descartes, and she asked questions that few of the boys understood, let alone were able to answer.

After class, Nino and I tracked her down as she stood at a fountain in the center of a courtyard, splashing water over her face and neck. I raised my voice and said, 'The Revolution!' She turned around and looked at us, and strode across the

cobblestones, nearly leveling a few absent-minded monks that were walking in her way. 'The Revolution,' I said again as she came closer.

"Yes," she replied.

"The Revolution."

"You have heard of Jefferson, Washington, Robespierre?" She said, looking at us intently. Nino and I replied that we had.

"I want a revolution like that. Here. Now. Independence from Spain. Freedom from tyranny. A place where a little girl's parents won't be killed by the men supposed to protect them.' We told her that we wanted the same thing, but she stared at us with a ferocious sheen in her eyes. 'Why would rancheros' sons want change? It's people like you who crush the poor with heavy burdens that force them to exhale the very last things they have. They are King David, stealing Uriah's prized possession. How are you different?'

"Meet us tonight at Jorge's tavern and we'll show you,' I responded.

"Later that evening, Nino and I took Maria to see the alleyways. She heard the screams of the abandoned babies. She smelled the rotting onions in the garbage that the little children were rummaging through. She saw the old men passed out against whitewashed walls, tenderly holding their guitars. We told her that these were the reasons we wanted revolution. All the while, she was silent and stony-faced, but her eyes burnt with a sad glow. A few blocks away, we saw one of the tiny young prostitutes, drifting coy eyes at the scarecrow farmers. They took her, almost carrying her towards the back of the alley. Suddenly, the glow in Maria's eyes grew terrifyingly bright.

"Not tonight,' she said. 'Not tonight.' With that she ran down to the alley, ripping the knife from her belt, and we took off after her, a few seconds behind. By the time we neared the alley, Maria had disappeared within it, and Nino and I could already hear the girl's screams. Finally, making it around the corner, we saw the familiar sight of the farmer groaning on top of the girl, a sight disrupted by Maria, who had flung herself on top of the man, stabbing him in the back of the neck and hurling him off of the little girl. Confronted with the enraged Amazonian woman, the other farmers, small and emaciated, fled through an even smaller side alley. But Maria was not satisfied, and seizing one of the stragglers by the wrist, she pulled him to the ground and tackled him, and straddling him between her knees, she pummeled him in the face with the butt of her blade, breaking his teeth and bloodying his lips. And then, just as abruptly as her rage exploded, it died down, and she dropped the knife. There was an empty clatter as it hit the ground. Her shoulders rose and fell with deep-drawn breaths, and she unsteadily went over to the small girl, who was curled up in a dark corner, sobbing quietly. Covering her with the sheep-skin cloak, Maria, who appeared nearly twice the girl's size, picked her up as though she were but a baby, and rocked her back and forth, whispering softly in her ear, telling her that it would be alright, that no one would ever hurt her again. Nino and I stood still, struck speechless by the whole scene. After the girl stopped sobbing, Maria put her down and tried to make her look decent before bending low to kiss her on the forehead, saying softly to her, 'I'm staying with Senora Delgado on San Salvador street if you ever need me. Alright?' The little girl nodded with big eyes, soft brown in a sea of pink, and ambled out of the alley and down the street. Maria seemed to ignore us and took a few erratic steps past us before stumbling and collapsing to the ground, bawling, buried under a tide of emotion. 'O God, O God ... God ... God ...' She looked up at us and said, 'I pretended they were the soldiers that killed my parents, you know, not just poor drunk farmers, stupid starving men because ... I wouldn't kill ...' She broke down, overcome by fierce sobs. We put her arms over our shoulders to support her weight and then returned her to her cousin's. We stopped outside the door, where she turned to us, her eyes dazed and bleary. She rubbed them with the heels of her hands and said, 'We will meet tomorrow, and discuss what we must do.' Then, unsteadily, she opened the rough wooden door, walked through, and closed the door behind herself."

The colonel stopped speaking, wandering in his memory, and I heard only the waterfall and the singing in the valley below.

"But I still don't understand how that singing down there struck your memory," I interjected.

"Ah, yes. I will get to that shortly. After that night, the three of us spent the rest of that term and the next finding other students who would listen to our ideas, and we would meet regularly in Jorge's tavern to discuss how to begin the revolution. We contacted important liberal leaders and other dissidents, and at some point in the spring, we decided that at the end of the term, Nino and I would lead half of the group over the eastern plain to converge with a rebel band under the leadership of General Cortez, while Maria would lead the other half south to the mountains, where Menele Ramirez was in hiding.

"The last night of our final exams, we met in Jorge's tavern for the last time to have a sort of final hurrah. You must remember, too, that for all the months I had known her, Maria had only ever worn men's trousers and shirts and thick boots, and the long knife in her belt silenced any who questioned her choice of attire. That night, as Nino and I walked through the door of the tavern, having just finished a four-hour exam on Aquinas and Spinoza, we were met by our usual comrades but also by a very tall, dark-skinned woman in a lovely white lace dress, a woman whom I did not recognize. But as she turned toward us, Nino went right up to her, took her by the hands and kissed her on the cheek. I have never in my life seen a more beautiful woman, even your Miranda," he said to me. "This woman turned to me with a familiar expression on her face. 'Hello, Jose,' she said to me. And then I realized like a fool that it was Maria, but could manage nothing in reply but a weak hello.

“Nino took control of the scene, declaring that on a night like that one, we needed dancing. He directed me over to the tired-looking upright piano in the corner of the restaurant, and then asked Maria if she wanted to dance. ‘I would be delighted,’ she responded. So I wove through the crowd of our comrades to sit down at the piano, and after hitting a bass chord with an exaggerated flourish, I began playing a lively folk dance popular then. Nino was a very graceful dancer, and he led Maria around the small space with an artful dexterity. He performed his odd faces and expressions, as he occasionally did, and looking over at him from the piano, I laughed as much as Maria. Everyone there knew that the morning would in some way bring the end of our childhood along with many tearful goodbyes, and it made Nino’s humor all the more timely. I played, they danced, and I was very happy to keep it that way, and so I repeated all of the verses at least twice, and finally ending with three consecutive choruses, I reluctantly closed out on a rousing forte. The others cheered and applauded the couple as Nino made a graceful bow and Maria curtseyed self-consciously. ‘It’s your turn now,’ Nino said to me with a raised eyebrow as he sat himself down on the rickety piano bench and played the first few chords of the *Blue Danube*. I took her hand in one of mine and placed my other hand on the small of her back, trying to lead her in the box step my mother had taught me when I was ten. ‘Is this how you do it?’ I whispered to her.

“‘I have no idea,’ she said. ‘We don’t do much waltzing in the highlands.’ Her hands were large and strong, but smoother than I had expected. My hand on her back, I could feel her heart reverberating through her rib cage, and beads of sweat were racing down her forehead and down the bridge of her nose. Perhaps she’s as nervous as I, I thought to myself. I tried deftly to wipe her brow with my handkerchief, but only succeeded in almost poking her eye. I smiled, trying not to stare at her, but I eventually realized that that looking away was even more awkward than staring, so I slowly turned my eyes until they met hers, which were huge and black and shrouded in thick long lashes. I had never seen her wear any sort of cosmetic, and was completely unprepared for the beauty that met me like a frontal assault. I caught my breath sharply. Maria looked surprised. ‘Is something the matter?’ she asked, looking anxious.

“‘No, no, nothing, everything is fine.’ I floundered and sputtered, attempting to salvage our conversation while also trying to keep us from crashing into a wall as we waltzed. ‘It’s just ... Well, you, you ... You’re beautiful, Maria. You’re beautiful.’ She blushed, and gave me a look that I didn’t exactly understand. ‘I sound like a fool, don’t I?’ I said.

“‘No, no ... It’s just, well, well, dancing is hardly discussing the clear and distinct or arguing about the social contract, you know?’ We both broke out laughing, and after a pause I told her I didn’t know she owned a dress. She told me it was from her Confirmation. ‘When you were sealed with the Holy Spirit, like the apostles at Pentecost ... About to be sent out to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of all the earth. That seems somehow appropriate.’ She smiled. ‘Indeed it does,’ she said.

“Soon Nino ended the waltz, and the three of us sat down with our comrades. We laughed and told stories and remembered the days when we first began meeting together. Near the end of the night, someone proposed a toast to the revolution, and I remembered the first night that Nino and I met Maria.

The next morning, Maria once again wore her trousers and boots as she and the others set out for the mountains. Our farewells were terse and heartfelt. We all expected to see each other again within the month ...”

“But did you?” I asked. “I’ve never heard her mentioned among any of the revolutionaries.”

“That’s because she was ambushed along with the group she was leading on her way to the mountains. One of our comrades betrayed them, and a Spanish garrison massacred them all, even though they had no rifles, no bayonets, nothing with which they might have defended themselves.” He became quiet, and I watched the mist from the waterfall collect in droplets and roll down his cheeks like tears.

“Do you know who the Iscariot was, the betrayer?” I asked, trying to sound more mournful than curious.

“His name is Hector Alfonso Flores, the one I spoke of the day we met in the mission church outside San Fernando. He is now a captain in the imperial army. I have yet to meet him in battle, but the day will come. The day will come ... Hector was among our company from the earliest days, the nephew of a provincial governor, though we did not hold it against him – many of us were from wealthy families as well. But he was always tense, compressed, like a fist closed too tight. Small, metallic eyes, never looking at anything save the dirt ahead of his feet. We talked of freedom and lived in hope, but he spoke of retribution, rectitude, words of iron, hard and dull and cold.”

“Why did he betray you?”

The colonel paused, his dark eyes trailing deep into the past. “I think we were too human for him. I wasn’t Caesar. Nino wasn’t Pompey. In the end, we were men, and Hector wanted myths. I remember once over Christmas, he, Nino and I were riding back home to the plains, where his family also lived, and we camped for the night under a small canopy of trees. The next morning, he looked perplexed, and when I asked him if anything was the matter, he said he couldn’t believe that I snored while I slept, and he gave me an odd look that was like a startled sneer. I suppose it was a substitute for laughing as he rarely laughed. I told him many men snored, but all he said was, ‘I suppose men do, I suppose they do.’ I don’t know exactly how he contacted the imperials, but with his connections, I’m sure it wasn’t difficult,” the colonel added bitterly. “I can imagine

him standing to the side during the ambush, sneering, watching his comrades being butchered, watching Maria –” He broke off, real tears now cascading down his cheeks.

He pointed down into the valley below, to the small hut, to the singing. “We fight for them. We fight for the music, so that some might dance more than once with the ones they love, that huts like these, that music like this will not be quenched by silence.”

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I remember the day that San Fernando fell, only a few weeks after the colonel returned to fight. The imperials had fought hard for many months, but they were no match for the well-rested, battle-hungry colonel and his men. His brigade captured a small hill near the city walls and moved in their artillery to bombard the city. They undermined the barricades with explosives. And finally, one day, they used ladders and grappling hooks to scale the walls. The colonel had asked me if I would join his brigade, and so I was at his side that day, and he fought like a hero from a myth, with a ferocity that was like some god-like beast. He hacked and slashed with his saber, his mouth caught between a grimace and grin with white teeth bared. He seized imperial soldiers, making them into human shields and then threw them off of the walls when he no longer had use for them.

It soon became apparent that we had overestimated San Fernando’s strength. There were few imperial soldiers to fight once we scaled the walls, and many of them turned out to be young boys. When they were dispatched, the colonel found the imperial governor and gave him the choice between immediate unconditional surrender and the death of every living thing in the town. The governor wisely chose the first.

