

The Bend

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Number Two

University of Notre Dame

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from the Aesthetics of Belief Conference for Catholic Writers

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Editor's note

In your hands is the second volume of *The Bend*, our Creative Writing Program's annual –and often morphonymous– publication showcasing the work of our students, alumni, and friends. This year's edition coincides with the Aesthetics of Belief Conference for Catholic Writers, and we are pleased to include poetry from two of our distinguished guests. Their poems–like all the pieces this volume comprises–grapple with questions of faith. Here you have what's left behind when our work is turned upon our faith in God or science, in others or in ourselves. Only mildly misappropriating the words of William Faulkner, perhaps it was this faith, the curse we “had to accept from the gods in order to gain from them the right to dream.”

The publication of these pages incurred generosity and labor from several different sources: William O'Rourke's guidance was, as always, invaluable sound. In commissioning Campbell Irving's several favors to this book (which were exceeded in tirelessness and brilliant thanklessness only by the effort required to coordinate the conference that anticipated it in tone) this editor did his damndest to plumb the depths of Campbell's hospitality, and was obliged at every turn. We are immeasurably grateful to Paul Mariani and Demetria Martinez for the loan of their genius to supplement these pages. My fellow editors, Sandra L. Dedo, Nathan D. Gunsch, and especially Matthew Ricke, worked hard to make *The Bend* an easy job for me.

For the moment, all I can provide as return for your investments is this book: humble in realization, perhaps, but extraordinary in content. And that forces me to remain, as ever,

Happily in your debt.

Dylan R. Reed
Notre Dame, Indiana, April 2005

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S.D. Dillon

Fear of Dry Land

There are things I remember which may never have happened, but as I recall them so they take place.

--Harold Pinter, *Old Times*

Somewhere *by the edge of that water*,
between memories, old films,
recurrent dreams of squirrels,
things crystallize.

The pendulum oscillates—a flash,
and I assume both sides:
emerge from the baptismal: Old St. Mary's in Greektown,
watch a snake wriggle across the beach at the Farms Pier,
cross an inlet that percolates over granite,
empties into Lake

Michigan.

The word seems foreign—
a place I have been at times,
something I have appropriated,
not my own.

The word tumbles past my lips, a gust seeping through sandbags:
icebergs calving into the sound,
frost on the window,
the ruins of an orchard,
and warriors in the forest,
ever closing in.

My Father's Photograph

I no longer have the photograph that I wish to write about; when I was younger, I gave (very foolishly) the photograph to a boy I thought I was going to marry. I did not really give this boy the photograph, but rather, in that naive youth, when I believed in the reunion of what was rightly mine, I said that he could *hold on to* the photo album in which the photo was enclosed.

In the picture, my father looks much older than thirteen; he is wearing a suit and stands next to his adopted parents. There is a white house in the background and a car poses alongside them. It is the first time that I have seen my father as a boy, and the car, of a make and model that I've only seen in old movies, makes the photograph and my father automatically ancient.

When I try to remember it, the photograph is imperfect, and the only detail left intact is my father's face. The photograph exists in its own columbarium. This photograph (which I should have and would have passed on to my own children) is now undergoing its own histolysis, accessible to me only through the involucrum of memory, which too is undergoing its own histolysis.

To approach the photograph is to approach its dysphonia along with my dysphoria. In the photograph, my father is smiling. He seems proud to own a suit and to have parents who own a car. Before these parents, he wore girls' hand-me-downs, picked Oklahoma cotton, raised chickens to buy a fishing rod, starved, moved from orphanage to foster family to orphanage. The photograph seemed to be a foison of dreaming things, of things yet to come.

Printers place broken or discarded type in a "hell-box." I imagine that lost portraits, because they contain, as Roland Barthes says, the "essence" of the person, must also have a hell-box, however metaphysical. Or perhaps they gather themselves into a columbarium, where they are infested inevitably by psocid and reconstitute their own loam.

The photograph of my father was clipped, I imagine, in order to fit into a wallet. I like to think that my mother carried it in her wallet before bequeathing it to me for safekeeping. Only my father's face is still vivid; the other elements are vague, and I will never know what resided in the areas that were cropped from the photo. So too will I never know the areas that were not photographed, the scenery that existed outside of the picture. Excluded from me as well are other elements that constituted his world: the inside of the house, his adopted parents' demeanor, the town in which they lived, the nature of their outing. More importantly, the areas that I want most to see are the ones that the photograph contains but cannot reveal: the dark anterior whence life comes and the dark afterlife thither we proceed.

The front and back wings of certain insects are connected by a yoke-like structure called the "jugum." My father's photograph will never find its way back to me, and because of this permanent loss, I look to other modes of salvation. (If I cannot accept the loss of my father's photograph, how then will I accept the loss of my father?) Our living bodies, I think, must be this yoke, this jugum, connecting our front and back wings.

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Between Cassiopeia and Perseus

I thought that if I approached late enough, then perhaps it would be sparsely populated and dark enough so as to allow me to sever a sprig of ivy without having any witnesses. If it grows in a park, then it is public; if a church grows it, then to take is sin, although this is not true of sacraments. All summer, I wanted the outdoors in, but the ivy, the other severed flowers, the roots of grasses, and budding potato plants all wizened and wilted, dying from some other original sin.

What causes sadness is to live in a different place each August, and each August having fog and rain instead of the Persied Meteor shower. Look toward such and such constellation, and such and such constellation is not there. So nice of the Greeks, I think, to leave us golden apples. So nice to look up some nights and see crowns, dippers, arrows aimed finitely towards infinity.

What made me want a hot shower nonetheless was my thinking of Medusa. Men look at her, and they turn to stone. What is feared takes the shape of a serpent, and men are afraid of beauty sometimes and so they must kill it, while I fear that I am not beautiful and patiently wait and inspect my ivy for roots each morning.

If I have a love story, then it exists in the bowl of my breakfast. I don't know how they do it, the ones who drink milk from their bowls when the cereal is all gone.

Every day, something dies: when there is a breeze, it scatters the dead flies on the windowsill; the mouse has been caught; a moth did not find its way out. I think of Elizabeth often, her Manmoth confusing the moon with a way out. The misprints of the past gather like newspapers waiting to be turned into something else.

For him, I was the only brunette, I know. I was (what is the term for rocket ships, which blow up and crash back down to earth?) an anomaly. Not that it matters. There are some weaknesses that reveal themselves only if you wait long enough, that is, if you look diligently for the roots.

I want to know, in the end, what will get set in stone, because what gets set in stone is, of course, final: someone's name, the year of his birth and the year of her dying, these things unarguably, do not change. I want to know how quickly the quickest of flora grows. As a child in science class I remember my teacher saying to take pity on the plants—rooted, they must depend on what is immediately around them to survive and cannot flee those animals that crush or bite. Why is it then that I have feet and yet still am?

This place is your private part. And when I was eight, Chris lay on top of me and the next day asked for his stuffed duck and toy tugboat back. What is private, what is hidden should be one's heart, as it becomes more and more difficult to show. All summer, I wanted the outside in; to take that which grows inside sacred places is a sin.

August 13 and last year, a bridge in Austin, overcast, high in the upper 90s and 0% chance of rain. The bats leave the bridge at dusk and return at dawn. The Perseids do not fall here. I think of Elizabeth, of cuttings of newsprint. I don't know why some people want their water so cold, why they ask for ice. It pains my teeth, is so difficult to drink. The way out of an affair is another affair, a misprint for a misprint. I want to know why is it that I have feet and still am.

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Kafka's Garden

January 31. Gardening, hopelessness of the future.

—Kafka, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*

The latticing for the string beans will strive towards some sort of heaven, for in every physical being, there exists the imaginings of some spiritual equivalent. If the beautiful, if the Good does not take root in this life, then it sprouts in the life that plants itself directly perpendicular to this one. The latticing for the string beans will serve as some sort of ladder, if not for Jacob, then the small insects that know no where else to go.

It is not so much the gardening that surprises, but rather the gardening in the dead of an already dead European winter that surprises. What I see that E.B. cannot, although she is in perpetual leave, is the frost-formed dew, the minute icicles that cling with blue fingernails to the stiff leaves. What E.B. cannot see that I can is how, weeping, I too cling to something long since dead.

Instead of the Tree of Life, a silver ash and the poor wren that hobbles there. What of the frozen fruit? If anything is tempting, it is not this, not this garden of grasses that shatters underfoot. Perhaps it is not so much the promise of paradise but rather the promise of not paradise that makes me want to uproot radishes, smash the just buried spring bulbs. A thousand different specimens of lichen have hatched, are roosting upon the stone by the icy gourds. In the mornings, what I see that E.B. does not: a myriad of red chicks, a splattering rainbow of sitting eggs.

Dreams again of carrots and the red devil claws of rhubarb stalks. Evil must, I know, also have its roots in the garden. I have witnessed the splaying of petals, the curving mounds of earth when new life shies before breaking through. Dreams again of E.B., her white handkerchief fluttering by the frozen fountain, and a snow veiling her visage from me. Evil, I know, must live underground like the badger, the mole, and other animals that take, one by one, those beings I love. Dream of E.B., her frozen mouth, her frozen heart.

It is not the planting that keeps me alive, but fear of breaking through the winter ground. How odd that nature too must develop a thick skin in order to survive the cold. Yesterday, a few rocks unearthed and a few potatoes to replace them. Today, a boulder threatens to keep me mad: my shovel impaired, my ungloved hands worked raw. It is not the unearthing that keeps me alive, but rather everything that gets substituted, the promise that for every subtraction something living will take its place.

The seed casings remind me of the perplexity of life, how it exists within another perceived life. Come spring the string beans will, because of my latticing, climb towards infinity; I, possessing the idea of Knowledge, will try through my studies to reach heaven in similar fashion. The perplexity of this life, existing within another life: Hamlet's nutshell and the almond, not eaten, but to be planted to become a tree. What E.B. cannot see that I see: no matter her leavings, we will be united again whether in this life or the next. What I see that E.B. cannot see: the ice-covered moss, the rhododendron's hidden fire, the pond iris all ashiver.

James Matthew Wilson

To My Father

It's foolish to camouflage our sores.

-Horace

Into the sucking mouth of the machine

-Robert Pinsky

I

You will remember better than I can
The quiet smell of woodchips, damp concrete,
And laundry from the other room, which crept
Into your basement workshop; and the neat
Piles of timber laid out for my desk.
Over the course of my sixth year, you built
It, towering, wide with bookshelf, drawers and cabinets;
And carved the front with gratuitous leafy frills,
As any old woodworker would have done,
As if the dead planks from an unknown tree
Should own as artificial scars the forms
They would in nature bear but never be.
Our house was filled with pottery and glasses,
The other desks and chairs and tables you
Had made for other sons at other times.
But this one stood in ornate solitude
Behind the furnace, waiting for your brush
To darken the blond grain an oaken brown,
To sand its splintered crest and joiners smooth.

You left the radio on when not around –
At work perhaps, or outside mowing the lawn.
And I would stand, diminished in its shadow,
The rise and falling hum of the mower outside,
The feel of cold and sawdust on my curled toes.

It was too big, of course, not for me then,
But for the house. You scraped the walls and marred
The fresh-stained surface trying to get it
Upstairs and into place with my toy cars,
My Star Wars people, bed and crucifix,
All the inheritance of childhood.

Though everyone said it was beautiful,
Though you rubbed soap along the drawers, I could

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Never get them to open with any ease,
Nor did I, as the years passed, start to write
My homework there. It turned into a crypt
Of sorts, for rock and coin collections, kites
And comic books, the model tanks you built
Because I'd neither patience nor the skills
To glue such minute replicas together.
Nonetheless, when guests turned up, I was thrilled
To show this master trophy of your mastery
And stare on it myself in admiration.

Though it was sold three years ago, I see
It as a great gift, symbol and occasion.
You are the person who has taught me most
Of diverse kinds of thinking and of making.
And when you left your workshop idle, you
Furnished as well a symbol of unmaking.
Pardon me, Father, if it's you I choose
As silent subject while I inquire
What is a well-made thing, and how to make
An artifice out of the things of nature.

II

Not given to the lengthy or the stirring
Speech, (I can almost hear) you brush aside
The arguments on every current cause –
Abortion or assisted suicide,
Or those more recent, more minute affairs
The harvesting of cells from embryos –
Impatiently, the scientific terms
Whip-stitched together in a bland picot
Intimidating as ornate. You knew
The hidden nature of the physical,
And so interrogated what we'd do
With the criterion of its discerned rules.

Outside the trained world of the scientist,
Agreement on what nature is seems less
Settled; perhaps because it's not the limit
Where thought begins, the unsaid terminus
That you, in white coat, staring down through glass,
Would seem not to arrive at, but begin
With -- with the almost shrugging modesty
Of one to whom this much, no more, is given.

I think of Rousseau, who thought nature was
All that was wild, uncultivated, raw.

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What man had made, nature was not. A horror
Rattled through him at every iron he saw.

To this, de Maistre replied with blackening fire.
That which exists, if not divine, is caught
Within the ceaseless nature of becoming;
That which *is*, independent of what *ought*
To be. He dreaded finite men would dare
Think their confounding of the will and sense,
The aching stomach and the smoking meat,
For every judgment sufficient evidence.

A boy, he wrote, will hold within his palm
A new-hatched sparrow; he'll feel the down and beak
And clutch it closer in a cage of fingers,
Until he feels the stillness of bones break.
If nature was an all encompassing brute
Crushing in power and mortality,
Then goodness lay in the unnatural act
Of slavish turning to authority.

To these Gauls, let me add an Englishman,
The prototypical conservative
Who saw in raised chivalric sabers, alpine
Peaks an ethical imperative.
Burke said that nature *of itself* was cruel,
But deep in root, in sap, in spreading leaf
A finite hope refined itself and grew
With absentminded slowness. In his brief,
The counter-entropy of custom and
Tradition played their juvenating part.
Cultures and governments must grow as trees;
No contradiction there: man's nature's art.

III

Excurses such as Burke's are predicated
On nature as a kind of constancy.
But it, by definition, changes always;
The lapping waves of potentiality
On actual sands. That endless mortal throb
Of dark descending where land slips to sea.
We've lived so long in earshot of the protest
Against such fate, our oldest poetry,
That verse seems a dead letter written to
The dead. But I write now to ask a living
Question of you.

Do you remember when,

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Some news show on some humid summer evening,
When twilight lingered hours at the screen
Door; and some late-returning neighbor mowed
His grass, its heavy smell, drifting inside
Along with a more faint mosquito drone?
You sat in your chair, I sprawled on the floor,
A plastic soldier fighting in my hands,
And all our light came from a slipping sun,
Or in the television's blue-fingered bands.
On screen, with masked voice and a shadowed face,
Some creature told of how a surgeon had –
With scalpel, thread, the unimaginable –
Made look a woman what had been a man.
The shy shame of the unknown face collided
With an electric voice speaking a need,
Not just to have done what was done, but tell
Of metamorphosis with such a greed
For details I could grasp but not comprehend.

Later, I wanted to ask what it meant.
But curiosity fell off in shame,
And that became just another incident
To rhyme with others later, so that sound
Seemed to mean more darkly without certain content.
Years have passed. We have superannuated
Shame with proud spangles, all our natural ferment
Has melted, not eschatologically,
But rather in the forge of mind and knives,
Where nature now is subject to revision.
T.V. shows men who've become wives of wives,
Their broad unsuited faces in ill-fitting
Clothes. Conscientious objectors in a war
Tiresius tried to solve in the old myth,
No god could force them to stay what they are.
The screen's profuse with other shows, where girls,
Less monstrous, far more trivial resign
Their modest forms, thinking fairytales
Come true in plastic surgeons' books of designs.

Doubtless the crossing point of television
And medical technique has much to do
With how frequent these transformations are.
But not all take place in the light of noon,
Where stage lights and a viewing audience seem
To give with their attention their approval.
The vain unconfident seek tummy tucks,
Nose jobs, and any kind of hair removal.

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Father, this world that you can understand
By Chemistry, yet, as one more private being
Unsure what right or leash a public power
Could wield to cleave the flesh from market scene;
Tell me have we become the worse monsters
By Shelleyan transformation or by vice?
Are sutured pelvic scars the only fruit
Of natural science grown to artifice?

IV

Those rare nights, Father, when we sit across
The table from each other eating our
Suburban dinners in a house of beige,
Within that quiet privacy of hours
We hear, like tumblers slipping in the locked
Back door, the medicated children of
Divorce, their pierced and tattooed proclamations
They recognize no outside or above.
They've claimed their bodies as the cowboys claimed
The earth: with clumsy rhetoric, barbed wire.
You stare down at your plate, without reply,
Biding the hours till you can retire.