“And where is Hector Flores?” the colonel demanded coldly. The governor was shriveled and old, and looked very small under the colonel’s eyes. “He ... he isn’t ... He isn’t here,” the old man sputtered. “I sent him out last night to ride for more reinforcements. He’s, he’s probably halfway to the capital by now.” Judging correctly that the old man would have no reason to lie, the colonel just nodded, looking deflated, receding. Staying near the colonel, I spent the rest of the day following him around the city as he assessed the damage and tried to decide what was in need of most immediate care. As we walked about on that dry midsummer day, we saw toddlers abandoned and screaming in the middle of the street. We saw old men clothed only in homespun pants, looking as though each of their ribs was about to pierce through the skin of their stomachs. We saw the young children with stick arms look hungrily at the dogs we had brought for tracking. At each new horror, the colonel would cover his eyes and say, “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Later that day, the colonel was noticeably absent at the ceremony of surrender, when the governor handed over his sword to General Cortez and all of our men cheered, encouraging each other that the war would be over soon, that the freedom we had fought for would finally be one. Sneaking away, I went to back to the colonel’s tent on the outside of the city. I found him lying facedown on his cot, shaking violently, and he turned over to look at me, his face red and wet and desolate. “What’s the use, Aurilla? The imperials torment our people. We torment our people. They drown in misery regardless of what we do. It’s vanity, Aurilla. All is vanity, striving after the wind.”

“Colonel,” I replied, “I saw what you saw. I saw the sick, the wounded, the starving. It’s a terrible sight for the eyes, and I’m sure that a man with a heart as large as yours feels that pain even more than I do. But remember, it will not always be that way. After the revolution is complete, there will be no more war, no more starvation, no more. It looks bleak, but great things require great sacrifices, as your friend Colonel Arroyo said so well. Don’t despair. The people, colonel, remember, you said it to me. We fight for the people. When all is over, the people, the people you love so much, they will be free.”

“The Father goes on working, and so must we,” he said.

The civil war lasted for nearly another decade. In battle after battle, rumor of Hector Flores would seem to whisper through the ranks, that he had been seen leading a cavalry charge, that he had fought duel with his commanding officer, that he had been spied crawling back to the capital after a failed ambush, his leg struck by a cannon ball. Though it seemed like every soldier in our ranks had seen him with an almost ridiculous regularity, neither the colonel nor I ever even caught sight of him. When we queried the men as to his appearance, some said he was six and half feet tall, others that he had false teeth made of obsidian. Another soldier claimed that he had seen Hector leap twenty feet across a surging river to avoid capture. Still another said that he was half African and spoke only in a demonic heathen tongue. Hearing these stories, I wondered what might happen if the colonel ever met Hector, the titanic struggle between a giant African demon and the noble, knightly colonel. I remember asking the colonel if these rumors were true, but he only shook his head, smiling.

“No, Hector was small, compact, full-blood Spanish. He could barely leap across a large puddle. And black teeth? No, no. They make him sound like some terrifying, earth-shaking jinn. No, he is but a man. A man.”

As the war continued, the number of victories gradually began to outweigh the defeats, and finally, after years in highlands,

on the plains, near the river, our army approached the capital. I anticipated an epic battle, perhaps a long siege, but a few days after making our camp at a surrounding village, an emissary came bearing a white flag. Apparently Spain no longer had neither the money nor the interest to sustain a war, and had instructed the governor to surrender.

On the day of the ceremony, General Cortez accepted the sword of Commandante Utrillo, the commander of the imperial forces, and he handed the saber over to the colonel with a somber nod. All of us men there cheered wildly, and I felt privileged, somehow special, since I was the one that so many years before had convinced him to return. As we were walking back to the house where we were stationed, an infantry soldier ran up to us at full speed and said, "Colonel, Colonel, they've found Hector Flores." Images of a bloody saber duel flashed through my mind. "He's in the hospital, the soldier continued. "He's dying of cholera."

"We were quickly led to the other side of the town, to the hospital, crammed like a jail full of the sick and wounded. It was a house of death. The colonel and I were shown a large long dormitory, the space between the beds merely cracks, the air stewing with the smell of chloroform, urine, and vomit. A nurse pointed us to the far end of the dormitory, and we walked single-file, for there was no room to walk abreast. Lying on a bed in the corner of room was a small man with pale, jaundiced skin hanging loosely over his light bones. He looked no larger than a child. His bright green eyes looked up at the colonel, his face without expression. "Hello, Jose, I would rise to greet you, but ... as you can see, I think I'm not quite able." He turned, painfully moving his head over to the side of the tiny bed, and wretched violently, eyes squeezed shut, hands clutching the neck of his thin night-shirt.

"Nothing in there, you know," Hector continued, smiling bitterly. "Nothing inside of me, it's a wasteland, a desert, dry as dust ... I really am sorry to be in such a state, I know that vengeance is that much less sweet when carried out upon a pathetic object such as myself." He continued, his voice still without emotion. "It's a bitter irony really. I'm so thirsty, I can think of nothing but water, and I want to believe that it's the cure, that it will solve everything, but in my mind I know that it will do nothing. Like you and your revolution, perhaps," he said with a slight smile on his lips. "When I drink the water, I hope that it will soothe, that it will make things better, but it hardly satisfies me for a second. But the pain as it passes through me makes me curse myself for having drunk at all, and I am left just as dry as I had been before."

"I did not come here to argue about ideologies," the colonel replied. "Nor to kill you. I think that will take care of itself soon enough. I want to know what happened that day."

"The ambush?" The colonel shook his head, tersely replying, "The massacre." Hector smiled again. "Words, words ... regardless, there's really very little to tell. I reported to the local garrison commander the path we would be taking, and at the agreed upon time, I deliberately fell behind, and while Maria and rest went ahead, the garrison surprised them and killed them all." The colonel interjected. "So *you* did not –"

"Kill Maria?" Hector replied softly. "No, there was no blood on my hands. The troops took care of everything. I didn't even see any of the event myself. I was on the other side of a bend in the road. I heard a few seconds of rifle fire, a shout or two, and then silence ... Silence." As he spoke, his voice grew hoarse and soft and sputtering, his eyelids began to sink, his breath slowed.

"Did you see her before, before the end?"

"Yes ... Oh, I see. I understand now. You want to know ... if she left the world with any moving words, pledging her love to you, her devotion to your cause ... something that would look good on a plaque or an epitaph ... No. Most were dead by the time I arrived on the scene. She was still alive, but not much alive. I just looked at her, didn't say anything, didn't do anything. I just looked at her. Maria was a beautiful woman, even in death ... perhaps especially in death. I heard her say only one thing, just before her eyes finally closed. No grand oratory, no Crispin's day speech ... nothing about you or anyone else. She only said, 'Tomorrow.' That was all, just 'tomorrow'. Laying here, I wonder ... I wonder if that's the only thing you can say as you die. Tomorrow." And with that, his eyes closed, and he grew still. As we walked out, the colonel said, "It's strange how the demons of our dreams and nightmares suddenly shrink when we finally meet them. It makes you wonder sometimes where the demons really are."

After the war, the colonel removed to the house of his fathers, and I moved to the new capital to work for the fledgling government. Soon after, I married my sweetheart Miranda, whom I had met during the war, and we now have eight children, the oldest of whom was married last summer. The colonel never married, and I heard rumors that he lived like a priest, devoting himself to prayer and once again taking up his studies after a furlough of nearly twenty years.

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As we walk in from the veranda to his sitting room, I notice that he still walks as he did when I first met him, with very long, almost stiff-legged strides. He does not have my old man's limp, the result of a leg broken in a cavalry charge and never

properly set. As we sit down together at the piano bench, he asks me about the state of things in the capital.

“As you know, General Cortez’ son was recently elected Prime Minister, and he appears to be a very competent politician,” I reply. “The Parliament seems to work efficiently under his direction, and together, they have managed to form lucrative trade agreements with America and Britain. I think his work will help to make the nation more prosperous, more secure.” The colonel’s left-hand fingers dance over the keys, occasionally playing a few sparse notes of a sad melody. He says nothing for a while.

“But what of the people, Aurilla, the people? We did not fight for twenty years to be ruled by competent politicians. Maria and Nino did not die for lucrative trade and efficiency. The people, the people, for them, for the future, I remember you once saying. Do the little girls still hover in the alleyways at night, waiting to be torn open by the farmers whose families afford to eat only dry corn? Are the poor still falsely accused and sent to the silver mines because they can’t afford lawyers? Can you still smell the scent of fear like clusters of rusty irons hanging in the air?”

I say nothing, considering his words, and then, ashamed, I reply, “I don’t know. I now spend most of my time tilling my garden ... What do you want for them, for the people?”

“I fought so that they might have life, and have it to the full ... Democracy is the world opening itself before you like dawn chasing the shadows away. It is a cup overflowing. The simple harmony of a thousand voices. The revolution was meant to be a phoenix rising and never dying again. He pauses, eyes still turned toward the keys. “What is your favorite image in Scripture?” The question surprises me. After thinking for a few seconds, I reply, “That of Christ as Good Shepherd, picking up the lost sheep, gathering them to himself and comforting them.”

“Indeed. It is a most moving scene.”

“Do you have a favorite?”

“When Christ wails over his beloved Jerusalem, knowing it will soon be destroyed,” he said dreamily.

“Jerusalem rejected him.”

“They failed to recognize the time of their visitation.”

“I doubt that the Pharisees and Sadducees were wicked men. They were just trying to maintain a prosperous social order, trying to keep the city from falling into ruin.”

“But Christ still died, and the city was still destroyed, despite the good intentions of all involved,” he said, his voicing rising. All throughout our conversation, he has been dabbling upon the keys, but he now rises quickly to his feet, shifting his weight back and forth, his hands trembling. “What do you mean to do?” I ask him.

“Maria once told that she was walking among the foothills of the highlands when she was young, before her parents were killed, and from a distance, she saw a group of mountain lions surrounding a young kid that had been feeding upon the grass of a small knoll. The kid had tried to run, but the mountain lions had cut off all ways of its escape, and appeared ready to pounce. Suddenly, a billy goat, apparently the kid’s father, jumped off of a small cliff over looking the knoll and crashed into the midst of the mountain lions, rearing his horns and trying to protect his offspring.”

“What happened next?” I interject, breathless.

“The kid managed to escape, fleeing up further into the mountains, but Maria told me that the lions killed the billy goat and devoured him on the spot ... Aurilla, I plan to ride to the capital today.”

“Why?”

“Because it will not ride to me.”

“But what will you do there?”

“Throw myself upon the mountain lions.”

“Will you not first sit with me and sing and make music? The poor you will always have –”

“But I must be about my Father’s business. My music will be the crashing of my horse’s hooves.”

He walks hurriedly off towards his study, and comes back a minute later wearing his green short coat and carrying his old saber and pistol. Knowing he has made up his mind, I pack him some food along with a canteen and help him saddle his horse. We embrace quickly and he jumps onto his steed with a young man’s ease. With a cry of ‘The Revolution’, he gallops away into the dusk. I wave goodbye, though he cannot see, and walk back into the house, unsure if I should feel like one who has been left behind.

As the sun sets, I smell the colonel’s rosemary through the open windows, and I wonder if the tomatoes in my garden are yet ripe.

Overqualified

Brian South

Briefcase check tie check fly check breath check it's fucking on it's fucking on it's fucking on it's fucking on up the stairs mop yourself up first Norman nice day it is if you say so don't slip fourth floor going up hello miss intern coffee girl how are you this fine day you can get my coffee anytime lots of cream wouldn't I just like to give it to you right here I'd tie you up down we'd go it wouldn't be that long certainly we wouldn't leave those poor people waiting too long on their precious fourth floor what am I saying of course it's long I'm sure she'd like it all women like it long yeah I'd use that silk scarf around your neck your wrists would go right up against the rail black coffee spilled against the wall there yeah fuck she's getting off not the right way third floor maybe after I'm done I'll pay a little visit to el trio see if there's anyone who has a free night for the master of sensual delights maybe she can take some notes okay fourth floor that's me briefcase check tie check fly check breath shit binaca check it's fucking on it's fucking on it's fucking on it's fucking on it's showtime it's gametime here we go here we go here's the show papa wants a new car hey honey how you doin yeah that's right you like what you see miss receptionist get off the phone because Mr. Talent is here to see Mr. Generous I believe a three o' clock appointment that makes me five minutes early yes this job is mine it's in the bag how could you argue look at this face look at this smile if this doesn't say winner I don't know what does sure I'll take a seat hot stuff probably so you can get a better view don't be ashamed I'm not bothered to put on a show let's see what do we have here Time Newsweek Fortune Forbes what no Penthouse I thought this was a high class place oh well just have to make due high risk tech stocks the way to go none of those shit mutual funds for Mr. Talent he knows his game he's not afraid to show it to nobody Ten Secrets to Wall Street Success I should fucking be writing this shit not these fucking losers who don't know the first thing about investment How I Made My First Million How You Can Too what the fuck once I make my first million I'm sure as fuck not going to tell everyone else how to do it what the fuck is wrong with this guy why yes I'm quite ready to see Mr. Generous thank you honey how could he not hire me I'm the most qualified person for this job ever it was made for me what's with this loser accountant guy coming out of Numero Uno's office no worries he can have all the brown nosers he wants wait till he gets a load of me that dude needs to grow some hair anyway all right all right all right executive office of one Mr. Generous here I come he looks ready for me I'm ready for him briefcase check tie check fly check breath check it's fucking on it's fucking on it's fucking on it's fucking on.

Find a way to cut back on expenses. Fire more people. Get this loser out of my office. Try to ignore the fact that I'm too valuable to be dealing with this menial shit. Get stock quotes soon. Call Nathan to see about the trading. Find a damn copy of the Journal. Stop this guy from droning on and on about the mediocre state of the company. Eat more fiber. Try to get a decent personal trainer. Fire current personal trainer. Have Sally call Exec Travel about Bermuda. Find a nice native girl to fuck in the ass until the sun comes up. Drink an obscene number of margaritas. Try to listen to this moron's report. Pay more attention to market trends. Hire more conservatively. Keep composure in front of colleagues. Feed fish at home. Water plants. Hire another maid. Get this suit retailored. Buy a new suit. Stop by The Gentleman's Club after work. Get some sort of action. Pour some scotch. Sop up the spill. Pretend like it didn't happen in front of the moron. Continue acting like what he's saying is interesting. Give a damn. Find a way to cut back on expenses. Fire more people. Get this loser out of my office. Try to ignore the blatantly obvious fact that I'm too valuable to be dealing with this menial shit. Take an extra long gulp. Pretend it's smooth. Don't grimace. Buy better quality scotch. Sit back down behind the desk. Recline just so. Take hand crafted Italian leather shoes off. Prop the feet up. Keep the eyes open. Stare at the ceiling. Emulate reflection. Switch to a different wireless service provider. Drink more wine. Think about dying hair. Think about hair replacement. Grab a

few more asses now. Wink more. Look fetching. Try to finish this scotch. Act unsurprised that this moron is still here. Ask Sally why Carrie hasn't brought me my annual report yet. Buy a new car. Open eyes back up. Rub face tiredly. Have Sally schedule a game of tennis with Senator Mallory. Tell moron here to wrap it up I have a three o' clock appointment. Buzz Sally to have the three o' clock sent in. Shoo the moron out of my office. Try to make it through the interview with this jerk without falling asleep. Find a way to cut back on expenses. Fire more people. Get this loser out of my office. Try to ignore the fact that I'm too valuable to be dealing with this menial shit.

Could this job get any worse? Could these people be bigger jerks? When's the last time I played golf? Wouldn't this company crash to the ground if I just quit? Does Mr. Genera really care about how to cut back expenses or is he just humoring me? Would my colleagues stop laughing at me if I quit? They wouldn't be laughing if I came back and blew the building up, would they? Won't it be funny when all the little executives run around on fire, their arms flailing above their heads, completely forgetting about the stop, drop, and roll they learned about so many years ago? Sort of a microcosm of their lives, isn't it? They used to be well-trained businessmen and women, but haven't they forgotten everything they learned? How could they just lose the human aspect of business? God, could I hate these money hungry executives with their expensive sports cars and well cut suits any more? Look at him pour himself some scotch to get drunk in the middle of the afternoon, and does he think I didn't notice when he spilled it all over the sidebar? Why does Genera always try to keep up that fucking ridiculous persona of the wealthy captain of industry, when in actuality he's as bald as I am and graying to boot? Why do I still put up with these assholes? Could this job get any worse? Could these people be bigger jerks? When's the last time I really enjoyed playing golf? Wouldn't this company crash to the ground if I just quit? Yeah that's right Genera, why don't you just down the rest of your drink in one go? What a fucking boozier, how am I not vomiting right now like that guy and his penne arribiata at lunch? Should I just kill this prick and serve the jail time, and then maybe there'd be one less fat cat jerk and the world would be that much better? How could I have gone to college to be doing this filth? How can he just lounge back there behind his desk? Would he notice if I cut my report short and just got out of here? Oh great, are his eyes seriously closed? Shouldn't I just stop talking and shoot him in the head while he's asleep, then sneak out of the building and play the most carefree game of golf in my life? How nice of you to open your eyes, mother fucker, to what do I owe this most sacred of honors? All right, I get the picture, wouldn't it be in the company's best interest for me to leave so you can interview your precious three o' clock and possibly hire the future of this sinking ship? And can you see this guy as well as I can, greasy and pathetic? Do you own a mirror, pal? Nice, are you really staring at my fucking head? If I fucking killed you, you'd be staring then, wouldn't you, buddy? Could this job get any worse? Could these people be bigger jerks? When's the last time I played golf? Wouldn't this company crash to the ground if I just quit?

"I can't believe Cynthia's pregnant with her sixth and she's sure it's going to be another girl I can't believe she's going to have five girls and only one boy boys are so much easier to raise than girls at least that's what my mother used to say though she made it clear she wasn't talking about me specifically and from what I can tell she's right because Justin is just a little angel yeah uh-huh uh-huh he never causes problems for me and he always does his homework and when he has a problem he always comes to us and talks to us about it yeah yeah oh hang on a sec Debbie hello Mr. Genera's office yes I do have you down for the twelfth at ten yes ok see you then I'm back sorry I swear I hate this job I have to put up with the most anal people here but where was I oh yeah he's not like Sarah who keeps everything bottled up inside and then it usually comes out with her breaking curfew or skipping a class at school or something yes yeah uh-huh no all I'm saying is that Justin is a lot easier to raise because he knows how to address his problems whereas Sarah just redirects her frustration to places where it really shouldn't go and Tom and I get so frustrated about that sometimes uh-huh uh-huh yeah I know uh-huh she did uh-huh uh-huh uh-huh are you serious uh-huh really he told me that they were still together uh-huh well I think that that's wonderful for him he needs to get back out there it just wasn't a healthy relationship uh-huh but I can't believe Cynthia's pregnant with her sixth and she's sure it's going to be another girl like us I can't believe she's going to have five girls and only one boy uh-huh uh-huh yeah well that serves him right he's been acting that way since high school and there's no call for that if you ask me he just got what was coming to him I know yeah seriously I know what you mean yeah hang on Debbie hello yes Mr. Talech I have you down for three o' clock yes you are five minutes early go ahead and have a seat and I'll call you when Mr. Genera is ready yes thank you yes okay Debbie sorry Mr. Genera's three o' clock just showed up and talk about corny he just walked right up to my desk and made a point of saying he was five minutes early like I'm the one who's supposed to be impressed or something yeah uh-huh what oh he can't hear me he's across the room but then when I told him he could have a seat and wait he definitely checked me out I mean I'm flattered and all yeah but come on it was so obvious that's terrible uh-huh yeah uh-huh uh-huh are you serious yeah yeah uh-huh he did not no he didn't uh-huh well I would just tell him that he should learn some manners or you're through yes yes I would I know I know it is you've told me he won't want to give it up either that's why you should give him the ultimatum yeah no I'm sure it'll work trust me and if it doesn't Debbie I have to call you back yes Mr. Genera I'll send him

in Mr. Talech Mr. Genera will see you now you're welcome hey Debbie I'm back where was I oh yeah I can't believe Cynthia's pregnant with her sixth and she's sure it's going to be another girl I can't believe she's going to have five girls and only one boy."

Mr. Oppenheimer's faxes, Ms. Sanderson's coffee, Mr. Gantington's stat sheet copies, Mr. Marchal's market reports, gotta remember, gotta stay on the ball, am I on the ball, I hope I'm on the ball, if I weren't on the ball would I know it, when is this fucking elevator going to get here, every fucking day it's as slow as hell, you'd think they'd get somebody to look at it, it's not like they don't have the money, I really hope this summer goes well, Mom would be so happy if they offer me a position for next year, god I'm only going up one floor, it'd be faster to take the stairs if I didn't have all this shit, hard enough to carry as it is, this job is so much harder than school, but this is what I want to do, right, so I better get used to it, it just seems like I'm better than carrying all of this shit around all the time, could this scarf get any tighter, I feel like I can't even breathe, shit, no hands to loosen it right now, finally the fucking elevator, I should have taken the stairs, oh god, who's this loser with the briefcase in the middle of the day, looks like he's never carried one before, yuck, he's definitely checking me out, why do I put up with this shit, stop it Carrie, just deal with it, god I can feel his breath on me, sick, yuck, god, get me out of here, why is this fucking elevator going so slow, Jesus, ok concentrate, gotta concentrate, finally Jesus Christ finally, goodbye bad breath, Mr. Oppenheimer's faxes, Ms. Sanderson's coffee, Mr. Gantington's collated, stapled stat sheet copies, Mr. Marchal's market reports, all right which office is nearest, gotta hurry, they're gonna to be fucking pissed, and all because of that stupid goddam elevator, oh fuck, Mr. Tartak, looks like he wants me to do something, yes, Mr. Tartak, no problem, I can make six thousand copies of these data reports and have them on your desk in three minutes, sure, I'll just add it to the pile, lay it on me, I am never sleeping with you again, I don't care how much sway you have with hiring, it just hurt, and not in a good way, and you don't even care about what a lady wants in return, I should tell his wife, I will if I don't get hired, fuck, papers everywhere, thank god the coffee didn't spill, that would have been perfect, Ms. Sanderson could just suck on Mr. Marchal's market reports for her hourly caffeine fix, all right, what goes where, fax to fax, stat sheet there, another fax, market report, all right done, no sweat, god Mr. Keller was watching me the whole time from behind, he is such a sleaze, there's no way he's getting any of this, I don't care if he's single and his best friend is the director of personnel, fuck him, or, don't fuck him, I should say, what a sleaze, yes, Ms. Fenster, I would be delighted to take this all the way down to the fucking basement mailroom for you, when you could just as easily put it in the mail basket, but oh, no, it's especially important, so we must be extra certain that it gets there, so it can be mailed first thing in the morning, what a fucking bitch, not to mention slut, I wonder who on this floor she hasn't fucked, she's probably done everybody, including Ms. Sanderson, slut, shit, focus, Carrie, focus, where was I, Ms. Fenster's mail, Mr. Tartak's data report copies, Mr. Oppenheimer's faxes, Ms. Sanderson's coffee, Mr. Gantington's stat sheet copies, Mr. Marchal's market reports.