I would be silent too. The ownership
Of houses, all that talk of men and castles,
Long ago slipped into the market place,
And charged that feet and bowels were but vassels,
The merchandise of our unruly wills.
Your body's *yours*, just as this poem is mine:
To make, destroy – a tenancy of will,
For every citizen and concubine.

Creations of a world we helped to make;
That stripped chicken bone on the gravied plate
Betrays us as the beneficiaries
Of terms that, taken to extremes, now grate.
So this embarrassed quiet and the question:
Can we untangle casual wants and bodies
From the stretched net of private property?
Or has the gleam of television, shoddy
And obvious as it sometimes seems, made all
Things, real and false, true or imagined, turn
Monochrome, till appearances are all,
And all things can be ours, if we just learn
The necessary digital techniques?

With Wellesian aplomb, our journalists ask

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If fiction can be passed off as pert fact.
But surgeons, salesmen have taken up the task,
Just like a mirror, of making fantasies
As actual as your own actual skin.
Which must be why some artists throw their shit
Or sperm upon a canvas; however thin
The charge, they want us where we dine to feel
The shock of the real. Such crude artifice
I've tried to stay from sundering this poem,
To offer sense, rather than ugliness.
But following Horace, I have had to note
Neatly the very monsters that I fear.
If they embarrass both of us, at least
They're only words, not spectacles in clear
And gaudy color, road signs on a path
Of nature, warning of inglorious ends.

And that, in truth, is what our nature is:
The course from birth to death that we must wend
To be mere human beings; no set of laws
Gleaned watching wild dogs rutting in a wood,
But what we learn from living through our doing
In exodus from goods to final good.
Burke almost had it right. Just as this meter
Grew gradually out of native English stress;
Just as the cut of fabric and the stitch
Must match the body's contours if a dress
Of worm-spun silk and hammered golden clasps
Is to be worn with any elegance;
Hence to the rhythm of our lives we learn
The steps and missteps that become its dance.

Now, Father, at the sight of ownership,
Don't wither in the silence shame induces.
Our oldest concepts have their applications
As well as modern and antique abuses.
I, like de Maistre's boy, have grown up, discerned
Authority of a supernatural
Order may reveal much, but we can find
A proper order in the human halls
We each pace leaving footprints in our wake.
And so we find that the grip of our power
Need not choke everything it can, but may loose
The fist of art to fit the palm of nature.

Tony D'Souza

Necropolis

Though we couldn't have known it then, there was a kid scattered all over the southbound tracks, and people were looking for us, though we couldn't have known that either. It was a clear winter night, starry through the roadside tree branches, and where the corn had stood tall the autumn before, the snow—lying as smooth and even as slate in the fields—was tinted a luminescent, midnight blue in reflection of the moonlight. It was a crisp night, a January night, and most everyone was inside. It was late, and frost-bite cold.

Gretchen and I, we were in my car with the heater on high, hurrying home from an evening at the Metropolis club in Milwaukee. They knew us there, the bouncers would pull us out of line when there was one, and the bartenders would greet us by our names. Gretchen enjoyed the celebrity feel of it, and it was our regular place. We drank vodka tonics at our table there that night, and watched people dance in the smoke and the lights, met friends from the city, and by the washroom where it was dim, we'd blown a little coke. It had been an okay time, it had been a standard night. Gretchen had looked good, I had spent money, the conversation we'd made had been unremarkable. That's the kind of kids we were.

To avoid troopers on our way home, we drove Highway E—a long, quiet, dark road stretching the seven miles from the Interstate to where our school was on the lake. I'd once talked Gretchen into going down on me while driving that road—that's how secluded it was—but on the night of the kid on the tracks, she was driving as I was on a ticket. I often was then—to be honest about it, my father had money and I didn't care. I was a reckless driver.

That's not to say we were less of a hazard with Gretchen behind the wheel. The limit was forty-five on E, and she had it up past seventy. She was cool about it, she didn't get excited about the trees whizzing by in the fringe of the headlight beams or the car taking the hills like bumps. She didn't get any special rush from driving fast—it was the way Gretchen drove. I can't remember any longer if it was her who told me she'd never had a ticket, or if that was a girl I met later.

They say that kid was wearing headphones when he leapt in front of the engine, that he was listening to Rachmaninoff, and I say good choice. If I had done that then, it would have been typical kid's stuff for me, it would have been something from the music I knew. It would have been 'Stairway to Heaven,' or the Moody Blues, or some Grateful Dead psychedelia. Not to slight that sort of music, but at that time I hadn't suffered much—nothing real, not anything caustic—I hadn't seen ugly things, and I hadn't had a need for beauty. I wasn't thinking about things then, about who I was and what I was doing in this world, and I was doing a lot of drugs. I was a college kid. I was a freshman with too much money and an undeclared major.

"Richie," Gretchen would often say to me as we'd lay together in the dark of her room, "I'm tired of this world."

"I know it," I'd tell her, though I didn't really, and we'd smoke hash and have sex.

It was a long train of livestock cars, and he must have run up the snowy embankment from some hiding place in the bushes to meet it because the crew reported that they hadn't seen him there until the very last moment. That engine julienned him tilting full throttle.

I think about the brakeman, I think about the engineer, and I wonder what they saw when they saw it, and I wonder what they heard. I wonder what they think about when they think about it, and what they tell their wives. I want a wife like the ones I imagine theirs to be—a wife who will support me, a wife

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to tell things to. I want a wife who's not ashamed when I lay my head on her chest and say, "There was nothing I could do. He didn't give me a chance." And I want her to hold me close and pet my hair and understand how important this weakness of mine is, and tell me, "You're a good man, Richie, because you care about this." A wife who makes sense of things in that easy way good women do.

I see the whites of the kid's eyes when I imagine it from the crew's point of view. They're stricken eyes, they're eyes that say, 'I want to take this back,' but he's caught in the headlight, the train's almost on him, and my last thought before impact is, 'That man standing there is a man who is dead.'

I imagine what it must be like to drive a freight train at night, to wear that cap, and the overalls, and the heavy canvas gloves. I imagine swaying for hours at that unerring, constant speed, I imagine steady-ing a cup to pour coffee from a thermos. I imagine sliding open the side window to hear the engines clear in their force, the thunking wheels, I imagine the chill of the outside air rushing in and across my face. I think about all those droning, soporific, endlessly empty miles with the black night all around—I see the gold glint of deer eyes in the trees in the forests, and the intimate backyards with their swingsets in the towns. And I catch glimpses of folks going about the mundanities of their lives in the passing lit-up house windows—sitting together at dinner, washing dishes, folding clothes, reading, old couples dancing together in living rooms to music I can't hear. There are dogs in the yards who strain at their chains as I pass.

But it's the utter darkness of it that gets me, the way the headlight over the tracks bores a tunnel through the night and the world. To see a man suddenly standing there—it's not a memory I'd want to carry. Because you recognize what he's there to do, that beneath your feet in a moment this man will die. And there wasn't a thing they could do to save him. Not one thing in this world.

He was just a kid really. His name was Oliver.

"Oliver's dead," Gretchen told me on the phone, after they'd given her the news up in her room.

"Who?" I asked her from my bed. I knew I screwed up my face at the name.

"Oliver Kohl," she said—in shock, though I didn't know it then—still holding the phone in her hand. "I know you know who he is."

I said to her, "I'm telling you, Gretch, I don't know anyone named Oliver." But she was right, and I did.

There were closed casket services in a local funeral parlor about a week and a half later, Episcopalian, Lutheran, something not Catholic, and there weren't many flowers as we were all students. Not that we couldn't afford to spend the money for flowers, but that we were rather thoughtless. He wasn't really anyone's friend. I don't believe anyone felt obligated.

His mother was wrecked, she couldn't stand up, so we formed a line at the couch they had her on to shake her hand and say the things to her you say at wakes. At least I guess that's what people did—expressed their condolences—and I just said, "I won't even pretend to know how you feel, Mrs. Kohl. I'm just sorry this happened." But I neither was nor wasn't sorry. I didn't know what to feel because I hadn't understood what had happened. She looked up at me with her large, dark eyes as stricken as I imagine her son's to be just before he died and said, "Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. You don't know what your kindness means to me. The kindness of you all." I know she meant it, too. It was those pleading eyes that told me so. I thought for a moment that I should tell her her son was a friend of mine, but I didn't, and we looked at each other in silence a moment longer, and then I walked away.

Going up and meeting her was a hard thing for me to do, something I'd thought about skipping during the week we waited for the police department and coroner's office to sort things out and release the remains, but Gretchen insisted she would go even if I didn't, and I knew that I had to go anyway, that people would be watching for me, waiting to see what I would do, and how I would act.

After paying our respects to his mother, Gretchen and I walked past the few floral arrangements on

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their wire stands—mostly red carnations, the largest bunch of which had a green and gold banner reading, ‘Beloved Son,’ and another had a banner in our red and white school colors reading, ‘Student’—to where the casket was in the alcove, and Gretchen turned and stopped me a few paces before it, whispering in my ear, “Wait your turn here until I’m done. I want to be alone.” She went up and knelt at the half pew they’d positioned there, and I looked back at his mother who was reaching up to exchange hugs with some girls I didn’t know. That lady, she couldn’t have had a good life with that kid as her son—I mean, you’d think she’d have seen this coming. But then again, it surprised Gretchen. The mother on that long Victorian couch was a petite woman in a navy blue dress, Greek-looking with her curly hair pulled back, and it must have been the lack of sleep on top of the shock of it, but her face seemed molded of yellow wax.

When I looked back at Gretchen kneeling at the casket, I saw that her lips were moving. She was too smart for religion, too sensible to pray just because something bad had happened, so I knew she was talking to him, to Oliver. It was the first time I admitted to myself that they had been friends. She stayed up there a long while, not slouching but kneeling erect, saying things now and again, pausing in between to bow her head—making a good show of it I thought at the time—then she stood and smoothed her black dress down over her hips and walked away without even glancing at me. Sometimes I just couldn’t figure out what she meant by the things she did or said, and that moment was one of them. I wanted to talk to her then, I wanted to be with her and have her tell me things were all right, so I went up to the casket, kneeled, closed my eyes, counted a brisk fifty, and got up to look for her.

Weeks later, when it came out that Rachmaninoff’s what he’d had in his headphones, I went to the library to listen to it. The library wasn’t a place I had often been, and a librarian’s assistant—a skinny kid in glasses—had to show me where the CD’s were kept, and then set me up in the audio room. We were alone in there and he said to me as he pressed buttons on the CD player, “People don’t usually come in here asking for this music. I bet you have to listen to him for one of your classes.”

Because I didn’t want to get into it, I told him, “That’s right.”

He said, “Rachy’s one of my favorites. You’ll find him to be extremely complex. All right. You’re ready to go.” Then he left me alone.

I was sitting at the carrel where they had the CD player, and the audio room, covered walls and ceiling in sound absorbing foam panels, didn’t have any windows, so when the music started, I just closed my eyes.

It was soft music, it was soothing music, and with my eyes closed, it made me feel as though I was sitting alone in a long, cold, stone corridor of a great empty castle, feeling vaguely sorrowful about something. For no reason at all, I thought about girls I had known in high school—girls I had not loved, but girls—listening to that music at that moment—I felt certain I would never see again, and the strange thing was, I was upset by that. It was weird, it was silly, it was my first real experience of beauty. I thought about a tennis player I had been with for a time the year before, who I’d slept with a while and given up, and I thought that even though we would live during the same period of history, alive and together in time, the circles of our lives would not cross again, and though she was doing something at that moment somewhere—breathing, laughing, sleeping curled on her side with her knees pulled up the way she liked to do—I to her and she to me, we were as the dead are to the living—existent only in our memories.

I thought then that I must write to that tennis player, and to the others, to see how they all were, to know for myself that there were people out there who knew me intimately, who knew I existed in the world and had a history, and I wanted to find Gretchen, and embrace her and make love to her. Then there was one famous track playing that I’d heard many times before, and it could have been that track he’d been listening to, or it could have been something else. The rumors never delved into those sorts of specifics.

The emotions I had felt listening to that music stayed with me a while, but by the time I’d walked

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down the long campus drive—looking down the cliff at Lake Michigan breaking foamy on the stones of the shore below—back to where the dormitories were, I was returned again to who I had been. I went up to my room and drank a few beers. I watched a storm push in over the lake, I watched the heavy rollers crest and fall, I watched the lightning—flashing in its cords—striking far out over the water, and the rain started, and the snow was turning to slush, and I had lost Gretchen, and I imagined I was just fine.

It must have been a cop who found the cassette when they were investigating the tracks, one of those buzz-cut locals who wrote us speeding tickets, who sent us running for the backdoors when they'd raid the college taverns, and I think about how strange it must have seemed to him, that gleaming white tape on the black stones of the track. As I imagine the evidence gathering and clean-up operations to have been that night, I see him in his police coat, the earmuffs coming out from under his cap, I see him huffing white plumes of breath in the cold night, hunched over and looking, and then—straightening up from the line of hunched over officers searching the track-ties by flarelight, by flashlight, how he—delicately pinched between his forefinger and thumb in their latex glove—held the cassette out away from his body as though it was contaminated with some infection, how he tilted his head and read the label before bagging it, how he told his wife later—in bed and restless after that gristly duty—about the scene at the tracks, told her about the tape, about Rachmaninoff whose music, it's my guess, neither of them had ever heard, and started the diffusion of that particular information through the town. Being a cop, he'd seen situations like that plenty of times before, and the tape with its strange Russian name was the one thing which helped him remember that cold night differently from the others he had dealt with.

Because for a long while afterward, people spoke of the kid's listening to classical music as though it explained something. That it made clear who the kid was and why he'd decided to do what he'd done. And I'd felt that way for a time, too, until I listened to it and found that it wasn't at all the sort of music I'd expected it to be. It was not strange or queer music, it was not the sort of music only a suicide would listen to. It was the sort of music people discover when they have a need for something such as it is in their lives—challenging music, and full of beauty. No, the Rachmaninoff couldn't explain anything.

In my version when I reconstruct it, when I place myself in his shoes, I don't burst out from any bushes, I'm not hiding when I do it, I simply take a pivot-step over from an empty darkness I've been waiting in, and the train's headlight blinds me. And it's the thunder of it that I think about, the sound of all that weight and speed, and I'm certain he heard the engine's awesome roar finally, even above his elegant music. And I'm glad in a way—though I'm not certain why—I'm relieved it wasn't a beautiful thing for him finally. To have done what he did, he must have had a sensitivity, a bravery I can't imagine, and to hear the sound of that pounding engine from only a heartbeat away, I know he understood how painful, how simply ugly, it would be.

To explain it, people said he did it for Gretchen—that it was as simple a thing as love—but I can't believe that's true, I've never felt comfortable with things being as easy as that to put away. That sort of talk—it was a burden, it was too much for Gretchen. In the end, she transferred out of school. People wondered about me too, because I was so close to what seemed to be the center of it, but honestly—to me, he was just some strange kid pestering my girlfriend. I really, really did not know him. I can only even remember seeing him on one occasion. I had watched him and Gretchen walk together along the beach one evening. I hadn't even been sure it was her until they passed below my window, and then he had lifted a stone from the beach and cast it out in a long arc to the water. He looked small next to her. He looked like a small and dark form in his hood beside her, like a dog, or sort of pet. He had been talking, and she had nodded once or twice. "Who were you walking with today?" I'd asked her when we were together later in my room, and she had said, "What, Richie? Oh nobody. A kid from my lab. A nerd. He's got a crush on me or something. He talks. I listen. Lots of things I don't know anything about. He's nice. I don't know

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what he sees in me.” She’d shrugged and lit a pipe for us and I forgot all about it.

People watched Gretchen and I all through that time, whispered about us, speculated, they were curious—I don’t blame them. But I didn’t have any answers for anyone, I never pretended that I did, and as I’m gone from that place and time years now, I suspect I never will. When college friends look me up and we arrange to meet for drinks in the city, it still comes up, it’s still a pressing mystery. And what I know and say about it—no matter how many times I’m asked—that won’t change. It can’t. I simply do not know why it happened, not definitely, not really. He loved a girl I barely knew, killed himself over it. That’s it. But people who knew me then, they associate me with that, linked to that is how they’ve remembered me—as though that was my only experience at college, as though I could have done something to change it.

In memorial to someone nobody really knew, for three days the college flew the flags at half-mast on the great pole outside the student center, and then there were the funeral services, and then there were the counseling sessions. By the time the last of the snow was gone just five weeks later, Oliver Kohl was a fading memory, and most everyone was done with it.

I thought I was, too. Perhaps I was for a time. I’m an older person than I was, quieter. It’s loss I feel now, questions, dulling with the years like spoons in a drawer, and as constant. Now and again I’ll look at the sky, at the angry swirl of gathering clouds, and I’ll say in words not meant for anyone but him, “Why did you give this to us? Why did you think we were good enough to deserve this?”