Mop mop mop fucking mop—this is some sick shit—can't believe I have to do this shit in the middle of the day when I should be kicking back in the break room watching my soaps—probably because of some queasy executive who decided he couldn't make it five more steps to throw up outside instead of in my nice lobby—son of a bitch—and nobody bothered to tell me about it for who knows how long so it stinks to high hell—ha ha that greasy mother fucker almost stepped right in it—didn't even notice it—that would have made my fucking day—but goddam this smell is bad—guy must have had peppers and garlic for lunch or something—no but don't worry about it old Norman's here to take care of everything Just go on about your day—it'll be all right—like that lady who's doing everything she can to not even look at this side of the lobby—yeah that's right lady get in your fucking elevator and go make your money—I'll clean the fucking mess up don't worry—can't wait till I can knock off here and go home and spend some time with my wife and kids—goddam people here think I don't have a life outside of the New Valley Office Building—gotta stay here till eight o' fucking clock in the evening—how the hell do they think I'm supposed to keep a real life—always asking me to work overtime and on holidays and when I do work they just have me do stupid shit like mop up some guy's refunded peppers and onions or change a fucking light bulb or some shit—I'm a high school graduate for Christ's sake—what do they think I got nothing better to do than wipe this puke off these floors I just cleaned this morning—mother fuckers—Mop mop mop fucking mop—oh Lord this is some sick shit—I bet if I switched places with that guy in the suit there for one week I'd do a hell of a lot better at his job than he would do at mine—what does he do all day anyway—just sit around adding stupid numbers together and giving reports on those numbers to other people in suits who don't give a goddam about what he's saying anyway—he wouldn't last one day mopping up this shit here—probably up and quit—say he's over qualified or some shit—hell ain't we all overqualified—I don't want to be cleaning up nobody else's puke neither—but by God Pete's gonna go to fucking college whether he likes it or not and I'm gonna get him there even if it means wiping up overpriced leftover peppers and onions off my lobby floor for the rest of my life—Jesus Christ this stinks—Helen's gonna ask what I did tonight and I'm gonna tell her I cleaned up somebody else's puke so our son can go to college—damn straight I am—and she'll put her arms around me after I shower of course and kiss me and tell me I'm a wonderful husband—damn straight I am—mop mop mop fucking mop—this is some sick shit.

Geraniums

Sally Boman

It's June. Waves of heat stir on the metal roof of the trailer, then flutter up to the cloudless sky. Maggie and Pete sit in the front of a blue Chevy pickup. A brown couch, a mattress, a small table, one chair, a radio, an unassembled bookshelf, a brass towel rack, one carpet, and twelve cardboard boxes sit in back of the blue Chevy pickup. Maggie is holding another box in her lap with red geraniums in it. She squints in the noon day sun as she looks over the trailer. "It's smaller than they said, Petey."

Pete grips the vinyl steering wheel. He looks at his hands, then breathes in hard through his nose. His brow droops as he exhales. "Just till the end of summer. When summer's over and Bill leaves, I'll make foreman. We'll get a real nice house, end of August." He glances over at Maggie. "It's just till then."

Maggie smiles, leans over and flicks a pebble of sweat from his nose. She looks down and strokes a geranium petal. "I know. I guess it won't be so bad. Cozy." A cloud of gnats filters in through the open truck window; a droning murmur fills the front seat. Maggie and Pete both scrunch up their faces, cough, then laugh as they wave off the tiny winged things.

"Ugh." Pete blows a remaining gnat from his nose. "I'll start to unload. You stay here, don't want you to over-exert yourself." He pats her stomach and gets out of the car. Maggie remains in the seat for a moment. She looks down at the box of geraniums. Seven pots filled with damp brown loam, the slight stems stretching from their roots to uplift the fervent little blossoms. Maggie's father loved flowers, all kinds. He grew impatiens in the window of their duplex when she was a girl. Convinced the large German landlady of their one room apartment to let Maggie and him grow lilies and violets behind the tool shed. "Her mama left her, she needs to see some pretty things," he told the landlady. Kept marigolds in the window of his dingy little office at the laundromat. A house, he would say, isn't a home without flowers.

It's July. Maggie sits on the brown couch in her bathing suit. It's 102 degrees. She's listening to a broadcast of *Aida* on the radio, reading last January's *Good Housekeeping*. A clicking box fan rustles the pages of her magazine. "Lighten Up a Room with Mirrors," "Quick and Easy Chocolate Souffle," "Three Step Window Treatments." Maggie has almost memorized the articles by now. Really, there isn't much else to do. She and Pete haven't even unpacked the twelve cardboard boxes yet. After all, this is just temporary. Pete is working double shifts to finish up a new high-brow office building in Atlanta. It's an hour commute round-trip, and he gets home every night exhausted, but he's sure to make foreman by the end of September, maybe even sooner. Then they'll move into a house, with a mailbox and porch swing and a place for Maggie to plant her geraniums. They're sitting in the shade of the refrigerator right now, all seven of them in a line. Hearty little plants, to stay alive in this heat. She turns to the article "Trendy Baby Rooms Are Cheaper than You Might Think!" Maggie runs her hand down the tightening skin over her stomach. Pete tells her she looks slender as ever, but really, she's excited to be getting bigger! She is going to be a wonderful mommy. And while her baby sleeps, in her bright new kitchen, she will make the world's quickest, easiest chocolate souffle.

It's August. Maggie is having coffee with Blanche, who lives alone in the trailer next door. Blanche is a thin, middle aged woman with weary shoulders and black penciled-in eyebrows. She smokes a cigarette over an ashtray balanced on the arm of her lawn chair. Maggie sips her coffee like whiskey, wincing after each swallow. She feels a little nauseated. The two women watch the sun set from their chairs on the crabgrass patch between their trailers. The dying sun washes everything with a golden light. "When are you due?" Blanche's voice is low and rasping.

“ January 17th.”

“So is it a little girl?”

“We aren’t sure. Pete and I, we want it to be a surprise,” says Maggie, blushing. Secretly she wants a little boy. She’ll name it Aaron Peter, after her father and Pete. “The doctor said that everything looks ok, but I’m so small.” Maggie coughs up some drops of coffee that went down the wrong way. “The doctor, he says we shouldn’t move till the baby comes. You know, less stress.”

Blanche sniffs. “I told you about my first baby, didn’t I?”

“No?”

“Came two months early. Water broke on the sidewalk in front of Nina’s Bakery. I was carrying six pecan pies for Sunday School, and felt the baby coming.” Blanche rubs her forehead with a wrinkled hand, smearing some of her eyebrow. “I just wanted to have my baby in a hospital, white sheets and nurses and all.” She laughs. “Instead I wind up on the sidewalk next to six squashed pies. I tell you. Beaufort wasn’t even in town. He was off with *her*.” She looks down at her cigarette butt. “He was off in Montgomery with her and I was on the concrete, pushin’ a baby out with cars driving by.” Blanche snuffs the butt too hard into the ashtray and it topples off the lawn chair onto the red clay. She looks up at Maggie. “Wish now I’d divorced him sooner. Not that it matters anymore.”

They sit in silence as the sun slumps further behind the hills. A thick twilight creeps over Live Oak Mobile Home Community. Blanche picks up the ashtray and lights another cigarette.

It’s September.

“Petey, wake up,” Maggie gasps. Pete sleeps like a dead man. She pokes him limply with her pale hand. “Petey.” She heaves again, feels like a fist is squeezing her soft pink stomach and twisting it dry. Experience has taught her to set a trash can by her bed every night, anticipating the inevitable vomit tempest at 3 am.

She knows how tired Pete is. He’s working sixteen hours a day now; he’s so close to getting promoted. But until then, he continues to stagger in at 11:30 pm and collapse onto the brown couch in fatigue. Maggie wipes the sweat, clay, and sometimes blood from his face and takes off his boots. Usually she can get him to come to bed but sometimes he just stays there, in his dirty work clothes, till 4:30, when he has to get up again.

Maggie understands, and doesn’t try again to wake him. When she has nothing left in her stomach, she slumps back against the bed and tries to stop her spinning head. She reminds herself how wonderful this baby will be, and how everything will be worth it. Pete’s backbreaking construction work, and her body-wrenching vomiting, all that will vanish from memory when the baby comes and they get a real house.

Through the Three Step Window Treatments she put up last week, Maggie can see the sky, a fragile clouded sepia that will soon give way to the pink of dawn. Her geraniums are on the windowsill. They look like they need water.

It’s October. Maggie always has a hard time in October because it’s when her father died. Three years ago she spent all of October in a hospital room, watching cancer eat the bones away from her father’s brittle body. She and Pete were engaged then, to be married the next April. Maggie worked a department store during the day and the late shift at a diner to pay for school. Every day between shifts she came to the hospital, listening to her father’s hoarse breathing and watching the luster in his eyes grow muted. She tries to stay busy in October.

So now she is making a slipcover for the brown couch. Blanche picked the fabric out from the thrift store, since Maggie is no longer allowed to leave the trailer. She has such a delicate frame, and the baby is growing too fast for her. Maggie has never made anything like this before, but the April edition of Good Housekeeping has instructions for “No-Sew Slipcovers that Look GREAT and Save Money.”

After a half hour of struggling with the heavy fabric and safety pins, she feels a gnawing in her stomach. She always feels guilty, eating an extra hot dog bun or can of peaches. Pete works so hard and she hates consuming their meager savings. But when she begins to feel light-headed, she decides to open a box of macaroni. As she is sitting down to eat, the phone rings. Maggie lifts the bowl of macaroni off her swollen belly and gets up.

“Hello?”

“Maggs, it’s me.”

“Petey? What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, just seeing how you feel.” Pete sounds tired.

“I feel fine.” Maggie feels awful.

“Ok. Call the site if you need anything.”

“I will.” Maggie says goodbye but Pete has already hung up. She collapses back into the kitchen chair. She needs to clean, but she just doesn’t have the energy. The trailer is messier than it used to be. Pete unpacked one of the twelve boxes on

one of his days off because he needed his tools for something. Maggie unpacked four more, looking for all of her old *Glamours*. It gives her some new magazines to read, even if all the pictures of clothes and makeup are out of date. She has all her real books in one of the boxes, but she'll wait to unpack that one when they move out. It would just clutter up the place anyway. Pete expects to get that promotion in the next two weeks. Maggie lies down on the brown couch; her stomach hurts. The geraniums' blossoms have dropped off, but that's natural in the fall, says *Good Housekeeping's* article "Perennials 101".

It's November. Maggie knows Pete didn't mean to hit her. He's so exhausted from working long hours in a high stress environment. She knows he's on edge. He's a loving husband. It was her fault, really. She just wishes it hadn't happened on Thanksgiving.

For the past two weeks Maggie has worked on Thanksgiving dinner, trying to make it nice for Pete on his day off. She wanted it to be a surprise, so she waited until Pete got home and collapsed on the bed. Despite the doctor's orders to avoid straining herself, she moved the slip-covered couch back against the window, and set up the kitchen table in the living room. Maggie smiled as she thought of the two of them, eating turkey and stuffing at a candlelit table, both thankful for all they had and everything they would have, very soon. It would be nice to actually talk to Pete, too, find out things he was thinking. Talk to him about the baby, how it was kicking and how she read to it during the day, just to get a head start. *Glamour* and *Sports Illustrated*, because she wasn't sure if it was a boy or girl. She had started to unpack her books too, and planned to start reading *Great Expectations* as soon as Thanksgiving is over.

Maggie got up at 7 am to start cooking. She set the table with a beige sheet and two candles, and some ears of corn. *Good Housekeeping* called for dried corn, but Blanche said there was none at the supermarket so she got fresh corn. It still looked nice.

When Pete came out of the bedroom that afternoon, he stopped and narrowed his eyes. "What's going on?"

From the kitchen, Maggie beamed. "I wanted us to have a nice Thanksgiving. I made it into a dining room, like in a real house." She turned to stir the potatoes. "I think everything should be ready in an hour or so."

"Maggie, I don't want all this." Pete sounded exasperated. "Can we please just put the couch back so I can watch the game?" Pete had bought a 30" TV two weeks ago to watch football. Maggie had turned the TV to face the wall this morning.

Maggie turned around. She furrowed her eyebrows. "I want to have dinner as a family, with candles."

Pete sniffed. "Maggs, I'd really rather just relax and watch TV. You don't have to do all this, and you shouldn't have moved the couch, with the baby and all. We can eat in the kitchen." He pushed the table towards the door and turned the TV around. "Why the hell is there raw corn on the table?"

"It's for decoration," said Maggie quietly. She stared down into the bubbling potatoes as Pete rearranged the room. Pete flopped down on the couch and clicked on the TV. He rolled his eyes and chuckled under his breath "Raw corn on the table. What the hell." Then to Maggie: "When did you say dinner would be ready?"

Something inside Maggie's ribcage tightened, her eyes threatening to spill hot tears into the pot. Her voice was hollow. "When we have a decent place to live instead of this pit."

Pete jumped up from the couch, "You ungrateful *bitch*. I work till my hands bleed, and you sit around all day reading magazines. Don't complain when you don't help with *shit*." He grabbed her shoulders and shook her, then flung her off in disgust. He turned and sat back on the couch, his back to Maggie, and turned the TV up.

Maggie stood, gripping the stirring spoon till her nails dug into her palm. She had just wanted this to be a nice day. Too late. Wordlessly she lifted the pan by its handles and threw it against the dingy kitchen wall. The potatoes rolled out of the fallen pan onto the linoleum. Pete leapt up at the clang and splatter. Eyes blazing, he lurched across the room. Maggie shut her eyes when he swung the meat of his palm into her cheekbone, but she didn't flinch. Her head burst into fireworks of pain. Pete looked at his hand, calloused and trembling. He bent down stiffly and started to pick up the soggy, grimy potatoes. Maggie watched, eyes hazy and head throbbing, as he went and turned the TV to face the wall, and pushed the couch back to make room for the Thanksgiving table.

Maggie knows he didn't mean it.

It's April. Aaron is three months old. The birth was swift and on schedule, despite all the doctor's fears. Maggie doesn't remember a lot from the whole ordeal, except one nurse telling her to concentrate hard on something, anything, because the baby's coming soon. Maggie tried to ignore the pain coursing through her body, the skin stretching, ripping. She looked at Pete, the clock, the window; nothing soothed her loins, nothing made the air seem less agonizingly stifling. It was hot. Heat escaped her body like steam off the top of a trailer. Like hot vomit rising in a nauseous throat. Like boiling potatoes in a tiny kitchen. She screamed and it was a boy.

Aaron looks like his daddy, with dark eyes and fragile lips. He's napping in his playpen, under an umbrella outside the trailer. Live Oak Mobile Home Community is blooming, the white spring light spilling in through even the most tightly closed

mini-blinds.

Maggie is planting her geraniums. One of them withered last winter, so she only has six. It works out better this way, because three can go on the left of the doorstep and three on the right. Their blossoms are not fully open but the soft hearts of the petals are visible through the buds. Maggie isn't sure how they will grow, but they look pretty now. And she can always dig them back up when they move out of the trailer. Aaron stirs in his playpen, then falls back asleep.

Blanche comes out of her trailer in a navy dress and starts her car. She's going to Beaufort's funeral in Alabama with a look of ill-concealed satisfaction on her face. She waves at Maggie and lights a cigarette. Blanche has stopped painting her eyebrows on. Her face looks peculiar now, but somehow softer.

Maggie hears the oven timer go off. She's making a roast for Pete's and her anniversary. Three years, and so much to come. Any day now, Pete is going to get a raise. Maggie runs in to baste her roast, careful not to slam the screen door. She leaves Aaron asleep outside. The geraniums stir in the spring breeze.

Junk Food, or the Disappearance of the Fat Man

Shaun Dillon

Paul Grunt lived up to his name. If we wish to understand Paul, we must first learn to decipher his grunts, which, in aggregate, form a bipartite pattern, representing the two qualities that most defined his character: his unrelenting egocentrism and his passion for cheap, unhealthy vittles.

Paul knew everything. If you told him something he didn't already know, he would grunt and cast it aside as false. If you then proved your statement's veracity, Paul would grunt and insist it was not worth knowing in the first place. Paul knew the known knowns and known unknowns alike—there were no unknown unknowns.

You might say our world revolved around Paul, and in a way it did. Paul was the anchor around which our axis rotated, the fulcrum of our spiritual see-saw. If you sent us all into space, Paul would immediately affix himself to a certain location, never to move again, and gravitational forces would cause us to either merge with the savant, absorbed by his massive personality, or to orbit him. Paul was big. At 260 pounds, he easily outweighed us all. In short, Paul eclipsed the prescribed weight for a twenty-something male of his height by a buck, maybe a buck-o-five.

Paul existed in one of two states, depending on what he was consuming. When he ate, he was sedentary. Picture him sitting on a couch, like a plant neglecting its tropisms, a bear sinking into hibernation, sinking its teeth into a bacon sandwich. Paul loved hoagies, bacon, pizza, cheesesteaks, baconcheesesteaks, pizzacheesesteaks, baconpizzacheesesteaks, and so on. He flooded his hoagies with mustard, canola oil, maple syrup. He garnished the dish with potato chips of various flavors—grapefruit-coriander, sauerkraut-salmon, peanut butter-jalapeno-ice cream. And he drank the most ridiculous pop you could find. Once we caught Paul eating a cheesesteak with a hamburger and a tuna melt folded inside, curry-n-cotton potato chips, and mayonnaise-flavored cola. Like a dormant cactus, or perhaps a pig, Paul did not bathe as often as he should have, as bathing required walking to the shower, and, for Paul, walking required a certain input, which brings us to his second state.

When Paul drank, he moved. The beverage of choice was either cheap vodka or cheap beer, with the exception of the times he drank a Long Island Iced Tea to get wasted, or a Bloody Mary, which recalled the flavor of the ketchup that doused his cheesesteaks.

The first, sedentary, state was unpleasant to watch—picture Paul shoveling an Italian hoagie into his mouth, chewing with his lips open, sucking down a root beer, breathing heavily, belching. When he finished a meal, Paul sat and grunted. He constantly emitted foul noises and odors, like an incinerator, an uncouth gorilla, forever bound by his unfortunate name. Yet, as disgusting as his sedentary state was, it was preferable to the drunken state, in which Paul bounded about the room like King Kong, grunting, chasing women, spilling pitchers, knocking over tables, sometimes keeling over from the force of his own weight. Trying to control Paul when he got drunk was like rodeo—it would take at least three normal-sized guys to corral him, and even that was risky.

Ecstasy, for Paul, was combining both states. On occasion, he drank beer with his hoagie, and bounded around the room, sitting on the edge of the couch as he bit into his sandwich, then standing up and running in circles with his beer, grunting so fast it sounded falsetto. He dreamed of a hoagie-flavored beer, or a beer-flavored hoagie, and tried to combine the flavors into one by mixing mayonnaise in a Coors, or dunking a peppersteak in a Natty Light.

So picture Paul at the beach. Or, to tell you the truth, don't. The sight of stretch marks on a 25-year-old man is not appealing. Picture Paul after the beach, on vacation, in a bar full of unsuspecting women, for that is how we last saw him.

We were able to lure Paul out to the bar with a couple of Long Islands, a few beers, and at least one Bloody Mary. Three of us—Paul, Bob, and I—sat around a table in our motel room eating hoagies, drinking, and playing poker. It should be noted that, when Paul had food and alcohol—and a diversion such as poker—eating became the most important activity and the sedentary state predominated. When in doubt, Paul sat still.

As Paul guzzled a bag of chips, two hoagies, and two dozen drinks, Bob and I split a foot long hoogie and a twelve pack. After a few drinks, Paul's eyes glazed. He bet ten bucks on a pair of eights. He thought two jacks beat three kings. He said, "hit me," between hands. I looked at Bob, who was laughing.

"We're not playing blackjack," Bob said. "We're playing poker."

"I *know* we're playing poker," Paul grunted. "Hit me."

"No, you fat fuck, you don't say, 'hit me' in poker."

"I know we're playing poker. *That's what I said.*"

"Those drinks getting to your head, Paul?"

"No I'm not feeling anything."

"You look pretty drunk to me."

"No. I'm only buzzing."

"You're 'only buzzing' all right."

"I want a cheesesteak."

After churning in the big man's stomach for a couple hours, the drinks seeped into his head, providing his brain with the stimulation it needed to raise the body into a standing position and move the legs forward, one after another, at which point inertia took over, and Paul became confined to his walking state—beer in hand—until we got to the bar.

And at the bar is where we saw the dinosaur. A tyrannosaurus-rex to be exact. That's what Paul became, with the help of alcohol. At first the t-rex was funny. Hey Paul, we said, you look like a t-rex. He beamed and gulped his beer, and what ordinarily would have been a grunt became a roar. When the music was good, Paul raised his stubby arm in the air, his outer two fingers pointed up as if to wake the devil. When the music was bad, Paul wanted more beer.

"Hey, Dillon," he said to me. "I'm going to get drinks. Want one?"

"Get three beers," I said—two for us, and one for Bob, who was in the bathroom. Paul disappeared into a crowd by the bar. In a few minutes, he returned with four shots of vodka.

"I said get three beers."

"I got shots."

"I said get three beers."

"They're *vodka* shots."

Paul handed one to me and I drank it. He drank his shot. He had two left over. Paul examined the shots like a child encountering an ostrich for the first time.

"Where's Dylan?" Paul asked, after a silence.

"I'm right here," I said.

"No, where's Dylan?"

"Right here, Paul. I'm Dillon."

"I *know* you're Dillon." He stepped towards me, his eyes bulging about an inch from mine, snorting foul breath like a rhinoceros rearing to charge. "Where's *Bob Dylan*?"

I laughed. "Probably off on tour somewhere."

"*Where's Bob Dylan?*"

No sense of recognition in the rhino's eyes. I feared he would trample me. Then I caught on. "You mean our *friend*, Bob?"

"Yes, Bob."

"He's in the bathroom."

Paul nodded. "Okay." He snorted, looked at the shots again—this time like a prospector examining his tray—and drank one.

"Where's Fred?"

"Fred's not here."

"Is he in the bathroom, too?"

"No, Fred didn't come on vacation with us."

"Oh." Paul gurgled and drank the last shot.

“That was Bob’s drink,” I said.

“Bob’s not here,” Paul said. “I want pussy.”

“She’s in the bathroom too.”

“No, I want pussy *now*.”

Paul growled like the walnut-brained Cretaceous monster he had become, so lacking a sense of time or feasibility that he might chase a pterodactyl, or a frisbee.

“Look. *There*.”

The t-rex pointed his stubby arm at a girl across the room, dancing, her back to a guy, his arms around her. Paul shuffled over to her, his hand in the air to salute the devil, closed his eyes, grunted, and ground his hips into her. She stopped dancing and stared in disbelief. The guy she was dancing with rolled up his sleeves.

“Paul,” I said. No response. “Paul.”

“Huh?” I awakened the beast, apologized to the guy and the girl, and led him away, at which point Bob showed up.

Bob shook his head and leaned toward me. “Dillon, just let him do it.”

“No,” I said. “He’s practically molesting that girl. That’s assault. He’s going to get us in a fight.”

“Dillon, just let him. He can defend himself. And if someone fucks with Paul, I’ll take him on.”

Bob was big, but not that big. And Paul was drunk and out of shape for a tyrannosaurus. He couldn’t defend a beer at this point. But what the hell, I thought. As I talked to Bob, Paul must have wandered off. When I turned, he was gone. A few moments later, Paul emerged from a crowd, with a girl. She was actually dancing with him and she seemed to be enjoying herself.

“See, Dillon. Look at that. He’s going to get lucky tonight.”

“Maybe.”

I looked on in disbelief. This girl was attracted to Paul. This was bizarre. He had his arm around her, and he looked almost graceful for a dinosaur. He licked his lips and tilted his head to the side to kiss her. Bob nudged me, winking. Paul’s face neared hers, but the moment before the two spheres were to meet, she turned away, giving Paul a faceful of hair. But they kept dancing. Paul tilted his head again and again she looked away. He tried a third time. Again, nothing. She loosened her hold of the beast’s shoulders and backed away a bit, but they still danced. I looked at Bob and he was laughing. I laughed too.

“He’s going to be proud of this tomorrow,” Bob said.

“He shouldn’t be,” I said.

“He will.”

“You shouldn’t egg him on like that, Bob. This is awful.”

Bob shook his head. “It’s no big deal.”