Water Snakes

Before I shove off the canoe, I hold it near the bank beneath tree branches, I pause in the river that laps my shins, bend, hold the silver slide of boat against current long enough to balance before I swing one leg in and lean over the gunwale, before the boat turns into the pull, but as I look into the water now I stop

three of them, patched red-brown and white, slender wands arc from riverbed to the surface, they sway, perfect smooth-joined pipes, water snakes. Illusion in ripples caught by shadows hanging from bushes onshore. They live with whatever the river brings. Water-snake eyes look up askance, snake noses split surface then the water heals over, breaks and closes, as the river moves the three snakes that grow in it

as I grow in it, legs that waver, stalks drawn by the flow, seeing slips, overlapping segments, I choose, resist for a minute the cool slide of the surface stinging my calf, freedom of moving where we're tethered, the canoe a sleek bright world almost the world of the river

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The Umbrella Shore

As in the rain the blue van in which we were riding crossed a bridge just as mist shifted to show the long shores of a creek curving across hectic light-green winter meadows, the way grass sometimes is in the British climate, my brother who was driving and I, in the midst of his son's chatter and ditto sounds of a handheld electronic game machine, and his wife as she rattled open the map to see where we had last been before we became lost along this country road because there weren't many signs and we were trying to find our way to the town which was built around mysterious stones, and why would they mark the roads?—they don't want us there, caught a glimpse to the left of a row of opened black umbrellas the size of huts each leaning toward the water's edge, with long wands of fishing poles just visible through rivers of raindrops' paths driven by wind down the windows, umbrellas enormous as exotic blossoms, bells, a long pattern wavering across pale background, and he and I both at the same time said, "We should stop and take a photo of this," and we didn't

and it wasn't just the weather
I've often remembered

AGAPE

(César Vallejo)

No one stops to ask
or request a thing. I haven't seen
a single burial flower
in this bustling procession

of lights. Forgive me God
for dying so little. Every man,
every woman, every child
walks past needing nothing

of me. What have they forgotten
which, like something odd,
I cup in my hands awkwardly.
Once, in front of my house,

I felt like shouting: Hey, if it's
missing, you'll find it here!
People slamming my door in my face
perplexes me. Something strange

has taken hold. No one
stopped to ask or request
a thing. Forgive me, God,
for having died so little.

Matthew T. Apple

Home Helper

I took a sip from the can of Sapporo Black Label in front of me and set it back down on the *kotatsu*, shifting my weight slightly under the short, electric heated table.

The robot didn't move. Just stared impassively at me from the other side of the living room.

I glanced at the TV. The afternoon news was showing live feed from *hatsumode* at the Fushimi Inari Shrine in southern Kyoto, thousands of visitors swarming to receive New Year's Day blessings and fortunes for their children from the priests and shrine maidens. The cameraman zoomed in on two stone fox statues on either side of the shrine gateway. "Foxes were worshipped in ancient times as harbingers of a bountiful harvest," an announcer was intoning. "But these days, we Japanese come in the hopes of reaping money, instead of rice."

I picked the can back up and kicked the rest back. Finished. I crushed it in my left hand. The sound seemed to echo throughout the empty room. I set the crushed can back down next to the remains of a bag of dried squid strips and reached blindly with my right hand under the fluffy comforter that covered the *kotatsu*. Sitting on a floor cushion, legs stretched out beneath the waist-high table, I had started to feel a prickly sensation in my thighs from the heat from the *kotatsu*'s electric heating coils. I fumbled around for a minute, finally found the power dial and turned it off. I leaned back, bracing myself with both hands on the old *tatami* rice-mat covered floor.

The robot, impassive as ever, said nothing. It had no mouth, only a glass shield for a face, a pair of 35 mm lenses for eyes. But I could swear that it was smirking.

My family had all gone to *hatsumode* in Osaka, all of them. "No, I don't really feel like visiting a shrine today," I had told them, half-expecting a drawn-out argument. "I don't believe in fortune-telling. It won't help things any."

My wife, though, made no attempt to try to convince me. "*Hona*, well, then," she had said, "Aya and I will go. Koji's already out somewhere with his university friends. Look after Mother, will you? *Tanomu wa.*"

Then they left me here with the robot: The PE-V, a three-year-old model from the "Home Helper" series. Officially, the model name was "Elderly Home Helper Machine." We joked about calling it "Typically Senile," but in the end we named it "Yuuki" – "Friendly Machine" – instead. Aya had wanted to call it "Aiki," for "Love Machine," after the classic Morning Musume pop song. Koji, on the other hand, had suggested "Nonki," for "Do-Nothing," which is what he does when he hangs out with his university friends in Nishinomiya. He's like I was: living on his own for the first time, skipping class, playing mah-jongg all night. I only hope he gets his act together before reality sets in. When I was Koji's age, there were companies lining up to hire university graduates. I was offered jobs at nearly all my interviews, sometimes just because the company representative was a graduate of the same university I was attending. My part of the interviews usually consisted of "Yes, sir." Easy dialog to memorize.

But that's all over now. "Japan, Inc.," as the U.S. press liked to call it, is dead. In fact, it had been dying for a while; it was only when I lost my job last April that I realized it. Since then, I have been trying to find another job, but no one wants to hire a guy in his mid-fifties. I have seen plenty of NHK news reports about entire families committing suicide because the breadwinner lost his job. Driving cars off cliffs, into lakes, into trees. Jumping in front of JR express trains. Carbon monoxide poisoning group "death pacts" in the suicide forests near Mt. Fuji.

When my wife heard the news about my job, she looked me straight in the face and said firmly, "You

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will find another job.” It was not a threat or a warning: my wife was just being a Kansai-woman, since she is from Osaka, after all. She works three-quarter time as a part-time homeroom teacher at a local elementary school, but we need two incomes to support us. Somehow, I *will* find a job. Five stomachs are depending on me.

I got up from the *kotatsu* and unplugged the robot from its recharging cradle. I walked through the kitchen to the open doorway of her darkened room. Ba-chan was in bed, half-awake as usual, buried beneath a hefty pile of blankets and comforters. She turned her head slightly as I turned on the kerosene stove in the far corner and threw open the curtains. Light streamed into the room, the stove kicked out a puff of smoke and started up. “Mother, how are you feeling?” I said loudly.

Ba-chan worked her mouth silently for a minute and blinked her eyes. Finally, she rasped, “They...ain’t come back yet?”

“No, Mother. Are you cold? Would you like something to drink?”

I started pulling back the bedspreads, calling back over my shoulder to the living room, “Yuuki. Come, please.”

I heard a high-pitched chime like an electronic harpsichord, then a pleasant female voice, “Yes, ma’am.” Then the sound of the PE-V slowly walking to the kitchen as I helped Ba-chan sit up in her bed. The robot’s 130 centimeter high-impact plastic frame reached the doorway and stopped. Its eyes were level with Ba-chan’s, but didn’t appear to see me at all standing next to her.

“Yuuki,” I said crisply, “prepare the wheelchair, please.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Yuuki chimed. It walked to a built-in wall closet and slowly slid the door open. I had seen it many times, but always I was amazed by the precision, the sheer mechanics involved.

32 Degrees of Freedom! the subway station advertising signs had proclaimed. *Fully human-like articulated joints; four fingers and an opposable thumb all with “knuckle” joints to turn door knobs and hold chair handles; flexible arms with over 120 degree vertical range, including 45 degree reach above the shoulder; magnesium alloy knees and ankles with automated balance adjustment for climbing stairs.*

It couldn’t dance like the old ASIMO, but the PE-V was an amazing model when it came out, all things considered. It set the standard for all the current models that I could no longer afford, and in many ways the PE-V was still more advanced than the new ones. Except for one small problem.

The robot smoothly retrieved the wheelchair from the closet and positioned it in front of Ba-chan on the bed. “Yuki, help me sit in the chair,” I said clearly.

“Yes, ma’am.” The robot locked the wheels in place, stepped in front of Ba-chan, and paused. I stood there, looking at it. If only I had known about the next round of “restructuring,” I wouldn’t have spent two months’ worth of paychecks on this thing. If only I had known the electricity costs needed to recharge it for eight hours every night.

“Ma’am, I am waiting.”

I gave a start. Ba-chan was slowly coming fully awake and was working her mouth again. “Wha...What’d that thing say? Can’t figger, no, no...”

She waved her left hand in front of her face and shook her head. I gently lifted her arms up from behind as the robot advanced, its vinyl and rubber-encased arms extended. Ba-chan sagged in Yuuki’s arms. The PE-V slowly and steadily turned its upper torso to the left. Every few seconds, the robot paused to recalculate its balance, shift its feet a centimeter or two, and then turn the upper torso again. After four or five minutes, Ba-chan was positioned to sit in the chair. The robot slowly began to tilt its body forward, pausing often to check its balance. Finally, Ba-chan lay back in the chair. At this point I was behind the chair, holding up Ba-chan’s arms as Yuuki carefully withdrew.

Ba-chan suddenly said, “Wanna watch TV?”

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“Yuuki, push the wheelchair to the living room doorway, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I slipped to one side and picked a blanket or two up from the bed as the robot did its business. The entire process of seating Ba-chan had taken about ten minutes. I probably could have done it faster myself. In fact, I shouldn’t even have had to assist at all.

Of course, Ba-chan hadn’t been in this condition when we bought the PE-V two years ago. She could still move about mostly on her own: she could manage to get to the toilet and the living room using the hand rails we attached to the walls, and she could get in and out of bed with some effort. The sole reason for buying the robot was that my wife was worried about leaving her mother alone by herself during the day.

“What if she falls down when I’m at school?” my wife had exclaimed one day in March. “What if Mother needs to call for help?”

This hadn’t been a problem before my wife started working, but I knew it was useless to argue. We had some money squirreled away, but with my son Koji starting university, we needed extra income to avoid dipping into the household savings. On top of that, by agreeing to take my wife’s last name I had legally become Ba-chan’s adopted son. Not having any sons of her own, it was the only way the family name could survive. I wasn’t sure I entirely liked her as a person, and there were a few arguments and mishaps during the first part of my marriage. Things had become worse a few years ago when Ba-chan’s husband died and she moved in with us. Still, I had felt obligated to take care of her.

My wife wouldn’t back down. So, reluctantly, I had agreed to buy a “home helper.” We went downtown one Sunday and tested out a few models before deciding on the PE-V. At the time it was the fastest, it was upgradeable, and (most important to my wife) it was on sale. When the PE-V was finally delivered a few days later, Aya and Koji eagerly tore through the installation manual. We light-heartedly bickered for a few minutes over what nickname to give the robot – this was important because the robot would only respond to commands said directly after its nickname. Next, for each member of the family we provided facial contour photograph data, similar to when your features are scanned into the computer system when you apply for your passport. Last were individual voice samples to match the contour photos. And that’s when the problem arose. The robot could not understand Ba-chan.

Every time Ba-chan tried to repeat the standard voice pattern phrases, the robot simply made a quiz-show buzzer noise and said mechanically, “I am terribly sorry, but I do not comprehend. Would you say that one more time, please?”

Ba-chan had no patience. She stormed off to her room – as well as possible, anyway – muttering all the while about machines and other modern useless things. A quick read through the manual didn’t give us any answers, so I phoned the branch office in downtown Osaka, who transferred me to the helpdesk in Taiwan, who tried to speak to me in English, which I can barely manage on a “How do you do?” level.

Finally, I was transferred to a Japanese-speaker who explained that even he sometimes had trouble with his home helper. It was the accent. Be careful how you pronounce the syllables, he advised. Use proper intonation, pause a bit between words and make sure to speak clearly and loudly. In the standard Japanese dialect.

That was definitely the reason. Ba-chan spoke with an old-fashioned Osaka accent called Senba-ben, from the northern district where she was born. Our house is in the Kansai area, in Takarazuka City, just a few kilometers northwest of Osaka itself. The children can of course understand and speak broad Kansai dialect like everyone in the area, but they also know how to speak standard Japanese, thanks to school and to TV. Ba-chan is over 80 now; when she was Aya’s age in the post-war period, a lot of girls never went to high school. Many of them dropped out to help work for the family before they even finished the 2nd year of junior high. I have never asked Ba-chan how far she lasted in school. It wouldn’t be appropriate. Still, I would guess she probably never made it through junior high school or bothered to learn standard dialect. Probably survival was much more important in those days.

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At any rate, while we were getting used to the PE-V last April I was working at the Osaka Minami branch as usual, and my wife started her part-time elementary school job. Aya began junior high school and Koji took the train to university every day. About one month into the spring semester, sometime after the Golden Week holidays in May, Koji started to complain that he was tired of traveling back and forth every day. Never mind that his ride was a mere twenty minutes including walking time, whereas my daily commute time averaged an hour, including two subway transfers. He demanded that I pay for an apartment near the campus, someplace in eastern Kobe. Now that I think about it, I am sure that the real reason was that he was sick of being Ba-chan's "voice."

You see, we had decided after all to stop trying to have Ba-chan speak standard dialect. Even in her younger days, she might have refused anyway out of regional pride. I'm from Saitama, just north of Tokyo, so I have a hard time understanding this mentality, but my wife sometimes tells me that I should learn to speak more Kansai dialect in casual situations. Just as I find it difficult and awkward to change dialects, Ba-chan must find it difficult, too. It was a strain, actually, the first few years of my marriage. I often found it difficult to understand my mother-in-law when she spoke quickly, which frequently made her angry. Now that Ba-chan had become older and seemed on the verge of senility, there seemed to be no other way: we had to trick the robot into thinking that someone else's voice was actually Ba-chan. It was either that, or not use the thing. It was impossible to return it; sale items were non-returnable, especially since we had already programmed it and given it a nickname. Even if the company had accepted a return, we would have been charged for re-initialization of the hardware and for reinstallation of the OS.

So, instead of going through the difficulty of trying to return Yuuki, we simply tricked it into thinking that Koji's voice was actually Ba-chan's voice. The whole thing was originally Koji's idea. He's the one who went to university for computers, after all. I just left it all up to him. In the beginning I think it was a sort of mental challenge for him, figuring out how to substitute his voice pattern for Ba-chan's. Of course, the facial contour data and other information we had provided earlier showed Ba-chan to be a woman, so the robot always answered "ma'am," but that didn't seem so important. Actually, it sounded more polite, for some reason.

When Koji moved into the apartment I had got for him in Kobe, he reprogrammed Yuuki to accept my voice pattern for Ba-chan. Since I'm the only person in the house who naturally speaks standard Japanese, this only seemed natural. No one knew how prescient it would turn out, as just a few months later I lost my job and wound up being home the most of anyone in the family. Except for Ba-chan herself, of course.

The wheelchair slowly rolled forward through the kitchen and stopped at the entrance to the living room. "I am ready, ma'am," Yuuki chimed. Ba-chan waved her hand in no particular direction. "Wanna watch TV," she said again in a faint voice. "Can't see...where's it at?"

There was a buzzer sound from behind the chair. "I apologize, ma'am, but I cannot understand you."

I was in the middle of laying down hard rubber mats on top of the *tatami*-covered floor, making a narrow corridor straight to the TV. "Yuuki, forward, please," I ordered.

"Yes, ma'am." The robot slowly pushed the wheelchair onto the mats. Yuuki's feet were rubber-soled, despite the magnesium alloy frame, and so wouldn't damage the *tatami*. Not so the wheels of the chair, so the rubber would prevent any ruts from forming. This wouldn't be such a worry in a more modern house with western-style flooring, but then again, I had bought the house about twenty years ago. It had been cheaper to renovate the house to suit Ba-chan than to buy a new one.

When the wheelchair reached the side of the *kotatsu*, I spoke again. "Yuuki, stop, please."

"Yes, ma'am." The robot stood still, mechanical hands still firmly gripping the wheelchair handles from behind. Ba-chan was about two meters from the TV screen. She nodded a few times, waving her left hand and working her mouth as if chewing. Coverage of the Fushimi Inari Shrine festivities had shifted to Meiji

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Shrine in downtown Tokyo. I had gone there once, when we still lived in Tokyo and I was just starting work at the main headquarters. It wasn't until after Koji was born that I was transferred to Kansai, to the Osaka branch. In the third year of our marriage, my wife and I had gone to Meiji Shrine on New Year's in the hopes of catching a glimpse of the Emperor. He and the Empress always went to Meiji Shrine surrounded by a large retinue, bowing and praying before the inner sanctum before waving to the crowds that had formed around them as they returned to the Imperial Palace. We could barely see anything. There were so many people that it was difficult to move. Probably we could have got a better view simply by staying home and watching the NHK TV coverage.