No big deal. As we laughed, Paul made his final, fatal move. He tilted his head, cupped the back of hers with his hand, opened his mouth, and curled her face into his, as if to take a bite of a giant apple.

“Get *away* from me,” she shrieked, pushing the big man, and ducked into the crowd. And the t-rex, having cornered his prey, gave chase. He dashed into the crowd like a fullback into the pile, which engulfed him. There was a scream, and people collapsed like a wall of bricks, drinks flying. At the middle of the pile, legs kicked, and behind those legs stood Paul, triumphant, one arm raised in the air, one arm holding the girl. As the bouncers converged on the dinosaur, Bob and I bolted, leaving the big man king, if for a moment, with his queen, an alcohol-drenched pterodactyl sandwich.

Falls Road

Liam Farrell

The suitcases that Michael had taken out of the closet were old and tattered, barely used, but still worn almost to the point of disrepair. He would not be going very far away but he did not think these old bags would make it all the way to Dublin. The handles, at the very least, would probably break off in his hands after he had moved all of his clothing into them.

“I know those suitcases are old, Michael, but they should do the job. They are reliable. They saw me through many a tough night and a long journey. I think they’ll do the same for you.” Michael had not noticed his father come down the long hallway by the stairs. He knew what conversation was coming next.

“I don’t see why you have to leave tomorrow,” his father said.

“Dad, I’ve told you dozens of times. I wanted to get a job in Dublin so I could get used to the city before the university starts. Tomorrow is as good a time as any.”

“But school just stopped here. I think you should give it more time, reconsider all your options.” He wasn’t looking at Michael anymore.

“I’m not going to fucking Queen’s, Dad. Dublin has the best science programs in Ireland.” Michael shook his head. He knew where this argument was going. “I’m leaving Belfast, Dad. I can’t take this anymore.”

His father eyes narrowed as he looked back at his son. “Can’t take it? Get your head on straight, boy.” He slapped Michael on the head. “Don’t think you’re fucking above the rest of the people here. Don’t think you’re above your mates either, especially Breandan.”

Breandan had been Michael’s best friend for almost his entire life, and when Breandan got kicked out of his house by his parents Michael’s father had been more than happy to take him in. Breandan had only moved out the previous year and since that time there had only been two people living in the house. Michael had found less and less to talk about with his father since then.

Rather than follow Michael’s path and continue school at a university, Breandan had decided to join the Real IRA, committing himself to one of the few Catholic paramilitary organizations left. Michael wondered whether he would have received his father’s approval by taking the easy way out with his anger and frustration with Belfast by resorting to petty violence and gangster tactics. His father had been an IRA man in his youth, and although Michael had never found out why he had left, it seemed likely his mother had convinced him to leave that lifestyle behind.

“And that’s one of the reasons I’m fucking going, Dad. I don’t want to see my best friend in jail or a coffin. Better to lose him as a friend while he is still alive. I’ve been to enough funerals for a dozen lifetimes.”

“The fight is here, Michael, not in a classroom, not in fucking Dublin. Do you think anyone there has an idea of what it is like here?”

“I hope no one does. Then it will make it easier for me to forget.”

Michael expected to get hit again and was surprised when the blow never fell. His father never dealt with arguments or discipline in a peaceful manner, no doubt a remnant of the years spent engaging in underground warfare. Violence was embedded in every part of his father’s mannerisms. Even when he opened the door to a normal room in his own house there was a feeling that he was bursting in on an unsuspecting RUC man or an informant. Every movement held a vague threat.

Instead, Michael’s father sighed and went upstairs, pausing briefly by the picture of his dead wife and dead son, Seamus. He felt betrayed that his youngest son had become an intellectual and not a fighter, a pacifist, not a rebel. The fact

that the legendary Padraig McDermott had failed to create a revolutionary was always a topic of conversation with his old IRA friends at the local pubs.

“What’s wrong, Padraig? Did your son bring a new boyfriend home?”

“Too bad Michael takes after his mother, Padraig.”

“Your last hope is going to Dublin, Padraig? Does he think he’s too good for Belfast?”

Michael’s father slowly went into his bedroom, passing the small Irish Republic flag on the wall, the black brimmer hat that he had inherited from his own father the day that he had joined the IRA, and the small frame which housed a drawing he had made of his wife and given to her the Christmas before she died.

“Keep the faith, son. Ireland needs you now. One day, you will know the pride that I feel now.” Those words, spoken to him almost thirty years earlier, had come true when Seamus had left for his own fight. To think of them now only left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He knew that his son had some Protestant friends, that he had even dated a Protestant girl. He had failed in instilling the proper ideals into his son and decided it was time for Michael to see how cruel the world was on his own, even outside the walls of Belfast.

* * *

As Michael began to empty his drawers he paused at the sight of a green soccer jersey that his father had given him after his mother died. It was dusty, and there were some holes near the collar, but it still smelled like the soccer pitch the day that he had met Breandan.

He had seen little of Breandan in recent weeks, partly out of habit. They had started traveling in different circles once Breandan started reading rebel authors, listening to IRA songs, and fantasizing about the day he would take out the bastard policeman who arrested him for petty theft when he was fifteen. Near the end of secondary school they were little more than acquaintances, and out at pubs they were as good as strangers. Small decisions they had each made independently of the other had finally driven them apart. They had once pledged to always be close to one another, but now that was impossible, and Michael’s relationship with Jane, a Protestant girl, had severed almost all the ties left.

Everyday on his way home from school, Michael would pass by that soccer pitch. On the Falls Road, few Protestants would give him or any other Catholic any shit, but about five years ago the authorities had put up spikes of metal surrounding the pitch. Barbed wire was not an accurate description; indeed, it was much more menacing than that.

Now, the few times he did play there, he felt hemmed in by what was supposed to make him feel safe. Michael felt surrounded on his own home field, distracted and nervous while his friends kicked the ball at one another or whistled at the girls coming home in their short plaid skirts.

Near the top of the fence that lined the field were tattered Republic flags that would lazily wave in any wind, wrapping themselves around the metal spikes. The flags had been put there by local IRA men as a warning, and someone close to their cause had ripped out the middle section. None of the flags had white separating the green and orange; there were only two sides, not three, a clear symbol of what it meant for anyone from Shankhill to come into this area.

Occasionally, Michael would see a tour bus pass him as he walked past the pitch. He could count on them taking pictures of the tattered flags and that they would also do the same at the Republican mural on the side of his house. A few children and Michael’s friends would always throw rocks at the bus and try to get into its trunk until the bus and its frightened cargo would manage to speed off. Michael hated how his home could be reduced to nothing more than a postcard, a place of tourism for people with nothing better to do or spend their money on than an afternoon visiting the fractured hell Michael had spent eighteen years living in.

His mother had died in the bomb explosion on a Thursday. She had been standing in line at a fish and chips shop, but she was in the wrong neighborhood. For some reason she was near Shankhill, so whatever IRA man had set the bomb did not think that a Catholic woman would die there. His father had received a personal apology from the man who had ordered the bomb planted there. Michael remembered the way the man had shook in terror in the front entrance to his house at the thought of having accidentally ordered the death of Padraig McDermott’s wife.

But his father had not done anything to the man. He had forgiven him, and Michael, even at such a young age, knew that it was the one time he wished he could have seen his father act out in violence. That was another mystery for Michael, why his father had let that go. He could only assume that his father had done something similar in his time, killed the wrong person or blown up the wrong building. Only if he could personally understand the man’s tragedy would his father have empathy for anyone, let alone his beloved wife’s murderer. Otherwise, the gun holstered above the fireplace would have been put to less decorative use.

The funeral had been the following Sunday. His father had given him the soccer jersey on Tuesday, which was the same day he met Breandan. Michael ran to the field that day, eager to forget the events of the past week. It would be easier to deal with everything in the context of soccer; physical activity, passes, shots, tackles, these were things that he could understand

at six years old. Helping carry his mother's casket, symbolically at least was not something he could understand, not then.

A game had already started, but one kid had to go home for dinner; Michael did not have such a tight schedule. He took his place and scored several goals, succeeding in aggravating the other kids at their inability to stop him. One defender in particular was taking things quite personally and dealt a vicious kick to Michael's shins as he passed by.

Michael had fallen to the ground, crying, and quickly left the soccer field. On his way home someone tapped him on the shoulder, and it was the same child who had injured him earlier.

"Hey. Why did you leave? You were good."

"Why did you hit me?"

"I didn't mean to. It was an accident. My mom is a nurse. She could help you. Follow me." He took off down the street and Michael gingerly ran behind him until they reached the small rundown house only blocks from the field. The kid's mother helped put ice on the bruise and drove Michael home after giving him dinner. She had known Michael's mother and father, and she knew more about the situation than the child thought.

Michael did not know that the other kid's name was Breandan until the next time they played together at the soccer pitch a week later, and, luckily, they were both on the same team. After that they started spending more time together, found out they actually went the same school and just didn't know it. A fast friendship formed and grew for a long time. Their relationship had begun with violence, and Michael hoped it would not end that way, although recent events had told him not to expect otherwise.

One of the few times Michel had seen Breandan after the end of school was at the soccer pitch, and he was greeted by the same grin and greeting that he had seen and heard so often in younger days. "Hey Mick! Mick! Come here!"

Michael turned toward the sound of his name and saw his friend, Breandan, running toward him from the soccer pitch nearby. Breandan looked tired, his school uniform ripped at the knee and a fresh bruise on his right arm. "Hey, Breandan."

"You want to play?"

"No, I have to go home. My Dad is expecting me."

Breandan's face changed. His expression and tone of voice seemed to show true disappointment. "Alright. Well, be sure to say goodbye to us before you leave for Dublin. Don't forget who is truly responsible for turning you into such a fine, upstanding, and respectful man." Breandan patted him on the back and turned and left for the field.

Michael could tell that the invitation to play football with Breandan and his friends was the last show of brotherhood he would ever get from him. Everything would change for good when he left, if it had not already.

* * *

Michael closed the last of his dresser drawers. He was finished packing his clothes, and decided it was time to put his more personal affects into a smaller backpack. This bag was reserved for objects he didn't trust in anyone's hands but his own.

He placed a family picture album, his passport, and tickets in the bag before he remembered the small rosary hanging around the lamp by his bedside. It had almost blended in entirely with the background of his room as daylight was fading and he could smell the soup his father was preparing in the kitchen. It was the only thing he had to remember Jane. There were no pictures of them together, just a single gift.

Michael had started dating Jane a year earlier. They had met at a pub near Queen's College, and they had an instant connection. It was no surprise to either of them when, after only three months, they told each other that they were in love. The fact that Jane was a Protestant mattered little in Michael's eyes, initially. But he knew that his father and Breandan could never find out.

Jane and her family had moved to Belfast so her father could pursue a fellowship at Queen's, so they were not a product of the lurid divisions and prejudice created in the Shankhill area. She didn't understand, for a long time, why she could never see Michael's home or meet his friends.

"Damn it, Michael, I can't fucking live like this."

"Jane..."

"This isn't a relationship, it's a secret. I can't sneak around with you all the time. My family doesn't care that you aren't Protestant, I don't understand why your family and friends should care that I'm not Catholic."

Michael sighed and let go of her hand. Her bedroom always seemed too small to him, and if he was there for too long he found that he had trouble breathing. "Life is still different here, Jane. People don't forget, people don't forgive. My father lost a wife and a son in the Troubles, and I lost a mother and a brother who I hardly ever knew because he spent most of his life hiding from the RUC. If my father knew that I was with a Protestant he would disown me, if I was lucky. My friends would kill me."

Jane could tell by the way Michael's shoulders slumped that he wasn't joking, that his friends would kill him if they found out that they were together. Where she lived there was little economic or social division, just the ghosts of the problems

of previous decades. Belfast had taken large steps forward in many areas of the city, and she knew she was fortunate to live in an area that had progressed.

Michael, however, lived where wounds never seemed to heal. She knew he had seen people die and had to be a pallbearer at his mother's funeral, despite the fact he wasn't even old enough to reach the coffin, because the rest of his father's friends and relatives had fled the country, were in hiding, or were dead. Six months later Michael's brother Seamus had his homemade bomb blow up in his face and kill him. The police said the bomb had been meant for the pub where Michael took Jane on their third date, the only time he ventured within a mile of his neighborhood with her.

"Michael, I can't live as somebody's secret. If you believe so strongly in crossing the boundaries your family and friends like to keep, I don't understand why I have to remain a shadow. Grow up, for once in your life."

Michael didn't answer and stared out at window at the cars and taxis rolling down the street towards the city limits of Belfast. He had met Breandan on his way to Jane's house that same night. He had been walking through an alley when he had heard the familiar greeting from behind him.

"Hey, Mick. Mick!" Breandan was standing against a wall smoking a cigarette, his hand playing with the butterfly knife he always kept in his pocket.

"Hello, Breandan."

"I know where you are going, Michael." Breandan rarely ever called him by his full first name, and whenever he did he made sure whatever he said next would make Michael feel stupid, childish, or exposed. "And I know who you are going to see."

"And who would that be?"

"That Protestant bitch you've been fucking."

Michael stepped closer to Breandan. He had never been as strong as his friend, and in the many times they had fought over the years Michael had only won two times. Once was when Breandan insulted Seamus. Another time was when Breandan insulted his father. In each case something had inspired and gripped Michael and he was able to overcome the differences between the two. Michael didn't really know how to fight unless he was fighting for something extremely personal.

"Back off, Breandan." He was now inches away. "I suggest you let this go." Michael turned and walked away only to be pushed down from behind. Breandan ran over to him and put his knee into Michael's chest, using his hands to pin Michael's arms. Alcohol was practically pouring from Breandan's pores and the smell made Michael gag.

"There are words for people like you, and none of them are flattering, Mick, you stupid bastard. Traitor. Betrayer. Informer. Remember the people during the Famine who converted so the British would give them soup? That's you. You fucking souper."

"Fuck you."

Breandan grinned, his face twisted, angry and inspired at the same time. "Sorry, Mick. I'm not Protestant." He picked up his friend and pushed him into a wall. When Michael staggered to his feet Breandan pointed a finger at his face. "Do you have any idea how dangerous it is for me that you are fucking a Protestant? I do bad things to people like her, Michael. It doesn't help my cause to have you running around in their neighborhoods. You are way too deep into my life for me to have you there. How much does she know about me? Does she know my hideouts? Where I go? Who I've killed?"

"You fucking animal."

Breandan punched him in the face, hard. "You are a fucking idiot. You better start using the head above your shoulders or I'm going to cut off the one below your waist." He grinned. "And you know how good I am with a knife." To emphasize this he took out his butterfly knife again.

"If you ever touch Jane..."

Breandan laughed. "You'll do what?"

"You won't have to worry about Protestants or the police. I'll fucking kill you myself."

Michael had walked away after that. As he stared out Jane's window he touched the bruises on his face and body. She was lying down and looking at him. He hadn't noticed that she had been crying, for how long he didn't know.

"Jane, I think it would be better if we didn't see each other anymore. Things are too out of control. I'm having trouble sleeping, and whenever I'm with you I spend my time looking out the window or making sure I know where all of the exits are. I'm sorry. I'm just not strong enough to do this anymore."

Jane stood up and walked to the other side of the room. "Michael, someday you will regret not standing up to them. You will regret the day that you walked out my door and decided never to look back." She paused for a moment. "I have something for you. I know you can't have pictures or any big gifts, so, here."

She had handed Michael the small wood and wire rosary that he now placed in his bag. His father never suspected anything; after all, why would, under normal circumstances, a Protestant give a Catholic a rosary?

In the weeks that had passed since that night, Michael had only seen Jane once, from a distance. She was walking

hand in hand with someone else. Michael wondered if she missed him. He wondered if she would have even said hello to him if he had been walking down the same side of the street instead of sitting at a bus stop fifty feet away. He hoped she was with someone stronger than he had been, someone who wasn't Catholic and from the Falls Road.

* * *

The sun was red the next morning when he woke up at dawn. Although the afternoon would probably be hot, the morning was unseasonably cool and he would leave before the sun would have a chance to burn off the morning mist. More and more Michael had found himself waking up or going to sleep around this time to catch the last moments of peace and quiet before his father would wake him up for school.

As he brought his suitcases down he was surprised to see that his father was waiting for him at the scratched, wooden kitchen table and drinking tea. His father never drank coffee. In front of his father was a drawing of Michael's mother. Before joining the IRA his father had been a promising art student, and for Christmas one year he had given the drawing as a gift to his wife. That spring she would be dead.

In the drawing she was smiling, her dark hair hiding the left side of her face. She was sitting, with her elbow on her knee and her hand supporting her chin. The other arm was at her side. There was no background to the picture, no setting to get the bearings of where the drawing took place. His father had always said he had been able to do the drawing from memory, that he had not needed her to model. That way he was able to keep the drawing a surprise. Michael remembered seeing how thrilled she was when she had opened the box containing the small frame that was its home. For years it had stayed on the dresser in his parents' bedroom. This was not the first time he had caught his father sitting at the table looking at it early in the morning.

"Hey, Dad. I thought you would still be asleep."

"No, Michael, I decided to get up early and spend some time with you." He glanced at Michael's suitcases and his eyes became softer. "So, this is it."

"This is it."

"There's no going back, Michael. There's no going back."

For the next hour they sat in silence together waiting for the sound of the taxi to drive down their street. The lack of sound was not deafening or awkward; to both of them it had become familiar.

The father spoke first. "You never really knew your mother, Michael. I think I should tell you a story about her. Make her less of a stranger than she may seem now." He ran his hand over the drawing in front of him.

"OK, Dad."

"She died when you were six, right? Yes, I remember. You were tall for your age though, I think that is why I have trouble remembering. That and the fact you had to help carry her." He paused to compose himself. "Your brother Seamus had been out of our lives for a long time before you were born. He had only come home for the Easter holiday after you were born, and then the next time any of us saw him was the funeral five years later.

"The day Seamus left, the day after Easter Sunday, she was so disappointed that she cried for hours. It's terrible to lose a son. He was still alive, yes, but we both knew that he was in too far with the wrong people. He belonged to a fringe group, a splinter of the IRA that was responsible for some truly terrible violence. I had been proud of him when he first left to fight, but after that Easter I knew he had taken it too far. There is a price to pay for country and freedom, but he had changed. The tenderness and love he had had as a child were gone.

"So your mother was crying, hard, for hours. There was nothing I could do. I had tried to comfort her, but in a way she always blamed me for what had happened to Seamus. It was the way I celebrated the rebels, the way I sang and taught him to sing their songs. She always left the house when I did that.

"Then, near midnight, she heard you stirring in the other room, and she ran over to your crib, and took you in her arms, holding you tight. The tears were gone. She was concerned, but she was happier, almost immediately. I stood in the doorway and watched her rock you to sleep. She stood over you for a long time, stroking your hair and repeating over and over how much she loved you. Then she turned and looked at me."

Michael's father paused and looked at his hands, then the suitcases, then back at his son. Slowly he lit a cigarette and exhaled the smoke, watching it find its way to the ceiling. He had trouble starting up again. Once the story had begun it was easy to keep going, but the pause had robbed him of his momentum.

"So she looked at me. And she was angry. I had never seen such anger in her eyes before. And she said...and she said, 'Don't let them take him away. Don't let them take away my youngest child. If I ever hear you say anything to him about fighting or the cause of Ireland, I will leave with my baby and never come back. You will never see your son again.'"

He paused again. "I turned to leave the room, but she wasn't finished. The last thing she said that night, as we lay down to go to sleep, was, 'whatever you do, Padraig, don't let him listen to you.'"

Silence enveloped the room again. Michael realized that he had never seen his father cry. Not even at the many

funerals they had been to. The first streaks of sunlight began to fall across the kitchen table.

“And I’m glad you never did.”

* * *

Michael shook his father’s hand when he had finished putting his suitcases into the taxi. The cracks in his father’s hard exterior that had appeared earlier were now fully repaired. The farewell was no more exaggerated than if Michael was leaving for a football match. “Goodbye, son. Make me proud.” His father hesitated for a moment. “I know your mother already is,” he whispered.

“I’ll do my best, Dad.”

He stole a glimpse at the mural on the side of the house. After Seamus had died, several of his friends had asked for permission to memorialize him on the wall, if not explicitly in name than at least in message. Michael’s father did not want his son’s name on the mural in case the police did searches in the neighborhood. There were pictures of James Connolly, Che Guevara, Pancho Villa, and other rebels, the heroes that Seamus and Michael had been told to admire during their childhood. Above them in shaky lettering it said, “You can kill the revolutionary but not the revolution.” Michael supposed that, in the end, that saying would always be true.

The taxi took the same familiar route out of the neighborhood as Michael was used to, the same way he had walked thousands of times to go to school, the houses of his friends, to church or the cemetery. He only remembered that he had forgotten to say goodbye to Breandan as they passed by the soccer pitch. There was no breeze that morning, and the flags were not flying, dampened by the mist that was slowly rising above the city.

Michael noticed something different. “Hey, stop the taxi. Stop the taxi!” The taxi braked hard next to the front gate, which was locked each night at dusk and only reopened when it would be light enough to see everyone inside and outside the field. He opened the door of the car and stepped outside. “I’ll be back in a minute,” he told the taxi driver.

Michael stepped out into the cool morning air and walked towards the gate. There was a white handkerchief tied to the fence underneath the other flags. It was new, but familiar. In one corner there was a small green “B” stitched into the fabric. Michael gently untied, folded, and placed it into his pocket and climbed into the taxi.

“Alright,” he said after a moment. “Let’s go.”

The taxi wound through the city and Michael looked out the back window the whole way to the airport. In the distance he saw the large walls that had been built by the British to contain Catholics. The barbed wire barricaded the rising sun.

Junction I 62

Mary B. Fay

My mother said I should take some classes this summer. I had taken classes all year—I needed a change. So, I applied for a job at the tollbooth. My mother said that I should go back to my job at the Green Grocer. She was worried about the carbon monoxide. I asked Frank about it in the interview; he said you don't notice it after awhile. I decided change didn't have to mean progress.

The drop ceiling of the tiny break room almost skimmed the top of Frank's balding head, and I marveled at how such a wide smile on such a large man could survive in such a confined space.

"Hey, if you want to sit on a stool for a few more hours you can come down to Costello's with us for a drink when night shift takes over," Frank offered as he handed me my official Thruway Authority vest. All the vests were apparently ordered for my XXL boss, so the V neckline plunged to my waist. Despite my newly acquired hunchback and potbelly, Frank seemed satisfied with the fit. Judging from the strategically grown crinkles around his eyes, contentment was a natural expression for Frank. And so happily lost inside an oversized polyester tunic, my life at the exit 21 Duaneville / Junction I 62 Tollbooth began.

"Nothing complicated here. This is a straightforward operation." Frank's gray eyes lit up like a proud parent when he talked about his cherished tollbooth plaza.

"There's only a few things you really need to know. The food on the second shelf of the fridge is everyone's—so don't put your lunch in there, if any drivers give ya any problems, just give me a holler, and—" he paused held up his wallet and said with a grin, "Most important, the radio stays on the races unless I lose."

"Ok, I think I can handle it," I slid my lunch off the dreaded second shelf of the persimmon orange fridge. Seeing that there was no way to distinguish my paper bag from the rest, I shoved my lunch into the back; I wanted to get it far out of the reach of the casual snacker.

"You can only hear the noise when you first step outside," Frank shouted as the din of the traffic crashed through my entire system. As I leapt from the median of booth 4 to 5, the roar of a distant tractor-trailer's horn shot through my ears, raised the hair on my neck and my heart to my throat, and reverberated throughout my body until it finally exited through the very tips of my then curled-under toes. I found myself longing for the constant murmur of OTB racing results that had been playing on the radio inside the break room, until I reached my assigned booth and discovered that I wouldn't miss the outcome of the 4th race because the radio played over the PA system all day. By the end of the day I couldn't differentiate between the sound of the starting bugle and the honks from impatient motorists.