I stood to one side of the wheelchair, tucking the blankets over Ba-chan. She began turning her head this way and that, trying to look back at the robot. She worked her mouth again. "Somethin' to drink...drink... useless thing..."

"Yuki," I said sharply. "Pour a cup of green tea and bring it to me."

"Yes, ma'am." The PE-V set the lock on the wheelchair and let go of the handles. As it turned to go back to the kitchen, I wondered for a moment if I should check on it. The first time Koji asked Yuuki to prepare tea, the robot had left the oven range gas burner flame on high, sending smoke everywhere and setting off the alarm. It had then proceeded to leave a hot teapot on an unprotected kitchen table, permanently scorching the surface as it delivered the requested cup of tea to the living room. The next time, Koji had been more explicit in his directions, and the robot seemed to remember the routine after that. I still couldn't help feeling worried.

"Masa...Masahiro...you..."

I stopped and turned back to Ba-chan. Her eyes were glued to the TV coverage of the Emperor's visit to Meiji. The Empress was sick, and so the Emperor was alone this year, but that didn't stop the usual crowds of onlookers from coming to catch a glimpse. Ba-chan waved a hand at the TV. "Went there, dint cha?" Ba-chan mumbled.

"Yes, Mother, that's right." I bent down over her so she could hear. "Yuri and I went to Meiji Shrine once, when we lived in Kanto."

"Good, good, that's good," she mumbled. Ba-chan folded her hands in her lap, eyes still following the crowds on TV. The Emperor was approaching the sanctum, following the head priest. In a few minutes, the brief ceremony would begin with the head priest prostrating himself before presenting offerings of rice, fruits, and *nihonshu* rice wine on small wooden tables. Ba-chan's darting eyes took in everything. I wondered how much she could still understand. When I first met her, she was fiery, had a swift tongue, and was a keen observer of every little mistake I made. Much like my wife, I guess. Now, though, I wondered if Ba-chan could still tell what was happening. At times, she seemed to understand everything. Other times...

"Saw him, dint cha."

Ba-chan said matter-of-factly in a tone of voice that surprised me. She slowly turned her head to look at me. The head priest dressed all in white was preparing to pass the sacred *haraigushi* bamboo branch over the Emperor to purify him. I looked at the TV, then back to Ba-chan.

"Yes, Mother," I said, slowly. "Yes, Yuri and I both saw him. You remember when we visited that day, don't you?" It had been our last New Year's as a young married couple without children. We had gone out for dinner with some friends after the shrine visit, and then we went by the old Bullet Train all the way to Osaka. That was our first experience, too. It was the closest we came to taking a honeymoon. Unfortunately, we arrived over 6 hours later than we expected, and the local trains had stopped running. So, we had to take a taxi from the Osaka main station to Ba-chan's house in the suburbs, arriving well after midnight. Ba-chan had been waiting with the traditional New Year's dinner that she had laboriously prepared. She was so angry about our late arrival, she didn't talk to me for the next two days of the New Year's holiday. Years later when

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she moved in with us, she had obviously still held it against me, though we had never openly spoken of it. Until now.

The Emperor slowly bowed and clapped his hands together twice. He bowed again and clapped again. Ba-chan suddenly turned to me and smiled.

“Yuri looked so happy,” Ba-chan said. There was a noise in the kitchen of the robot pouring tea. Ba-chan blinked and waved a hand at me. “Masa...Masahiro...”

“Yes, Mother. I’m here.”

I knelt next to her. The Emperor had turned around and was walking back to his limousine, waving and smiling at the crowd. Ba-chan rested her hand on the wheelchair armrest. She nodded her head. “*Yō gambatotta na.*”

I nodded my head, placing a hand on her hand. Yuuki was walking slowly to the living room doorway, a handle-less brown porcelain cup clenched delicately in one hand. “You worked hard.” The highest words of praise I could expect from her, no doubt. The robot stopped just behind the wheelchair, arm outstretched with the cup. “Your tea is ready, ma’am,” it chimed pleasantly.

I looked down, swallowing a breath, and sighed. “Thank you, Yuuki.”

The robot stood still. “Yes, ma’am?”

I shook my head and cleared my throat. “Yuuki, place the cup on the table, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The robot slowly bent over and gently placed the cup on the table. The mechanical hand slowly relaxed, the knuckle joints pulling back as one unit from the cup. The tea sloshed a bit, but none spilled. An improvement over the previous time, I noted. The PE-V had only filled the cup halfway.

I reached over Ba-chan with my left hand and took up the cup. TV coverage behind me continued as the scene changed from the Emperor’s visit to Meiji Shrine to pictures of the crowds at Sumiyoshi Grand Shrine in Osaka. Somewhere in the shrine’s precincts were my wife and daughter, and maybe my son, too. Only three of the three million who would visit it before the festival period was over.

“Mother, how about some tea?”

Ba-chan looked at the cup, then at me. She reached up uncertainly with both hands and grasped the cup. I kept two fingers on the bottom of the cup, guiding it to her mouth. She took a sip, lowered the cup, took another sip and closed her eyes. I helped her lower the cup, then replaced the cup on the *kotatsu*. Ba-chan folded her hands in her lap again. She opened her eyes, slowly craned her neck to look back at Yuuki, and then looked at me.

She smiled. “*Homu helpaa.*” It sounded as if she were giggling. “*Homu helpaa.*”

I nodded, glancing up at the robot standing impassively behind Ba-chan, arms at its side, and laughed. “Yeah.”

The robot was smirking again.

Ann Elisabeth Palazzo

Exploratory Surgery

The nurse hands them to me
and I stuff my mother's teeth
into my pocket
like a shoplifted candy bar.
I didn't even know
she had dentures.

Well, I suppose I knew.
You could see little claws
silvered incisors
when she laughed
*You're so lucky they put
fluoride in the water now.
I never went to the dentist
until I was married.*

Her firstborn, my brother
isn't here because
hospitals give him *the creeps*.
His sponsor with the soul patch
told him that it's okay
to avoid things
that give him the creeps.
*I can't be good for anyone else
until I'm okay with myself first.*

Hey, I say,
It's *good you're
keeping it real.*

Safe in the bathroom stall
I take them out of my pocket
peel tissue and crumbles of tobacco
from the pink latex gums.
She'd kill me
if she tasted my cigarettes
on her teeth
now.

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My mother's smile
is in my hand
and this terrifies me,
this possibility
as though other parts of her
can be given to me as easily.

Her teeth are the only thing
she has ever entrusted to me.
I examine the feisty incisors,
touch them gently
with my pinky finger,
hoping to get used to them.

I think of her
in the cold operating room,
eyes taped shut
as they crack open her ribs
like an oyster.

County Kerry, 1992

Anyone could hear
the Irish in my grandmother.
How her voice dropped to a whisper
when she said *the Troubles*.
Boiled meat at 4:00.
Somehow even the hump
on her back, her whiskers
were Irish to me.

My Grandfather left Ireland behind.
Watched the Mets, The Price is Right
and Columbo, Lazy-Boy swiveled
away from my mother as he
chewed the side of his jaw
crushed by a spindle clamp
on the '56 GM line.

He was a man who tended
the fire of his grudges
like he was on his last match
Caretaker in a graveyard
filled with plot after plot after plot
Of regrets
If there were stories of Ireland
they went to the sons.

I tried to solve his mystery in college.
Read the epic of Cuchulain
Swooned at a hero who would
Beg the taste of an ax
Later I visited his hometown.
Climbed Conor Pass and drank rain
that tasted like coal
under skies as cold as time.
Counted hills as they rolled
like green syllables
melting in your mouth.

I never did solve the mystery.
(Though the scattered, moving clouds
and endless low rock walls
gashing the land like old scars
made me think of him.)

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What folly to think that I
as American as birth control pills
and drive thrus
could ever hope to find
my grandfather.

Kevin Ducey

mass at the speed of light

working along the highway
the overgrown path

we lose the way in
Isaiah foretelling

the light already in motion
toward us

certainty in physics
Dante watches the two

wretches playing table
tennis on the train moving

through a neighborhood of
hell, yet the little white

ball refuses to move – light
years of brooding ahead

Blackfriars

God's banker killed by mafia, experts rule.

Court-appointed forensic experts concluded that Roberto Calvi was not, as previously assumed, murdered elsewhere and then suspended below the bridge. ... He died by being hanged under the bridge from a boat on the Thames. Calvi's bank built its empire in close association with the Vatican bank, the Institute for Religious Works. This was headed by Archbishop Paul Marcinkus from Chicago. One of the most influential figures in the Calvi story was Licio Gelli, now 84. He was Grand Master of the P2 masonic lodge of which Silvio Berlusconi was once a member.

The Observer, December 7, 2003

The Banco Ambrosiano goes
in black, the doors
shuttered; the pope's
treasurer has gone
missing. The Angels
carry the dead man to
Blackfriars Bridge where
they leave him swing. Oh,
they charter a boat and
carry God's banker
sweating and pleading
to the river – following
the Sex Pistols into
the current. God save
the Pope's Bank
Manager. He ain't no
financier. The angels aren't
interested in your grand
feelings. Their compound
eyes never blink. All movement
on the crowded street goes
still. A holy silence, the plastic
bag rustles along the gutter
then lies quiet. The heirarch's
motorcade rushes by on its
way to the River. If you dare
look: a pale hand pressed
against the limo's dark glass.

The Worser Angels

In the Synoptic
Mary refuses the

angel at the cave where
they'd laid Jesus' body

– the sepulchre. She demands
to see the body: 'Produce –

Produce the corpse,
motherfucker,' she says and

the angel throws down
on her and grapples her

Our worser angels
cheat when at wrestling

and she breaks his
hold (the angel's only

one angel against Magdalene
– the Magdalene). She

rushes into the cave, calling
'help me, help me, Jesus,'

but the grave is empty,
only the rustle of her breath.

The Girl

A fourteen year old girl is kidnapped from her bedroom in the middle of the night, from her parents' mansion, in Salt Lake City, in Utah, by a man who may or may not have had a gun, a knife, a taser, or a cross-bow, but who did have a warning for the girl's younger sister, who shared the bedroom, that she should not alert the proper authorities for at least two hours after he and the girl had left this bedroom, lest he harm the girl; and she, the younger sister, believed the man because she did not know then, as we learned later, that he was crazy—which became especially clear when a picture of this man was finally put on television, a picture that showed his patchy beard and loose blue eyes, making him look not unkempt and not tired, but older, not aged but of an older age, perhaps from the time the Mormons first followed Brigham Young out to Utah, actually outside the then existing borders of the United States, and established themselves there, full of religious fervor and the belief that they and only they, and Brigham Young in particular, who picked up the reins after the more particular founder Joseph Smith was murdered in Nauvoo, New York, were doing something different, better, profound, for—as they say—a higher purpose, and thus leaving all the mundane tasks of existence to the pagans populating the East and the few scattered to the West; and since the man did not look like this then, in the darkened room in the mansion, the younger sister believed he would indeed know if she had told before the allotted time and he would indeed harm her sister when he somehow received such information, because, the younger sister must have reasoned, if he can penetrate this fortress in Salt Lake City, most recent home of the winter Olympics, if he could break into this particular American dream, he must be a mastermind, or at the very least a clever criminal following a well thought out clever plan; and the fact that he avoided being caught in the massive manhunt ensuing the conspicuous crime only confirmed that notion for the duration of the case, even though, as it turned out, his only plan consisted of marrying the girl, bonding her to him in some sort of ceremony, to keep her by his side and love her, or to do whatever it is that possessors obsessed with their possessed do; but initially we didn't know this and just assumed the girl was taken for ransom because the family—as you should have inferred by now—was rich and the idea of doing things for money would make sense to this country's mores, thus eventually leaving us all bewildered when no ransom note came forward and then months upon months passed without any word, without any new information, leaving us no recourse but to assume that the girl was dead, maybe having been too much trouble for the kidnapper, maybe the plan having failed before a note managed to be sent, maybe he—or even they—having already done whatever sick things there were to be done to her and, finished, left her somewhere, open and sore, to starve or wait for some kind hunter to come along as he explored hidden trails or perhaps trespassed on land more prolific than public land, and find her and, hopefully, remain—as I said—kind and not, in the instant he lay eyes on her, her hands and feet tied to ropes staked in the ground, the ripped remains of her clothes barely covering her private parts, change in that way that one can when it occurs to them that they have all the power and can never ever be caught; until nine months later, after most of us had forgotten, the girl was found outside of a mall wearing a wig and baggy clothes, slightly confused, adumbrating, leaving some to wonder why she didn't cry out, shout her name, who she was and where she had been taken from, say "It's me, take me home;" and leaving others to suspect that the fact that she did not implies that her identity had been hidden from the outside world for so long that it had also become hidden from herself, or that she lost herself first, perhaps through her captor's constant whispers and lies—no one is looking for you, no one cares—that she gave up her claim to the outside world, considered their relationship to be one of mutual indifference or even, perhaps, mutual dislike, and that this was the saddest thing of all; and so it was not all that surprising to these

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people when the world, or more specifically a man who first suspected this random girl might be the girl, as he had suspected several girls of being during the previous nine months, exercising that particular fervor of a hero or treasure-hunter, calling the police frequently to say this one this time might be the girl, and the cops who arrived in response to his call, wary of him by now but suffering from hope and perhaps a bit of that profound belief inherited by the Salt Lake area, barely recognized her, not just because of the wig and clothes, but because, as they said at the press conference held later that day, she had put on a bit of weight, and my grandmother, hearing this while we were at the kitchen table having dinner as the television blared in the adjacent room because she is, like many people her age, hard of hearing, remarked, as she tried to heap more boiled kielbasa onto my plate, “Well, at least they took good care of her.”

Embarazo Doble

Investigating a second, separate, in utero kick
The ultrasound shows there are two in the womb—
Not twins, but a rare “double pregnancy.”

Embarazo doble, the doctor explains
As his fingers trip along la guitarra double time.
Mira: el huevo y el esperma vienen juntos...

Espera, wait! The birds and the bees aren't in question,
It's my uterus, my fertilidad magnífica. My fears
Multiply. How will I birth two children due

Two months apart? Have they agreed to take turns?
Señora, silencio, the doctor advises, *y escucha*
La música. And I hush my questioning mind,

Soothed by the double quick harmony of his guitar
Y el sonido de los corazones dobles —
The sound of the twin-beating hearts.

Creation Story

*“in the beginning, the earth was a formless void
and darkness covered the face of the deep.” Genesis, the Bible*

in the beginning
the mythic Madonna and child
were still one—inhabiting each other,
a Mobius strip, molecule to molecule

*emptiness mated to presence, life
to spilt blood, matter inherent in the dark*

until slowly they unzipped
the paired DNA of their selves
hovering over and around,
their boundaries still kissing

*unlocking the space between atoms,
between cells, between stars*

slowly they gathered momentum, force
from the furthest corners of being,
until particles spun with the energy
of *need* and *want* and *must have*

*heat of the neuron’s pulse, shudders
and sparks, liquid stirring, splash of acid*

in the beginning
the universal essence quickened,
compressing desire within desire
within desire, until pure thought

let there be light

collided, shattered into fragments
and burned

Malignant

The danger: her parents are getting old, disease hovers now, a vulture on the highway. The diagnosis: we caught it just in time. We can erase all signs, eradicate all cells. A few treatments, nothing more. Some follow-ups, a balanced diet, your father will come through. She lies her head against the vinyl waiting room chair, she lies her hands against her chest, she lies to herself; she believes he will not die.

A boyfriend would be a comfort. Having none, no body to hold, she depends on her sister. Their father is sick, they cling together, they console their anxiety-riddled mother. They eat mint ice cream by the gallon.

Her sister, strong always, sleeps on the downstairs couch, in front of the TV. Continually on now, the constant hum of sitcoms and newsmagazines-- the trials of adolescence, the terror of airborne illnesses-- fills the horrible silence, becomes a third daughter, a dependable, lovable thing. They've lost the remote. No one bothers to move furniture to find it.

Work is suspended, seriously thought never to be resumed. Office spaces are easily occupied by other, more steady women, computer monitors functioning just as well under a stranger's fingers. Their mother worries about money, the bills multiplying, spreading just as fast as those cells they're trying to control. Their mother has begun to cough, has taken up smoking, a habit learnt in her twenties. She knows the smoke will darken the already heavy room, she knows the smoke will flood her lungs with all sorts of wrong, but there it is. Comfort will be drawn from any source. The drowning girl will remark how pretty the coral.

The neighbors, at the outset, brought covered casseroles, baskets of warm bread, quarts of homemade preserves. Cheery cards-- cartoon rabbits, kittens, golf jokes-- formed a stack as thick as two fingers. Enough with the plants, their mother said. They keep the curtains pulled; it's only a matter of time before leaves will dry, fall onto the floor.

But now, no one shows, no one phones. The allure of sickness has waned. Everyone has gone through it before anyway. Husbands, fathers, granddads of their own have fallen and stood again, or not. They want something exotic, these friends, a coma, a heart transplant, then they'll stop by, keep company.

The call was almost more than any of them could bear. Father swaddled in his study, home for a few days now, looking a bit less weary, looking a bit less pale, raised his head from his propped recline. She answered it, she took it out of the room, into the hall once she recognized the doctor's authoritative tone.

We've found another cluster, it's spread farther than we thought it would. Funny though, how we thought we had it taken care of. He'll need more treatment as soon as he's strong enough.

The address book is consulted, nieces, nephews, great-aunts, college friends summoned. They've lived in so many different houses, so many sets of neighbors to tell, to ask for prayers and positive thoughts. Their place in the south, remembered only by its saucer-petaled magnolia, the beauty in the front yard. The blue house on the Canadian border. The elm-lined boulevard of the east coast. All recollections now, relics of their family life. She pauses at the last entry: Zimmerman, Herold and Hilda. Their lovely East German neighbors; they made their own bratwursts, sauerkraut. Surely dead by now, they haven't lived in Wisconsin for some twenty years. Written in purple ink, her mother's hand, she hesitates to take black marker to the page. This is what's left? A house number, a short street? She feels a headache forming, right where her

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memory lies.

Tenderly she cuts out the page, the only Z anyway, nothing else will be missed. Her sister stands behind her, asking why she's doing that, why not leave it alone? She looks up, notices how gray her sister's face has become, she looks up and says I can't remember them anyway, I'm not sure if they even existed.

Let's pray, her sister's voice is quiet, let's find comfort. They kneel in the kitchen, dishes stacked overhead, the tile leaking cold into their knees. If God is anywhere, he's in the kitchen, overseeing domestic families, chasing away worries with a dishtowel.

We ask you Lord to look out for our father, to give him strength. The words form columns, the columns form buildings, the buildings reach skyward; she wonders how receptive God really is to all this talk. He is strong enough to raze these wobbly requests; he can push his finger into his ears, he may already have done.

She repeats her sister's ah-men, then asks if she wants to scoop the ice cream.

Another round, another onslaught of tests and trials, of hospitals smelling of vomit, of clinics showering down its ironically bright lighting. An old family friend, one who's just now realizing how bad it really is, has arrived from Alabama, carrying her dog in its airline cage. Little, its tongue a postage stamp of pink, its fur recently shampooed and combed, it sits as if stone. The flight was too much for it to handle. Turbulence. The friend releases it from the mesh door. Her name is Cupcake and maybe your father would like to meet her?

He is sleeping; the dog blankly licks his hand. The Alabama friend smiles and says we don't want to bother him now do we? Neither of the girls reply-- both are gazing at their father, whose body has now become unrecognizable, so thin and loose, a deflation on all accounts, an inward decompression. They wonder where their mother has gone, they didn't hear the front door open. They don't know what to do with their guest, the house is hardly hospitable, nor are they in the mood to be hostesses. A bed will have to be made up, the cupboards searched for dinner. Her visit is to make things easier. The politeness of culture has made this impossible.

Y'all don't worry about a thing. I'm perfectly fine to take care of myself. You just do what you need to do. I'm here to help you with everything. Cupcake, with her tiny white head, nods. She's just as capable of cheering up their father as anyone.

She gives up her bedroom, she has been relegated to the floor beside her sister. An ancient sleeping bag must be found, all their extra blankets have gone to the thin-bloodied visitor. As she pulls the attic stairs down from the ceiling, she briefly hopes they will fall on her head knocking her out for the night and into the morning. A deep nothingness is all she requires, a fog.

It has been years since she's been in the attic; she's forgotten all its contents. A list of childhood begins-- roller skates and water guns, teddy bears and baby dolls. She climbs into her past; she never thought it would be so dusty.

Perhaps everything will be okay, as her sister tells her before they close their eyes to sleep. Maybe they will get through this, clean and new on the other side. Of course all other families have walked with their own pains; hers is nothing special. It's just, it's just she is specific, the pain is her own.

The morning brings new distractions. Their guest has fallen ill, something cold-like, a stuffed nose, a throat coated in phlegm. She apologizes through her Kleenex, she says don't worry about me, I just need a few aspirin and a glass of warm water. Her face is puffed. Even poor Cupcake won't kiss her.

Their mother has walked to the store for orange juice and a carton of cigarettes. She'll be back as soon as she feels certain their guest has fallen asleep. It has always been a friendship of convenience, they've suddenly realized. Their house with the magnolia was open to her, now, this beige house with flapping

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shutters, this northern climate house, is a cut vein, only large enough to support its own blood type.

The guest has forgotten her robe, could she borrow one? They open their mother's closet, a disorder appears, nothing shocking, an assumption actually, that they would have to wade through cotton dresses and polyester pants, soft shoes, scuffed handbags. A chenille robe is finally picked from the dross, a pink thing, tissues in its pockets, no one knows how old. The smell of their mother is in it, rosewater, toothpaste. It is much too large for their guest; the belt circles twice. She thanks the girls, then shuffles back to her temporary room. They watch her thin hips beneath their mother's cloth-- a vision of her death, bones against skin, a large woman gone.

They've taken to playing Scrabble in the afternoons, she and her sister, long series of games, scores in the three hundreds, dictionaries allowed to be consulted. Their father doesn't shuffle tiles-- he keeps tally, his writing the same tiny scratch as always, the pencil lead a thin unending line.

Foreign words, proper names, hyphenates. Anything goes. Her sister has the advantage having studied most of all the Romance languages and German. The words come easily to her, a rush of letters, seventy points easy. They're impressed by her vocabulary-- she knows the definitions perfectly. Despite her knowledge, she avoids medical terms. Triage, urethra, nucleus. All fine words at any other time.

They play in their father's study, the only comfortable place for him, in the dim. Shades are pulled, only one lamp is on. They listen to the local talk radio, Republican slant, the views her father enjoys. They eat popcorn and taco chips; they drink chocolate sodas. They try to ignore their father's wet breathing, his falling asleep, his pencil dropping to the wooden floor with a soft thud. She puts away the board while her sister tucks more blankets around him. They leave their father to his sleeping; they cannot take comfort in winning any game-- their precious words, so important during play, have become meaningless.

It's evening then, or twilight at least. A time when possibility has faltered and only unconscious dreams can be looked forward to. She and her sister resume their vigil in front of the television. She wants to hold her sister's hand, to feel the blood in her veins, but instead, she grips her afghan, a flimsy substitute.

The shows they watch, astonishing. Contestants dangling from ropes, eating beetles, nothing seems to scare them. The audacity of referring to these slick shows as reality when obviously nothing real occurs. Where are the electric company's second notices, the failing mufflers, the tests coming back clouded with illness? But they watch anyway-- the release is all they need, the temporary numb.

The Alabama guest is still cocooned in her room, sick as a dog, she says, needing only a bit of broth now and then, and a rub of Vicks. Their mother is somewhere in the house too, floating, a ghost, from room to room, carrying the train of her nightgown, a Dickens character, inconsolable. It is just she and her sister, alone together, in the wavering TV glow.

Then late night talk shows begin, their upbeat entrance themes pounding, echoing off the living room walls. The lineups of guests declared, the curtains pulled back, and there he is, the powdered host. Somehow his monologue of presidential goofs and celebrity outrageousness makes them laugh. They are able to forget all their bleak thoughts and lounge in the superficial comedy. They are thankful for these plastic men in their well-made suits. They applaud the shining guests and are irritated when the show ends. Her sister is asleep as soon as the TV is turned off, she wonders how she manages it, slipping away so easily, not allowing her worries to trudge through her thoughts. But exhausted herself, she only wallows for a few minutes and then sleep arrives.

Cupcake has coughed a yellow-green sick on the sofa. Their guest is absolutely apologetic, on her knees, wiping away the pool with paper towels and Lysol. She is shocked that her little Cupcake would do such a thing. She inspects his mouth, looking for signs. What have you eaten, you horrible thing? Her voice is high and silly. Cupcake manages a shrug and totters off into the kitchen where he has overturned the garbage-- bones spilling out, milk bottles dripping.

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Without the girls' asking, the guest has decided it's time she left. A new airline has been booked, an early morning flight, no connections. She's sorry she couldn't have helped more, but gosh, she didn't expect it would be so cold here, she didn't even think to bring extra sweaters to ward off the chill.

She hugs everyone, whispering into their ears I'm praying for y'all. Cupcake is silent, is situated in his carrier. She leaves an odor of mentholatum and cherry cough syrup. No one is sure what to think of her visit-- she certainly didn't make things easier, as they had wished. But then, people are very often like that-- promises unfulfilled. With the closing of the front door, all are back to their usual places, filling in the gaps.

The doctors have deemed her father well enough to battle another round; he's to arrive at the hospital in a week, stomach empty, fears assuaged. Together, they attend church, the day before treatment. The congregation watches them as they take communion, they remark how unsteady he is, how brave. The pastor offers the requisite blessings, he holds their hands, squeezing too hard. Just give your worries to Jesus, he says. He'll give you the strength to get through anything. She wants to believe this; she looks around at all the uncomplicated folk, really, that's what they are, people who in their hearts know the Truth. God, she asks herself, is that all it takes, a concession of self, a ceding of mind? Her sister kisses the pastor's cheek. She is one of the followers, a simple believer.

After church they stop for donuts, custard filled and greasy. Their father can manage only one bite, his last until tomorrow evening or later. The girls finish two each, their mother three. No one says anything-- they're accustomed to their unhealthy habits and actually find nothing wrong with indulgences. They avoid their father's stares as they lick the icing from their lips and fingers. He says church wore him out; he stumbles on his way to the study but rights himself against the doorjamb. They hear his radio, loud, an advertisement for radial tires. The women look at each other, not knowing how next to fill their hours. Their mother suggests they bake cookies, although, when they find only a half-cup of flour and no sugar, they give up the idea. Instead, they decide on nothing at all, except sitting in the living room staring at the carpet.

They finish their day. Tomorrow, perhaps their father and husband, their beloved, will be cured. Perhaps the treatment won't induce such sickness. They want to believe everything will right itself, that prayers will be heard and kept, if not, this coping, this pretense of hope, will surely kill them all.

I'm the same as I was when I was 6 years old

Remember being a child,
the years just hours old,
asked in the narthex of Trinity Lutheran,
And what's your name?

Without meeting any gaze
I held my mother's hand,
because that's what I did
(what we all did),

responding, "They call me Daniel."
And the Voice would laugh
at me, at my innocent response,
And who are 'they'?

I looked up high, sheepishly,
into a face I cannot recall,
"You."

Dawn M. Comer

The Roswell Diaries

Editor's Note: I came across this diary in a Goodwill in Las Cruces, New Mexico, in July of 2001. On the surface, it didn't look like much, just a battered green spiral notebook that had fallen behind a row of romance novels. How this diary came to be there, nobody knew, though tire tracks on the back cover indicate an encounter with a highway at some point in its existence. The precise identity of the writer remains unknown. What we do know is her name (Valerie) and her approximate age at the time of her writing (twelve). Attempts to further uncover Valerie's identity at the International U.F.O. Museum in Roswell, New Mexico, led nowhere, as it seems the conspiracy-minded also have their secrets. The National Association of Tourist Attraction Survivors continues to investigate new leads.

August 1, 1998

We're moving. Again. Mom tells me it's for the best. She says she wants an alien baby and the only way to get one is if she moves us all to Roswell. Van and Velma don't seem to mind, but I don't want to go. Van's only three and too young to care where Mom takes him. Velma's going to be in first grade, but she's too weird to have any friends so she doesn't care either. I'm not too young, I have friends, and I care. A lot.

August 2, 1998

Today I asked Mom why she wants an alien baby and all she said was, "I need a new challenge, Valerie." A new challenge? I told her she should take up knitting or bowling or maybe even give marriage another try. "I plan to," she said. Then she got all dreamy and asked me, "Wouldn't you like to have an alien daddy?" YUCK!! Who wants an alien dad? I sure don't.

August 3, 1998

We're in the car now. The two little Vs are asleep in the backseat. Mom said she needed a map-reader so I'm up front. We've been on the road since 4:00 this morning and it's almost noon now. I begged Mom to let me bring Bruce so he's sleeping on the seat between us. Bruce likes to lay on his back and show off the white patch on his belly. He didn't like being in the car at first and howled a lot and sweated from his paws which seems really weird to me. But most of all he just shed. There's grey cat hair all over the seats from the first hour of the trip but he's fine now. I've been feeding Bruce Cosmic Catnip treats and letting him drink out of my water bottle when he's thirsty. "We'll get you an alien cat in Roswell," Mom said. She says I roll my eyes too much. I don't think I do. Who wants an alien cat? I sure don't. I wonder, though, do alien cats have antennae?

I'm back. I'm tired of listening to Mom talk so I told her I had to write in my diary. She's still talking but I'm not even pretending to listen. Here's what she sounds like when she talks nonstop: "Oh, alien men are great. Alien dads are great. Alien cats are really great. Just think, you'll be going to school with aliens. And we'll live in an alien house with alien TV and eat alien TV dinners blah blah blah alien, blah blah blah alien, blah alien blah blah blah blah." She makes me sick.

I had a hard time explaining all this to Brandi. Even though Brandi's supposed to be my best

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friend and understand me immediately like we've got some kind of psychic connection, she's kind of flaky sometimes.

"Mom's moving us somewhere else," I told her.

"Where?" Brandi asked.

"Roswell," I said.

"Where?" Brandi asked again.

"Roswell," I repeated, "like in *The X-Files*."

"Like in what?" Brandi asked.

So I tried to tell her about Mom wanting to marry an alien and how the only way she thought she could do so was to go all the way to Roswell which is clear across the country.

"Oh!" Brandi said, looking like she finally had it all figured out. "Like *Star Trek!* Maybe you could beam me up for a weekend sometime."

I told her I didn't think it worked like that, but then she acted all mad like I didn't like her anymore and started saying I probably had other people in mind I wanted to beam up first instead of her, that I was just going to forget all about her once I moved. She can be soooo annoying sometimes!

We stopped at a McDonalds just outside of Salt Lake City and ate lunch. Happy Meals for the 2LVs, a Big Mac, large fries, large coke, large chocolate shake, and cherry pie for me. Filet O' Fish without the bun or sauce for Bruce. I'll say one thing good about Mom; when she's excited about something, you can get her to buy you anything as long as you're willing to take advantage of her mood. I feel kind of pukey now, but I don't know when I'll get a meal that good again. Mom's gone kind of quiet now and isn't chattering away as much as she was earlier. Looks like she's getting mopey which isn't good for any of us. Uh, oh. She just asked, "Do you think an alien man will really love me?" So I said, "Uhhuh. Sure, Mom," and tried to smile up at her because the last thing any of us needs right now is Mom losing faith in herself halfway to Roswell.

August 4, 1998

Finally, the sun is up enough for me to see to write. Mom's been driving all night. I slept off and on, waking up when the car veered too suddenly or a horn blasted me out of sleep or Mom started singing really loud to keep herself awake. Ok. I'm going to write some things I didn't think I was going to have to write, things I don't want to write. I just hope Mom doesn't open up this diary.

See, the thing is, I'm not sure there are aliens in Roswell. I think we're going to get there and Mom's going to be really disappointed and she's going to crash, really crash bad this time, and I'm going to have to take care of the 2LVs by myself and that scares me. I hope for all our sakes that she finds an alien man she can marry and live happily ever after with, because that would mean the rest of us wouldn't live half bad. But I'm not convinced that's going to happen. Here's why:

1) She's never even found a human man who can live with her for more than a year.

2) The only evidence she has of alien men living in Roswell comes from a _____ story in *Weekly World News*.

It's not that I don't think *Weekly World News* isn't credible about a lot of things like the Bat Boy and the face on Mars, but when Mom called the Roswell Chamber of Commerce, the man on the other end laughed and hung up on her. "It's ok," Mom told me after she hung up the phone, "That's what the *Weekly World News* said would happen. They just don't want their town overrun by outsiders."¹

August 5, 1998

We're an hour from Roswell and the 2LVs have finally stopped puking. Van was the first. He puked with-

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out warning, straight onto the back of my seat. After that, Velma started in, and Mom didn't have anywhere to pull off or anything for them to throw up in, so the puke just went all over. By the time Mom pulled over at an old run-down gas station, the car felt like this puke sauna. Since mom can't handle being around sick people, she got me a bucket of water and an armload of scratchy brown paper towels from the bathroom and set me to work cleaning the car and the 2LVs while she scurried back into the air-conditioned gas station.