A sedan, not really red not really purple, instantly dodged out of lane 3 when the light above my booth changed to green. It skillfully cut off a tortoise-paced Lincoln and darted into my lane. Luckily I was just handing out tickets today—"Breaking you in slowly," Frank explained earnestly, "You don't want too much excitement in one day."

"Good Morning," I smiled and reached out to a long tweed clad arm with pressed white cuffs. Its large homo sapien appendage remained looking forward plotting his next offensive tactic. In front of him lay the next hurdle; the road diverged, the lanes for I 62 East, his goal, were congested with fellow competitors—could he sprint ahead in the lanes going west and slide back into the masses before the final split?

Snap!

The card was quickly slapped behind the driver's-side visor.

And he was gone.

* * * *

Peter always used to reach across and put the visor down for me when we were driving. I'd tell him that I was too

short for it to make any difference and that it obstructed my vision. He would laugh and tell me I wasn't driving and I didn't need to see. I'd crane my neck out the window so I could get a full view of the sky—moving in the opposite direction of the clouds felt like going back in time.

We were actually just going west on 62—headed to Stonington, to sit on the beach of Lake Sulla where he worked as a lifeguard. Our toes were tentatively touching the edge of the lake still cool from the early June nights, when he told me St. Marcos College in Spain had accepted him off the wait-list. He'd always wanted to go abroad for college; when he didn't get in right away, he made jokes about it saying he would hitchhike across the country or get a job as a forest ranger—he thought he could pull off the big Smokey the Bear hat. But I knew that he felt left out. I was thrilled with the news, and pushing him back on to the sand, I inhaled the smell of lake water on his sun-baked skin and kissed him. I could stop feeling guilty that he would be left behind when everyone else went away and moved on.

* * * *

I caught the eye of a round pink-faced woman cautiously choosing her steps to across 6. She moved like a mother duck, constantly checking the invisible parade of ducklings scuttling behind her. I thought maybe she had dropped something. When she got closer to me, she forgot whatever it was behind her, and started waving frantically.

"Hell-o Hell-o," she shouted, just before being eclipsed by a large conversion van full of singing ten-year olds driven by a teenage counselor.

"I'm Claudette, Booth 8!" Feigning concern for the delayed motorists, she quickened her pace slightly to cross my lane, but she still managed not to spill a drop out of her 'Look Who's 40' coffee mug.

"Nice meetin' ya!" She hollered before closing the half-door of her booth.

I had enjoyed meeting her too. She had as little reason to be happy to have met me as any of the 11 cars and 4 commercial vehicles that came through after her. Was it possible to meet someone without even exchanging names? I didn't have a nametag yet. It takes a few days, after you're hired, Frank had said. He gave me an index card to announce my name to any motorists dissatisfied with the quality of the card to hand transaction. ELAINE. I had written it in bright orange block letters. No one seemed to notice.

* * * *

We were all making signs in Danielle's driveway. It was still early enough in the spring that the mosquitoes weren't out in full force. Danielle had citronella candles burning anyway, flickering against the false darkness of the suburban night. Everyone was bursting with stories from freshman year; I hadn't seen any of them since New Years. The group was together again. Just like the old days when we'd spend two hours standing around in Danielle's driveway trying to decide what we were going to do that night, and end up going inside to her family room to watch cable, there was never a silent moment and everyone was on a different topic. People looked different though, cologne and perfume blended into the familiar aroma of a junior high dance. Girls in short jean skirts crouched in uncomfortable positions over their signs. They were foolishly trying to impress people that actually remembered them at junior high dances; or else they had forgotten how to dress for nights wasted sitting on roofs, docks and driveways.

One person in the crowd was not acting; she was wearing a seven-year old t-shirt from YMCA sleep away camp. My friend Cara lying against the asphalt with her arms outstretched said, "I don't feel like I have to tell you everything about school. With you I feel like we're the same as we always were, almost like you already know. Or that it doesn't matter 'cause you haven't changed."

I knew. And she knew I wasn't really listening to her. Bold red brush strokes declared what every inch of me could feel inside: "WELCOME HOME PETER." I had messed up on the second E in "Welcome," but I could not suppress my grin when I gazed down at the unevenly sized letters. Peter had been in Spain for a year. We had both agreed we were not going to stay together. It had just been a summer thing.

The tarmac looked tempting; I stretched out next to Cara.

"Peter called me last week, Laine." Cara spoke in the same tone my mother had used when my gerbil died in second grade. "He's got a girlfriend in Madrid. They went hiking in the Pyrenees together; he said she's awesome; she might be coming here to visit this summer."

"Oh," I said.

I was glad he moved on, it had just been a summer thing.

* * * *

The sun was getting higher but the traffic was subsiding. I switched on the fan, which provided a new insect-like buzz to my experience. Sitting in the same booth everyday, all there is to notice is details. Everything is so familiar you have to look close to really see it. Just like coming home, it's easy to see what's different or who's changed, but do you ever really look at what's the same? After rush hour, the masses stopped surging around me; I still in my booth considered the world from the fast lane.

The giant mound of sand on the far side of the employee parking lot stood out sorely against the strategically cultivated greenery of the highway. Though typically thought to be for slippery winter roads, I preferred to see it as the home of beagle-sized prehistoric ants. I imagined them carrying cow-sized prey up the sides of their castle, before a Tyrannosaurus Rex used their home as an ottoman. My theory was validated when a man came through my booth whose body was so compartmentalized I thought he had to have been a descendant of these giant arthropods.

Sometimes the enormous sand pile became the remains of a heroic but failed effort to dig to China. In fourth grade, Cara and I had given up our venture when we considered the molten core. Our plastic shovels could never have sustained the heat. I wondered if I called her now in Washington, where she was teaching inner city third graders to read, whether she'd come back if I said that some kids were at least 20 feet down already. My mom would let us have the metal shovels now that we're older.

Interstate 62 is a big commuter road. I rarely took it; my Tercel, "Paprika," ran hot and I used to be afraid of her overheating in heavy traffic. Driving to the tollbooth everyday, I didn't have to worry; I stopped where rush where rush hour began. But, after a while of staring out the cloudy panes of Booth 7's window the lush median of the highway began to look like a forgotten paradise. The grass sloped down into a forest - twenty feet wide - the low hanging branches from the convict-planted oak trees formed a canopy over a carpet of wildflowers, until the grass rose up again to kiss the shoulder of the lanes heading west. I asked Claudette whether she had ever been out to the median. She said no, but once a lady's hat had flown off into the median and she had tried to park her convertible in the middle of her lane and go retrieve it. Frank had gotten Officer Thady who generally parked in Exit 21's parking lot to give the frantic lady a ticket. I liked the drive to work on the back roads but I wouldn't have minded breaking down on the side of the highway—there was a lot to explore.

* * * *

Cara came home from Washington for a weekend in July. She lived on the other side of town; I always took her home at night because her car was even less reliable than mine. We took Old Route 24, right through what used to be the center of a small farming village before suburbia made it the outskirts of a town that has no center. There aren't many streetlights in suburbia, people prefer the lantern lights in their front yard: less intrusive, more personal. Everyone has one. Out near Cara, though, the housing developments are hidden beneath a thin layer of pines, which line the road. Driving at night through the veneer of wilderness you don't get to see much. One night I asked her if we could stop in the middle of the old village. She said it was creepy, and I'd seen that there was nothing there during the day.

I stopped anyway, "This is an adventure, Car."

"This is Duanesville, Elaine." She responded.

The white clapboard of the old Methodist Church shone eerily on top of the hill. Instead of services posted on the wooden placard outside the church a sign read: "Duanesville Historical Society—preserving yesterday for tomorrow." The church whose corner stone read 1781 looked sad at night. Despite its meticulously maintained exterior and perfectly arranged flowerbeds, its polished eyes looked downcast in the moonlight, as if ashamed of the sign in its window: "Monday-Saturday 12-6, Closed Sunday." The fresh coat of paint from its new caretakers weighed heavily over its old whitewashed underclothes; it missed the pastor and his wife who did their best to sweep the steps once a week before Sunday. The gray stonewall that held back the hill in front of the church became a balance beam for the specters that had just been disturbed by the slamming of Paprika's door.

Until that night I had never considered that my prefabricated town had a past, after your required eighteen years of residence, there wasn't supposed to be anything else to see there. I wanted to investigate the brick building across the street, the former post office building that now flew a teddy bear flag to advertise Holding Hands Day Care, but Cara's cell phone started ringing—her mom was wondering why she wasn't home yet.

* * * *

The tollbooth plaza became the starting gates. I could even feel the heat of the tension before the race; a fly flitting around my neck made me as agitated as a horse sitting in the blocks. It buzzed in my ear, I jerked my head back and forth flinging my ponytail wildly hoping to strike the assailant. I was lost in the perpetual music of the radio announcer shouting the neck and neck progress of the ponies heading into the straightaway. I wondered how long I would be trapped in the booth balking at the beautiful world around me. The paint-chipped toll plaza stood out proudly, as a sentinel to the world beyond Duanesville and a high chain-linked fence that kept the deer from leaping into their own mortality stretched infinitely down the road. The dotted lines of the highway are extremely long when you stand still.

Frank let out a yelp from the office—his horse "High Falutin" had come in first in the 7th race. "Beer's on me tonight!" Claudette gave me the thumbs up.

An old white Sunbird scraped its muffler along the oil-stained pavement of my lane. The fumes made the air in front of me swirl like the colors of a Polaroid that you rip open too soon.

“Hey Lainey. Sweet vest.” Bill Gyring, esteemed member of my high school class, smiled back at me. “Thought you were away at school, bet this scene gets pretty boring. But whatev’, everyone always comes back.”

“Uh, yeah, came home for the summer,” I smiled as I handed him his card. None of my friends from high school were home this summer, and I kinda wished he could have stayed longer.

“See ya around, Lainey,”

“Have a good day, Bill.”

I didn’t get a chance to ask him where he was going. Probably to Price Center, the supermarket where he worked. I had seen him at winter break, trudging up a worn path through the snow behind the strip mall. There were picnic tables behind the hill where the baggers smoked on their breaks.

* * * *

Everyone always comes back, Bill had said. Had he always possessed this worldly knowledge or was it seeing me that confirmed a developing hypothesis? I hadn’t seen him since he wished me luck on graduation day. I wondered if he had known then that I’d be back now three summers after graduation.

I guess I realized at that moment, once you leave town, coming home becomes coming back. It was as if I’d attempted to circumnavigate the globe and turned back when I saw the mythical monsters at the edge. Peter sent me a postcard; he said he was finally getting into that forest ranger gig, in a Swiss National Park. Cara called to tell me that we should do the Peace Corps together after graduation. Danielle, who had an accounting internship in Los Angeles, sent an email out to the group. Her boyfriend Ryan had just asked her to marry him; they were getting married in Duanesville the following summer, right after graduation. Everyone must come to town for it, she said. It would be a beautiful place for a wedding, I thought. But she’ll probably have it in some hall where they manufacture beauty with ice sculptures, carved bushes and vinyl Corinthian columns. I wonder if Christopher Columbus had landed in his hometown by mistake if he would still have called it India.

* * * *

I hung a notice on the fridge in the break room that I was bringing dinner for everyone on Wednesday. Frank asked me if my horse had come in; I told him not yet.

When the night shift took over, we met under the trees. The last rays of the sun darted in between the leaves of the oak trees, our centerpiece was a Big Gulp cup filled with wildflowers—Queen Anne’s Lace and Purple Heather. Frank brought the beer; Claudette brought the blanket; Donna from booth 4 brought her guitar that she played over the hum of the world rushing by. And we sat in an oasis in the middle of the highway—eating sandwiches.