As I was stripping off the 2LVs puke-soaked clothing, this shiny black SUV with a California license plate pulled into the gas station, and these perfectly tanned parents and their two perfectly tanned children, one about Van's age and one about Velma's, got out to stretch their legs and load up on potato chips and Pepsis. And since there was nobody else around but them and us, we couldn't ignore each other, even though I willed myself to be invisible. There's just something about the way people usually look at us that makes me uncomfortable.

The dad and kids walked past us to get to the bathroom, but the mom walked over to me. I was kneeling in front of the 2LVs wiping Van's bare chest with these wet brown paper towels which weren't holding up too well with the water and scrubbing, leaving little brown balls sticking to his skin like tiny leeches. "Looks like someone's not feeling too well," the woman said, tut-tutting softly, and she was actually really nice, not fake nice, but nice nice. "Hold on just a minute," she said, then went back to her SUV. When she returned, she had a plastic tub of wipes and just crouched down beside me and started wiping off Van's chest, which made him blush. "These will work better, I think," she said and smiled, but I could tell she was also wondering where my mother was and what I was doing taking care of these kids when I was only a kid myself. And just when I could tell she was thinking this, my mother came out with these ten alien head air fresheners to hang in our car.

Since Mom's my mom and I've known her all my life, she sometimes seems almost normal to me. I'm used to how she looks and how she acts, but not everybody is, and this tanned woman from California clearly wasn't. Her lips got all tight as Mom, holding her nose, handed me the stack of air fresheners, then gave a little wave to the woman who was cleaning her son, *her* son, not this woman's from California who had her own two children to look after. This woman who smelled like oranges and cocoa butter. And I was embarrassed. For myself? For my mother? For this stranger who didn't know anything about us and so must assume everything, and was probably making half-right assumptions? "It's not like she doesn't love us," I thought but did not say. And my mom, who has no self-consciousness and is really excited about getting to Roswell today told this woman, "We're meeting their new father today." And though it might have been almost ok if she had stopped there, she didn't stop there but added, "he's an alien."

"Do you mean he's from Mexico?" the woman from California asked, trying hard to be pleasant and to give Mom the benefit of the doubt.

"Oh no," my mother said. "He's from the planet ZugZug." I could have died.

The woman looked from my mom to me, and she must have known it wasn't a joke when she looked at my face, burning with embarrassment. As mom was hanging up the alien air fresheners in the

¹Editor's note. What follows is the portion of the Weekly World News article believed to have spurred Valerie's mother to make her cross-country move to Roswell. "Roswell, New Mexico, home to the 1948 Alien spaceship crash now home to bi-speciel families! Tucked away in a quiet corner of Mac Brazel's ranch is a thriving community of Humaliens (human-alien) living life as nature never intended! As many as fifty alien men from the planet ZugZug have made their home here with American women! The alien men, averaging in height from 4' 2" to 5' 0" express a preference for those shorter women often overlooked by the American male."

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car and the 2LVs were putting on clean clothes in the backseat, the California mom took one more wipe from the box. I thought maybe she was going to clean her hands, but instead she removed my glasses, cupped my chin in her left palm, and wiped all the sweat and grime from my face. And when she finished, she handed me the box of wipes and whispered, "You can keep these." And then she and her husband and their two small children who were the same ages as Van and Velma but were probably named Mike and Maggie climbed back into their SUV and drove away. Forever.

Back in the car, all Mom could do was be mad at me for throwing away the 2LVs pukey clothes and dressing them in clean clothes—the only extra set Mom had packed which she said were their dress clothes for meeting their new alien dad. "Sure, Mom," I said. "Whatever you want to believe."

The ten air fresheners hang all along the windows of the car—they may smell like pine, but they look like shrunken alien heads.

August 6, 1998

Like the spaceship that probably never even was, my mother crashed in Roswell last night.

At first, she was really excited, as were the 2LVs who perked up as we were driving into Roswell at sunset. Van had been sleeping, and the first thing he saw when he woke up and looked out the window was this huge green alien. Van thought he was real and in his sleepy voice said, "Daddy?" But the alien was tied to the ground with long ropes and held a sign that read, "Roswell Honda."

I could tell Mom was really nervous because she wasn't jabbering on about alien dads and cats and schools. I pulled Bruce onto my lap and he curled up and started purring and nudging my hand with his nose which he somehow knows to do at just the right times.

Mom stopped at a McDonald's and bought one cheeseburger which she split five ways "for a snack" since she said we'd feast when we arrived at the humalien community. I used the wipes from the California mom and cleaned all our faces and hands when we were through, even Mom's.

In the bathroom, Mom brushed her hair and gave me a comb to take care of myself and the 2LVs while she began applying make-up in front of the mirror, first blush and powder, then lipstick. She finished and turned to look at me as I combed out Velma's tangles. "Do I look ok?" she asked, and I swallowed and said "yes" even though her lips were bright green and her cheeks were pale blue with glitter stars and I wanted to say she looked like a freak and I wanted to ask what was going to happen when we got out to where the humaliens supposedly lived and there was nothing there, but at that moment I had no other option but to believe and to hope that she would find a wonderful four foot eight alien man who would love her unconditionally and would be her husband and would be our dad and that even though they wouldn't be like the California couple at the gas station, they would be ours and they would be stable and they would settle down. But it didn't happen that way.

The drive out to Mac Brazel's old ranch was quiet. The 2LVs sat up straight and tall in the back seat like Mom told them to, and they didn't say a word. Mom gripped the steering wheel and drove straight ahead, a woman with a purpose. Bruce sat on my lap and looked at me and I at him, his green eyes glowing in the darkness. He didn't purr and I could scarcely breathe.

And when we arrived, there was nothing, only some sleeping cows beneath a starless sky. Still, she got us all out of the car and told us to stand in a straight line and smile and reach out our arms, as if they were hiding and we had to show our good intentions before they would come out. But when they didn't come out of hiding and all we could hear were rumbling cow snores, my mother said, "Maybe they've moved on. Maybe they're nomadic." And she piled us back into the car and drove on and on in the night, out in the New Mexico countryside, looking for a green glow we could follow that would lead us to where we belonged. But there was nothing. And when the sun began to rise, I looked over at Mom, still gripping

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the steering wheel, still determined, but now with blood-shot eyes and grey tear furrows down her painted cheeks, and lips still green except where her natural red showed through from an unconscious chewing.

“Do I still look ok?” she asked with a crooked half-smile. The alien air fresheners around the windows blew in the breeze and clacked together. “Oh, mom,” I said, and began to cry.

What are we doing here? Where will we go? There are no aliens anywhere, but with no money, we have to stay. And I guess here is just as well as anywhere, or at least it’s no worse.

(night)

We found our way back into town somehow and then Mom saw it, what she thought she was looking for, a spaceship lodged into the side of a building with a big marquee with black letters spelling out “International U.F.O. Museum.” By that time, Mom was really out-of-touch with reality, and when I pointed out that it was a “museum” and not the humalien compound she thought it was, she just tut-tutted me and said, “you’ll see.” But I didn’t see, and what was worse was that she thought she did.

From the moment we stepped inside, it was clear to me that we were in a museum. Statues of aliens greeted us, and to the right was a place where you could pay for a set of headphones and a tape recorder to listen to the story of the 1948 crash as you walked through and looked at the exhibits. The 2LVs stuck close to me as Mom collapsed in front of this four foot tall silver alien and started to weep and kiss his feet. From all around, people came and encircled her and whispered, but it wasn’t those whispers I was used to like she was weird or something. I heard a man with long red hair tied back in a ponytail whisper “abductee,” and then one by one they wrapped their arms around her and the statue.

Mom had broken down completely by then and couldn’t say a word. And with her smeared make-up and green lips, I suppose she could have looked like an abductee to them. At first I spoke up and tried to say the problem wasn’t that she was an abductee, the problem was that she couldn’t find any aliens to abduct her. But then they picked up the 2LVs and the man with the ponytail reached for my hand, and when I saw we were heading towards some vending machines and everyone was digging in their pockets for quarters, I just shut my mouth and reached for the outstretched hand.

August 7, 1998

I had forgotten where we were when I woke up this morning. It was weird to open my eyes and see doctors all around me, looking down at me with white masks covering everything below their eyes. But then I blinked, saw them again, and remembered they weren’t real doctors, just dummies, even though I was lying on a real stainless steel operating table with bright lights on me and a glass window which I looked out of only to see lots of faces looking in. I scooted off the table and held up both my hands in Spock’s “live long and prosper” sign (one of the few things I’d learned from Brandi) and tried to waddle like E.T., feet turned outward. I must have looked convincing since people started taking pictures.

Even if Mom hadn’t come to her senses, at least we had a place to stay and food to eat and nice people to take care of us, all of whom were willing to believe we were humaliens. Outside of the alien autopsy room where I had slept, I found the 2LVs playing tag in front of a huge crashed spaceship and some not-so-real aliens. I couldn’t find Mom, but since I didn’t figure she was much good to us right now, I didn’t really look all that hard. So instead, I started just going around the museum looking at the exhibits and reading all the info on the 1948 crash. Reading all that, there was no doubt about what had happened, no possibility that maybe, just maybe, aliens hadn’t crashed, that maybe, just maybe it really had been a weather balloon and not a spaceship after all. They’re very certain about what happened and how the government covered it up. The weird thing is, deep down I don’t *want* to believe because that would make Mom right instead of just some crazy wannabe abductee.

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The man with the ponytail, who called himself Scottie, fed us bologna sandwiches and brownies for lunch. He watched us as we ate, but except for my funny E.T. walk and my “live long and prosper” hand signals, there was really nothing out of the ordinary about us. He thought that we were just “out of this world” and kept saying so, over and over and over again. The 2LVs acted perfectly normal except for telling him they were from ZugZug when he asked. I explained matter-of-factly that the reason I had alien traits and they didn’t was because I had grown up learning ZugZuggian mannerisms before we left our home planet, but that the 2LVs were too young to retain any of them and adapted more easily to Earth ways. This seemed to satisfy him. When he asked if we had bologna on ZugZug, I explained that we did, only instead of being made out of pork by-products, it was made out of animals called zigs (kind of like pigs, only they’re green and have antennae and radioactive tails). He took notes of everything I said.

I have to admit, though, I felt bad about lying to Scottie because he was so nice to us and seemed so understanding about Mom. “She’s had a rough time, hasn’t she?” he asked, and I said “yes,” because it was the truth. There was no doubt that Mom had had a rough time, even if she brought it on herself. “She told me your father was going to meet you all here in Roswell, is that right?” And again, I said “yes.” Van stopped chewing on his sandwich and shouted, “Alien daddy!”

I told Scottie our dad was scheduled to arrive last night, and that the reason Mom was so messed up was that she was worried about him. “They’ve had a tough relationship,” I said, trying to sound very mature and wise. “He did, after all, abduct her, but she’s come to love him, even if they don’t see each other often. He travels a lot and really doesn’t like Earth very much. That’s why last night was going to be so special. Dad was going to finally live with us.”

“The amazing thing,” Scottie continued, “is that you all look so much like your mother, so human.” So then I had to go into this long explanation about how alien genes are recessive and sometimes, in mixed breeds like us, can go almost unnoticed, especially when not influenced by the surrounding culture. It really got to be exhausting making all this up and trying not to contradict myself. But I answered all his questions, from my favorite ZugZuggian food (*azzip*, which I hoped he wouldn’t recognize as “pizza” spelled backwards), to my favorite ZugZuggian game (*Zogonopoly*), to where I would travel to if I could go anywhere on ZugZug (Disneyland, of course, because I’m sure if there is a planet called ZugZug, there’s a Disneyland on it somewhere). I was glad that was his last question because I was running out of Z words I could make up!

Then Scottie took us to the library to see Mom. All along the left wall of the library were tall book shelves filled with books about aliens and spaceships and government conspiracies, but I hardly even noticed those before I saw Mom at the far end of the room in front of a mural of a crashed spaceship with alien bodies sprawled all around. And she was acting like it was all real. She’d found a miniature alien from somewhere, a one foot high green rubber alien with big black eyes, a pot belly, and four fingers on each hand and four toes on each foot. Its face was crimped up like a little old man’s or a dwarf’s. She had wrapped it in a pastel green baby blanket and cradled it like an infant, the alien baby she’d wanted so badly. And she cooed to it in a funny alien-sounding voice and sang it a lullaby with lots of Zs and seemed to have forgotten all about her 3LVs, Velma, Van, and me, Valerie. Scottie seemed to realize there were problems in her behavior, things that weren’t quite normal, but he just repeated something he’d said earlier—“she’s been through a lot, hasn’t she?” And Scottie shook his head and looked very sad.

“She thought he would be here,” I said. “She thought her true love would be here.”

“Maybe,” Scottie said, putting his arm around my shoulders, “maybe he’ll show up yet.” I shrugged off his arm, walked right up to Mom, and looked her straight in the eyes, but she didn’t recognize me at all now. And I started to scream, “What about us? What about your three little Vs!” but she was just silent and smiling.

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“I think it’s best we let her have some space,” Scottie said, leaning over and whispering into my ear. “She’s not the first woman who’s come here in this condition, and they need time to heal, time to be apart from everything else.”

So I told Scottie the truth then, told him we weren’t really humaliens and that Mom was just nuts, but he didn’t believe me. I even stopped with the E.T. waddle I’d been doing all day. He was still kind, but “tut tutted” me and said he’d seen it all before.

August 8, 1998

I don’t know what will happen to us tomorrow, or the day after, or the day after that. We have Scottie who is good to us. But I don’t know if Mom’s ever going to get better. She sees what she wants to see.

We left the museum early this morning and are now riding with Scottie in a Toyota hatchback that has a “Beam me up” sticker on the back bumper. Mom’s sitting in the front seat beside him, still cradling her alien baby, and Scottie is dressed in an alien costume, gray-green in color. Van, Velma, and me are squeezed together in the back seat and Bruce is behind us in the back window, panting and sweating from his paws so he must be nervous. We’re heading out toward the same place where the aliens weren’t two nights ago, and Scottie’s not telling us what we’re going to do once we get there. He’s talking to Mom softly and reaches over to stroke her hand now and then with his rubbery alien costume fingers. “It won’t be ZugZug,” he says gently, “but it will be close.” Mom looks up at him and smiles—her alien man.

We’re pulling off the main road now, and in the distance I see what looks like a gray-green glow. Maybe, just maybe, we’re almost home.

Two Poetic Voices from the Aesthetics of Belief Conference for Catholic Writers

On April 3, 2005, exactly one day after the death of Pope John Paul II, four writers convened at the University of Notre Dame for the Aesthetics of Belief Conference for Catholic Writers. Arriving from around the country, they gathered not so much as a community, though one could say by their almost immediate fondness for each other that at the very least a brief community was formed. Rather, they gathered as dissimilar satellites, each of them Catholic in their own unique way, to ponder the position of the Catholic writer in America as well as Catholic literature as a whole. Taken from Paul Elie's 2001 paper on "Catholicism in the Literary Imagination," in which he defines the Catholic writer in America today as suffering in a state of loneliness, they sought to examine if this was true: that each of them, different in their cultural and aesthetic backgrounds, were writing, as it were, in a forced state of aloneness by their faith. Beyond that, however, and perhaps more important, the occasion marked an opportunity, which seldom occurs even within the safe walls of Notre Dame. It was a chance to appreciate a literature that, however multi-faceted or seemingly disparate, emerges out of separate cultures and even separate languages to represent an experience of faith that is both critical and glorifying. Katherine Vaz, a Portuguese-American novelist, and Tim Gautreaux, a Cajun fiction writer from the Louisiana bayou, represented the prose side of literature, whereas Chicana poet and journalist Demetria Martínez and poet and biographer Paul Mariani represented the poetic side. It is the latter two whose work appears in the following pages.

Campbell Irving is a graduate of the University of Notre Dame and the chair of the Aesthetics of Belief Conference for Catholic Writers. He is a former contributor to *The Bend* as an MFA student at Notre Dame. He currently lives in Washington, DC.

Paul Mariani

Poet and scholar Paul Mariani is the author of five collections of poetry, including most recently *The Great Wheel and Salvage Operations: New & Selected Poems*, as well as numerous books of prose and biography, including *Thirty Days: On Retreat with the Exercises of St. Ignatius*, *God and the Imagination: On Poets, Poetry, and the Ineffable*, *The Broken Tower: A Life of Hart Crane*, and *Lost Puritan: A Life of Robert Lowell*. His books have been short-listed for the American Book Award and been named New York Times Notable Books of the Year. His honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and, National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Wasn't It Us You Were Seeking?

*All the while jumbled memories flirt out on their own, interrupting
the search for what we want, pestering: "Wasn't it us you were seeking?" My heart strenuously waves these things
off...until the dim thing sought arrives at last, fresh from the depths.*

St. Augustine, *Confessions*

The lawns and mansions of old memories,
pale sea roses, the ululation of the willow trees.
These the mind strains after, and not the bully's gloat,
the barn, the bayonet gleaming like a tease,
pressed against a small boy's trembling throat. .

"You wanted something other?" Something other.
Something lambent, like the memories of a mother.
The red eyes of the photo changed to brown,
the fret become a smile. Presto, another
mother altogether, the lady with a golden crown.

My sister, likewise spavined by life's events
(we are pilgrims here and have pitched our tents),
has written with the very best of wishes, and added
in a postscript only now: *It's been a tense
ten years refusing to mourn a mother ten years dead.*

"Wasn't it us you were seeking?" Clamant voices, out
of sorts with this submersion always into Memory and Doubt.
And now radar picks up human wreckage on the screen:
the dead, dredged up from the depths. And now a shout,
as they flop about the deck, raw, barnacled, obscene.

Absence of Crocus

Eleven days till spring. Two hundred
sixty-four hours, sixteen minutes.
That's how one counts the coming on
of spring here in New England.
Eleven days, more or less. Less
or more. The thermometer outside
my kitchen window sticks at ten
below. Chilling news to say
that, if the sky is blue, it is the blue
of an S.S. überkommander's eyes,
a blue made bluer by two
feet of snow spinning crabwise
down for the past three days, my
unoffending chest screaming
with the pain of digging trenches
from the back porch to the Ford
buried somewhere out there
beneath all that anti-manna manna.
What shall I make of a much diminished
thing, of two pale crocuses fronting
the western wind. *There must be
in all of this a lesson*, said the preacher,
after his rambling sermon. *But I'll be
damned if I know what it is*. O blessed
saint of similes and metaphors, whoever
you may be, help me out this once.
You see these crocuses I have labored
over all these years. Make them please
cohere. Let them flourish as you did
with Dante into some grand flowering
symbol. Two crocuses heralding
the coming on of spring, pale purple things,
fronting the bitter cold. Like those
Bowmen of Shu, stiff in their frozen trenches
facing the Northern foe, as they dreamt on
of those citron cities to the south.

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How It All Worked Out

Come, sighed the Voices. *This way. Now. It's late.*
The crowd, upon inspection, seemed ready too. Shook
then that wide stadium with shouts. Dignitaries in black
began the long procession toward the ivory gate.

My shroud (a single piece of linen, with matching hood)
seemed outré, yet absolutely right for whatever
august event should now reveal itself. How clever,
I remember thinking then, that the voices out there should

be shouting in a tongue I both seemed to but could not
understand. *Come*, they summoned yet again. *Isn't this*
what you spent your life preparing for? Artful death? Wish
then for this. But whether you choose the Thing itself or not,

ready must you be. And here it is. I would have fled
then, you understand, as every blown blood cell cried
out for me in fact to do. But all self-will had died.
Surely, I warmed myself, *it will be better for me dead,*

or what's a heaven for? An ill-lit passage led
up a dripping ramp. Smoking torches and dried
blood lined the ancient granite walls. I tried
to keep my mind on something as I trudged ahead.

What was waiting out there by the ivory gate? Were they
friend or foe shouting for me out there in the stands?
A milky light beckoned as the line moved up. Bands
blended—drums, flute, winds--in the uplift of some way-

ward breeze. *So here it finally is*, I remember
memory remembering then, there on the threshold, & could hear
the wind howling down the empty passage with my one good ear.
Then total silence and a blinding light. As I re-member.

Poet and journalist Demetria Martínez is the author of a novel, Western States Book Award winner *Mother Tongue*, two books of poetry, *Breathing Between the Lines* and *The Devil's Workshop*, and a forthcoming book of essays, *Confessions of a Berlitz Tape Chicana*. She is currently a columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*.

Discovering America

for P, 1992

Santo Niño on a
bedroom desk,
holy water in a
mouthwash bottle
Grandma had the
priest bless,
this house,
a medieval city
you visited,
what you sought
was not here.

Not in wrists
oiled with sage,
Chimayo eather
sprinkled on sheets,
nor San Felipe bells
that pecked away
the dark,
Cordova blanket
we hatched
awake in.

To prove love
I shed still
more centuries,
rung by rung
into a pueblo
kiva where
you touched
the *sipapu*,
canal the universe
emerged from,
brown baby glazed
in birth muds.

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You thought
America
was on a map,
couldn't see it
in a woman,
olive skin,
silver loops
in lobes,
one for each
millennium
endured on this
husk of red earth,
this *nuevo méjico*.

Last night
I dreamed
a map of the
continent,
the train
that took you
from me whipped
across tracks
like a needle
on a seam
somewhere
near Canada.

It took me
four years
to heal.
Have you?
Have you
discovered
America
or at least
admitted
a woman grew
maiz here
long before
you named it
corn?

*Milagros**

after a painting by Francisco LeFebvre

When at last you find something worth
longing for

you breed horses again
half Peruvian paso, half Arabian
dance step and a mane like Rapunzel

grinding hummingbird bones
to a powder, aphrodisiac from before Columbus
your brushes on fire with color

and me? I listen for words that mean *heart*,
collect them like *milagros* we pin
to statues of saints
in the church at Magdalena

because we are beyond wishing
folding prayers like paper airplanes

no, the time has come to storm heaven
until the gods weep at the sight
of the horses' bare backs

and become flesh, and ride
and ride and ride

*a *milagro*, which means "miracle" in Spanish, depicts the object
for which a miracle is sought, such as a broken leg or money
to buy a house.

Untitled #2

You tell me there is a place
In the universe for those
Who wrestle with demons.
Tell me: What did the devil do
With my lost years?
Did he eat them?
Did he fall into a sound sleep
And so spare a single soul from pain?
I don't think so.
And why, all these years later,
Must I forgive him long enough
To touch with love all that was lost?
Forgive myself long enough
To write these poems?

Spring Cleaning My American Yard

Late Winter 2003

The earth has thawed and I am on my knees
in my American yard. There is very little sand
as it is all on TV, blowing and blown away.
My country tis' of them intent on marching
forward. I have remained behind hoping

to plant flowers. So many people say,
"What is happening?" and so many others
say what they think is happening.
I know more than I ever wanted to know
about Iraq, no offense intended. No room

in that country for additional offense
to be taken. I remain outside because the war
has filled my house. Each channel carries
its own brand of destruction which across time
always looks the same – wrong

and I am trying to believe that somewhere
someone or something is right.
Meanwhile I break the ground because
it is there to break – like the tanks roll forward
because they can and the people flee

because they wish they could. If someone's
written this day into being they've done
a miserable job. Still, I remain on my knees
in the yard, trying to believe that winter
can be turned over and upon itself.

Blake Sanz

The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire

From moment to moment the plan became clearer, and after awhile it dangled before us in the advancing twilight like a beautiful, ripe, shining apple. Permit me to name this apple, with some pomposity, The Golden Apple of Eternal Desire.

—Milan Kundera

The first meeting

There are many reasons I can think of why I might be sent to hell (any one of a handful of venial or mortal sins, depending on how you judge them), but none of them seem to matter just this minute. How can you worry about eternal damnation when there's so much to worry about every second of every day? Time doesn't wait for judgments, and then of course we all have that blind faith in our own goodness.

I'll admit it. In those days I let myself think about women too much even before I ever shared a word with one. There is always a series of moments in any relationship, with God or women, during which you can choose to put your desire away before it gets the better of you, channel it into something good, or at least into something harmless. And sometimes the crucial moment comes before speech, if the girl has it.

I met Helen at a dinner party at Clancy's, a restaurant in the Garden District. It was supposed to be a small gathering—the two other prenovices and me, and friends of the Brothers we lived and studied with, a celebration of Brother Francis Falcon's fortieth anniversary since taking solemn vows.

I wasn't expecting any girls, much less good-looking ones. I forget the exact connection; I think she was a distant cousin of one of the brethren, a relative traveling through New Orleans stuck with older relatives she didn't know and that didn't do anything fun. Maybe that's why she looked at me like she did, less out of pure attraction and more because of the natural relief I offered from the elderly. I know that it shouldn't have mattered to someone who had gone through a period of discernment and chosen the prenovitiate, but of course it did. How can you possibly be expected to take a vow and make these things go away?

She was gorgeous: thick, full, jet-black, hair, the kind of hair you could lose your hands in, dark features, a dark complexion, dark eyes that would suck a weak man in and bring him to his knees. And a body that would make you ache—the old Catholic guilt is kicking in even now, just thinking about it. I'm sure you can imagine (imagine the guilt or the body?, you ask. Ah, but the ambiguity keeps you honest! Let's leave it at that).

Thinking back to all the women I've seen and then thought about in my young life, and the simple joys those reveries brought about, it makes much more sense for me to feel guilty about joining the Brotherhood than about being attracted to Helen and acting on it. It was entering the Brotherhood that wrinkled my mind, not wanting her.

Kundera, in paraphrasing another brilliant writer that he doesn't ever name and I never took the time to look up because I was too busy reading books like *Why I Am a Catholic* and *Report From a Trappist Monastery*, said once that Judas Iscariot's infinite faith in Jesus was what led to his betrayal. That is, unlike the other Apostles, he truly believed that Jesus was the Son of God, and so he wanted to initiate a series of events that would reveal that to the world.

Maybe my infidelity to God was something like that, something born out of an innate and infinite faith in Him. But I'm afraid I may only be that smart in retrospect. The best I could hope for—and this is a long shot, because my sins are less important to the world than Judas'—was that one day, someone more brilliant than me would analyze my little life, as Kundera's writer did with Judas, and make me out to

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be something better than what I was. Or, I thought, maybe my lack of resolve to do what was right would somehow lead to someone else's grand moment.

Justification by faith or faithlessness? I suppose that was the question.

She sat down at the table and looked at me. That was it. That's all it ever is, and that's all it ever takes, if the woman is beautiful and she carries herself well, for the game to begin. I started to wonder what I would say if she spoke to me, or what I could say to evoke a smile. I wasn't classically trained in the art of seducing women. Far from it, in fact. But I was aware that even this, this natural clumsiness, sometimes carried a charm, and so then even what was natural became affected. I had managed to turn something very true about myself into an illusion, or perhaps she had done it.

Either way, the magic was sudden, like water into wine.

Tommy the believer

I had a friend who at no time had ever been a part of any religious community, but he wanted to, even though he didn't know it. We'd been friends since we were thirteen, and he'd always had a strange absence of desire for women, or at least he sublimated it so much and so well that he was able to function on a completely asexual wavelength, which I found no less miraculous than the Virgin birth. I truly believed he never got aroused.

It takes a bit more than this to be suited for religious vocation, granted, but this is the first and most important thing. It's also a thing that cannot exist, or at least I would have thought so if I hadn't known Tommy. God over the years has always been in competition with women, and He has always lost. Maybe that's what Hebrew scriptures really mean when they talk about a jealous God.

This is not even to speak of Tommy's other major qualification: he was a believer. And beyond that, he went to Mass three times a week, prayed rosaries at novenas on Wednesday evenings, and even subscribed to *Commonweal* (thank God *Catholic Digest* never caught on). More than all of this, there was something pure about his face that seemed perverted for someone who was supposed to be living the college life. In a city like this, where at night people dress like Vampires and women expose themselves on street corners and the ratio of bars to people is equal to the ratio of sex acts to massage parlors, a face like his, unblemished by the harsh realities of the world, was certainly a perversion.

He often visited me at the Brother's residence on Elysian Fields (that really was the street, I promise), which used to be a church before it was desanctified and renovated. From the outside it still looks like a church, and even from the inside you can tell where the altar used to be, where the pews went. There is a big open space in the middle of it where the Brothers roll out a ping pong table in the afternoons after prayer sessions and the big space fills with the hollow echo of airy plastic balls knocking against the wood of the table and paddles.

The Brothers liked Tommy from the first time they met him. I think now that they must have had their eye on him for the prenovitiate. As for Tommy, his mother had raised him by herself, and so it was obvious there was something aside from faith that drew him to those men that so many lay people often times mistakenly called Father. And so he came to us more than I to him, and his co-ed dorm.

We would sometimes sit on the porch that faced the street, me with a beer and him with a glass of juice because he didn't drink, and watch people walk by, taking in the day's dying hour and talking about our lives and the things that had made our day. Pretty girls who lived in the neighborhood would stroll by, and I would make comments, which Tommy never responded to with any enthusiasm. He would ask me questions about the religious life, and I would make something up that sounded holy and fulfilling. It wasn't that the life was particularly lacking in these regards, only that I knew Tommy's expectations were beyond what any organization of goodwill and sacred intent could fulfill, and not wanting to break the faith

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I saw in him as being utterly delicate and shatterable because of the profundity of his naïvité, I made up ventures of sacrifice, holy retreats of intimate prayer and connection with God. I didn't want to ruin his image of what I was doing. It was so perfect, and it validated the reasons for our friendship beyond what the truth could have done. And, to imagine myself in that way, it was delightful, after all.

On one of his visits, a day after the dinner at Clancy's, I told him about Helen, that we had exchanged numbers, and that we'd shared an interest in each other. I didn't tell him that we'd set a date to go out, that I was already masturbating to the thought of her naked body, to the thought of her letting me take off her skirt, her blouse, her bra, her panties.

It would have been too much for him. Tommy, as kind as he is, perhaps because of his naïvité, does not have an aptitude for concealing astonishment. I knew this, and wanting to save myself from the guilt that the look on his face certainly would have brought, I stopped it there, knowing that with that amount of information, he would feel as though there was hope for change, but would not be devastated beyond giving advice and praying for me.

It's obvious to me now that the simple solution to our problems would have been to reverse our lives. If only I could become him and he could become me! Or even if we could have perpetuated a fake, we both would have been better for it.

Imagine: the man born, like the rest of men, with that golden apple of eternal desire seeded within him, turned into a regular college student living in a dorm, allowed to smile at and talk to and think about and pursue women, free of guilt. And imagine the happily celibate believer, turned into a hermetic anti-intimate, falling naturally into the rhythms of reading and reciting Psalms and Papal encyclicals on Marian doctrine. We both dreamed in these worlds, and so it seemed a cruel trick of Fate (God) that such an elegant remedy was disallowed by Physical Law (His Will).

At least my revelation put him in the position of being someone who might save a potential clergyman from the lures of Satan. On hearing my confession he said he didn't know if it was such a good idea. I defended myself briefly, saying that it depended on what I wanted, and when he asked me what I wanted, I had to confess I didn't know. But there he was, making the case, doing the just thing by God. Tommy (my friend!) was perhaps the very person whose grand moment my sins might have been helping to create, if such a person and moment could exist. His belief was suddenly of practical value, and despite his good intentions, nothing could have been quite as pleasing to him as this.

A pair of benign deceptions

But I'm interrupting the heart of the matter with reflections, which often happens when indiscretions are explained by their perpetrators. So let's return to it, and forgive me any asides I may feel the need to interject. It's not just that I'm guilty, but also that the straight path doesn't become me.

The deception began both with Helen and Brother Pope, my mentor. With Helen, it was the result of a fortuitous misunderstanding over dinner. The conversation of the progress of the prenovices came up, and jokingly, Brother Pope discussed the other two candidates, then made a game of saying how thankful he was that he didn't have a heartbreaker like me to bring along as well. It brought a small laugh to those who knew me at the table, and he winked at me to signify his fondness for me and also to convey that, like all personal jokes, this one was meant to be taken seriously.

But Helen took it at face value. She believed him, that I wasn't a prenovice. And in the crucial moment of the punchline, when everyone at the table was looking at me to see how I would react, I made sure to look at her and give her an embarrassed look of Well, I guess that's me, and Isn't that funny, what he thinks about how I would do?

With Brother Pope, it started nearly as benignly. In our weekly, private meeting to discuss issues

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concerning whether the religious life was for me, I simply omitted the incident. Then he mentioned sexuality and the challenges posed by celibacy, pausing to hear my response. I didn't say anything, which in this case was the same as lying. At the end of the session, he asked me about finances and I told him I would need another fifty dollars at the end of the week.

The Vow of Poverty

For this is how the vow of poverty functions in the Brotherhood. You are given fifty dollars, free to spend however you like. No questions are asked at the start, no restrictions put on what can be bought. Your only mandate is to spend it wisely, frugally, with an understanding of the limited fulfillment a soulless capitalism can provide and the wisdom that a poor life may bring.

Once you have used it all, you simply return to the office of the House Director, a larger room with stained cypress shelves behind a Formica-covered desk and a high-back wooden chair, and ask the kind-looking older man in the white shirt and black tie for another fifty dollars.

And if you begin to show your face too often, someone will talk to you.

I never spent quickly enough to be questioned, though I wonder now, given my own behavior, what excesses were being hidden. What happens in these cases is that you forsake necessities to be able to afford indulgences without being noticed.

Take the case of how I handled my interest in Helen. As dinner ended that night and people walked to their cars on Annunciation Street (again, I'm not making this up; look up Clancy's on mapquest and you'll see), we found each other briefly outside the restaurant, and I couldn't help but remember how we had looked at each other.

I suppose I should have been strong then, but I told myself it was already too late. I asked her how long she had been in town. She said not long, and that it had been frustrating to be caught inside her relatives' house with no way of getting around. I took the hint stupidly and asked her if she would like to get away for a better look at the city. She said yes and gave me her number, adding that Friday would be perfect.

The next day, Tuesday, I began to fast. I ate only supper, the one daily meal we always shared together as a community, and the rest of that week I skipped classes at the university, because driving would have cost too much in gas. This left me nearly the full complement of fifty dollars for Friday night.

Sin often times demands these kinds of sacrifices. I wonder now what indulgences there had been for others living in the house with me, men who had taken vows in decades long since gone, a few of them in a time before Vatican II. In person, at the dinner table, watching the evening news, playing ping-pong, they all seemed so content, and given my experience of that life, I think now that they each must have had their own weakness, some outlet, however more or less benign than mine, for which, like me, they gladly sacrificed their daily bread.

Faubourg Marigny

My favorite area of New Orleans has always been the neighborhood behind the French Quarter, near the river, and across Esplanade. It's the kind of place that revels in slowness and remembering, the kind of place you can be assured a woman who has never been will look back on with longing, even if you say and do the wrong things. I know this now, but at the time, I liked it more for the eccentricity of the place, the soothing sense it gave you that, no matter what was on your mind, you could put it behind you there.

Every weekend, prenovices were allowed time away from the residence, though there was a curfew. We were to return by no later than midnight on Fridays and Saturdays, and usually, Tommy and I would

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go to the Marigny and walk around, wishing we could afford to see Ellis Marsalis at Snug Harbor, instead catching the free act around the corner at the place where they let experimental musicians try out atonal tunes on an artsy audience that appreciated them with the passion of youth.

I was lucky. I didn't have to lie to Tommy about anything because the basketball team was traveling to play a game in Mobile that night. Tommy played for Loyola, which probably contributed to his naïveté and, oddly, also to his lack of desire for women, for he was so devoted to the game from such an early age that, even then, his love of basketball, like his faith, was too pure for his own good.

In truth, I was more upset about having to lie to him than to any of the Brothers. After all, he had been my friend for so many years. Yes, I was taking the prenovitiate seriously, and I was more serious about the commitment than it may seem, but even if I had already taken solemn vows, God could not have looked at me and made faces of disappointment and anguish like Tommy.

The Brothers gave me one of our three community cars for the evening, believing I was headed to visit with Tommy, and I picked Helen up and we drove down Esplanade, turning on to Saint Claude and parking to take a quiet walk through the neighborhood.

I held her hand freely, and she let me. It was still early in the dinner hour, and as we passed by shops and cafés, I looked at our moving reflection in the windows. She was wearing a skirt that reached to just above her knees, and it suggested the possibility that a wind might raise it up. She had firm legs, somewhere between tone-tight and feminine, with a sly roundness that suggested everything.

We ate at a small place on a corner near where a large group of important-looking filmmakers were shooting a scene for a movie. There were lots of people gathered around to watch, but nothing was going on. Among the crowd were a pair of girls dressed in hardly anything. One of them wore a strapless top and a pair of shorts that showed a tattoo peeking out from below the waistline, and that showed, underneath, the long line of a thigh and calf; the other wore a pair of virtually see-through white pants (without underwear), and a tight black T-shirt that followed her form curve for curve. Their prettiness showed through the vagabond way they tramped around (something in their eyes was calm, pleasant), and I found all of it both endearing and arousing.

You may wonder why someone with such a wandering eye would ever think to join any club that requires celibacy of its members. The truth is that I was a virgin, and that I had started to question whether the desire would ever be fulfilled. Though I had no obvious physical defects, I had the misfortune of going to an all boys high school, and what is worse, of emphasizing school work over a social life, and what is even worse, of thinking this was for the best, and what is still worse, of not regretting it until it was too late. I realized the extent of the gap between my sexual experiences and those of people around me only at the age of nineteen, when I was briefly and brutally introduced to the world of college in New Orleans, this just before I went knocking on the Brothers' door.

The regular thinking on men who join brotherhoods or priesthoods or monasteries is that they could never succeed in bedding a girl; that is, it was never that they didn't want it, or even that, in whatever repressed way, they didn't try. Some experience or set of experiences instructs them that their eternal desire for women will never be consummated. That, or else they're gay.

For the most part, this is true, but it leaves out something important, something germane to the concept of a celibate, religious life, which is that the works of a club (which is what the Brotherhood of the Divine Trinity is), such as the passing on of a tradition of education, the dedication to serving some principle of social justice—these things provide atonement for lives that might otherwise, let us guess with a tinge of comical resignation, be wasted in solitary attempts to satiate that eternal desire. For if the desire is never met, then the remembrance of an extremely limited set of masturbatory sexual experiences provide orgasmic markers against which we measure the progress of our lives.

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Those of us who choose the religious life have, before making that choice, tried other means of confronting that desire, which is to say that we have tried masturbation in as many incarnations as our minds could fathom. Left, then, with no further erotic possibilities, the monotony and emptiness of the repeated act fills us and reminds us of our mortality and of the long stretches of time between hard-ons when something, it occurs to us with the full force of guilt, should be accomplished. And it is in these recurring moments of idleness and solitude, just after and long after climax, that the idea of atoning for such waste by spending those interims in some beneficiary way comes to mind.

Borges tells us that we forget our desires despite best intentions, and this may be true of the dreams we hold for how we'd like to achieve some level of greatness, but surely he can't mean the instinctual desires, the ones our bodies don't allow us to forget. And so you join the Brotherhood, because it fills the gaps between solitary sexual dalliances with bounties of selflessness, providing a perfect balance to the egosim of sexual desire that will never fade, even as the body crumbles.

A conscious decision

The question came up at dinner very naturally, as a consequence of how we'd met. How did I know the Brothers? How I wish I'd had more time to judge how to respond! In that moment, I might as well have tossed a coin, rolled a die to choose the correct response. I'd squandered so many moments already that could have been used to judge her character, gazing listlessly at the street while thinking of its charms, watching other women as they watched the idleness of a movie set. I considered answering truthfully, but in the end decided that she wanted to hear the best, or at least that she didn't want to hear the worst.

I told her that Brother Falcon taught me, that I had been fond of him as a teacher, that we had kept in touch over the years. Miraculously, all of this was true (though of course deceitful), and she seemed satisfied and even said it was somewhat remarkable, that not very many high school teachers think enough of their students to carry on relationships with them beyond school.

I think my discomfort at having lied must have come off as an awkward way of receiving the compliment, which increased her interest noticeably. I quickly launched into a series of questions about her, which seemed a result only of wanting to avoid undue praise, a quality I was beginning to see she admired.

After dinner, which cost nearly all the money I had because of a bottle of wine, I was left to suggest a walk about the Old Mint, one of the quieter sections of the French Quarter near Esplanade. Walking down Decatur, past a few bars and a couple of music venues, the building sexual tension was complemented by the sense of wonder we both knew she felt at finally being able to see the city for what it was. Some would call it the magic of the moment, I guess. We each enjoyed our roles (tour guide and tourist, giver and receiver, desirer and desired), and as we walked, everything else faded—past and future, guilt and introspect, other places, other voices—and as long as we had the comfort of the distractions that Decatur provided, my satisfaction and glee couldn't have been more keenly felt.

But then we turned a corner. The stretch down St. Thomas was dark and deathly quiet. There were no bars, no music, no colors—only the darkness of the street and the high walls that were built up along the sidewalk. Our roles disappeared. Every one of our footsteps, which were the only sounds, had the quality of being listened to, and soon I got the feeling that God was watching.

You mustn't forget in all of this talk of getting a girl that I was at that time still quite attached to the idea of atonement. I believe my sense of fear was probably akin to what many people would associate with ghosts, devils, vampires, or any of the regular violent criminals made infamous here. In fact, please think of me in that instant—a young, vulnerable girl at my side, full moon above—as a vampire (yes, and with immortal cravings, immortal fears!), ghostly afraid of all that the moment and place evoked of a sovereign and

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vengeful holiness.

Helen did not sense my change; maybe it was more internal than it seemed. She remained dreamy-eyed at the sight of ferns hanging in the black and white of moonlit, wrought-iron balconies. The feeling passed as we turned a corner and came back around to Esplanade, and on our way to the car I was able to concentrate again on the pursuit of her body.

As minutes passed and midnight approached, I feigned fatigue and told her I should probably bring her home. In the car, I could sense that we would kiss, for the deceptions had played out in such a way (beyond what anyone could have devised) that she perceived me as charmingly open to a variety of people, uncomfortably humble in the most endearing way. When I stopped the car, she looked at me, and I didn't hesitate.

The kiss

I think of it even today as a metamorphosis. In the parting of lips and in the softness and warmth of the inside of her mouth I could feel a progression in her from guilt to resignation to pleasure to recklessness. And in myself I felt the exact reverse progression, so that, in the precise middle of it, we met somewhere between resignation and pleasure for a split instant (that fleeting moment when the kiss was firm and there just the right amount of self-consciousness and urgency attached to exhaling through our noses while our lips were locked), an instant in which the details of our mouths and bodies overwhelmed the senses and it could be said that my desire had been satiated. If only I could have known that then! But I couldn't predict the coming thoughts that tightened around the desire and choked it out, and so I kissed on.

My favorite way to envision what happened that night is by putting myself in the position of the man in Gustav Klimt's famous painting, "The Kiss," who, in a moment of golden and dazzling luminosity while standing on the last edge of earth before a dark beyond of unknowable stars and blackness, reaches with his lips for the lips of the woman subjugated before him on her knees, but despite his burning desire, he kisses her only on the cheek.

Emotionally, we are twins. Something mysterious happens in his head (we can never know what) in the moments just before the kiss, and in this, the desire for her lips is overcome with something else (tenderness? guilt? benevolence?). What I mean is, the kiss missed its emotional mark; I was left with the same lack of fulfillment that I imagine the man in the painting must have felt, thinking first of going for the seductive kiss, one that would have been a precursor to sex, and then moving to the soft flesh of a cheek. Why did he do that? Why, when the kissing was over and Helen left the car, smiling at me with all the adoration I could have ever hoped for, did I not feel the satisfaction of being wanted?

In the moment of the kiss, things had mysteriously changed. In the new moment, I wanted her to want me, but only with an accompanying sense of some tragic knowledge that it couldn't ever happen. And yet my deceptions had disallowed that delicious forbiddenness. Because she didn't know that I was supposed to be celibate, the kiss, after that initial burst of novelty and passion, lost its intrigue. This, then, was nothing but the most regular kind of kiss, and the rapidity with which my body noted the falling away of satisfaction (despite how long it had been!) was astounding. The old desire was growing, and it needed to be fed with more than just an innocent kiss.

A Brotherhood of principles

You may wonder why I didn't try harder to have sex with Helen. Why, beyond a certain delicacy and gamesmanship we may associate with it, was kissing the ultimate end that night?

The answer is that, aside from the hesitation that virginity engendered, there was the question of principles. This is a dubious question for someone in a position like mine to address, but please understand

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that, lying atop the underbelly of the desires latent in the playing out of that kiss was a blanket of comfort and stability, a soft covering of security that the principles of the Brotherhood of the Divine Trinity provided, and that I kept about me loosely, sometimes so loosely that I forgot it was there, but that made itself evident as I moved, ever so slightly, away from what I had pledged and toward something more human, more desirous, more devilish. Think of it, if you please, as you would of Robert Frost's lovely and delightful Silken Tent.

I am speaking here not of the principle that says that men who are considering a vow of celibacy shouldn't have sex, but instead of the principle that says that the intimacy of brotherly kinship, if nurtured in an environment of shared humanitarian and religious goals, will bring a satisfaction and pleasure to the individual beyond what could be imaginable from the fulfillment of the most rapturous sexual fantasies.

And here is what must be, in addition to atonement, the final draw for those uncertain of joining a religious life, for what could be more appealing than the lure of something that would provide a satiation greater than sex? Of course, it is not sex that we religious men had learned to crave and covet, but, through the visions we'd seen at restaurants and coffee shops, at socials after church and at Parish fairs, we'd learned to lust after the *pursuit* of sex. For what do we see in those scenes of a normal life? We witness men better-dressed (and some worse!) than us, talking to beautiful women, touching them with confidence on the shoulder and waist in ways that elicit a smile or some response, we see them begin to dance with words and mannerisms, and sometimes we might even see them walking together for the first time toward a car, or a door, out of sight. This is what feeds our jealousy. Never had we witnessed the act (though of course we'd imagined it). Yes, it was the pursuit itself that we had learned to covet. In the end, the promise of a life spent in pursuit of something else, a substitute pursuit of educating youth, promoting goodwill and social justice (equally insatiable goals, one might argue), is no more than that—a replacement for the instinctual desire that has been denied.

And so, the reason I didn't pursue sex with Helen is because I had been learning to replace sexual pursuit with a pursuit of these principles. It was by force of a newly-acquired habit. And if do-gooding replaces sex for the religiously inclined lay person, then it would follow coversely that sex could replace do-gooding for the sinfully inclined religious person. Therefore, I had the fear not only of sinning, of going to hell, but of losing the power to satisfy myself through good works. This was a new kind of guilt, a double-shot of worry and selfishness that made sure that my lips went no farther than Helen's face, that my hands stayed atop her clothes, and held strictly about only her waist.

The seed planted and growing

In the following days I didn't call Helen, and I assume she left the city. I had not given her the number to the residence. But what she had implanted in me remained—that old desire had not only been rekindled, but had begun to spiral out and away from a simple desire for a monagamous relationship.

Despite this I could not put away my vocation, and many things reminded me of this: we, the Brothers, would meet in prayer twice in each of the following two days, I would soon have to ask for more money, and there were lots of assignments to make up from missing classes the week prior. What's more, at school on Monday, I would have to face Tommy.

But everywhere I went that weekend—to the grocery store, for a walk to a newspaper stand, to the café across the street—I saw girls, and I wanted them. This went far beyond the usual acknowledgement of beauty, which had been manifesting itself for some time (think of the girls at the movie set). But these girls now, I looked at them intently, hoping they would look back, and some of them did. I smiled and assumed whatever posture and expression I thought would make them want to talk with me. I even flirted a bit with a woman walking her dog. Nothing happened (she smiled and kept walking), but the games were so lovely

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to play, and the wonderment that came with not knowing how they would respond was thrilling.

Why had it not been like this in those high school days? It must have been the fear of rejection—and now, this was gone, for if a girl looked the other way, it was easy for me to say that I had given myself up to the Lord anyway, and to then continue back to the comfort of my brethren to share a meal, to read a book on social justice, to prepare for a life's work of sacrifice and service. There was absolutely nothing to lose, and while this wouldn't always be the case, it certainly was then, and the newness of every flirtation hit me hard, with the full force of forbidden pleasure.

The last cup of coffee

Tommy and I had class together on Monday, and when I sat next to him that morning, I could tell he was waiting for an update. There was something almost effeminate about his worry, and since there was no more chance that he was gay than that he was straight, I only noted my reaction to it, wondering if suddenly I had become hyper-aware to all things that held the mystery of sex behind them. After all, I'd suddenly become very aware of how I took more practical note of what the girls in class looked like, not only admiring them but also imagining the approach, the words needed, the angle I would take, how I might fake confidence in myself enough to succeed.

After class we went as usual to the Rue de la Course near campus and talked. I let Tommy buy, since I was out of money from the Brothers and over the weekend had not found the courage or effrontery to ask for replenishment of funds spent on a date. We took a seat at a table near the counter, facing back toward the entrance so that we could see everyone who came in. I stirred the coffee slowly, swirling clouds of milk away, and didn't say a word. He wouldn't ask, either. This was my punishment, simply having to be with him, knowing that he knew that something had happened. I tried to focus on the routine sounds of the café—saucers clinking, espresso machine churning, newspapers crinkling, but the tension between us was more noticeable than any of these.

This after-class jaunt had become habit with us from early in high school. It followed in the tradition of male friends who get together and make conversation, conversation about their lives and problems, but conversation also about girls, girls we knew, girls around us, girls we would look at and that I would comment on and try to get Tommy to talk to.

Before the Brotherhood, I did this because it was so strange to me that he would never mention them, and it was a way for me to test him, to see if I could bring him out of the shell I thought he was in. This was before I had decided on his asexuality. After joining the Brotherhood, it became a possible way for me to live vicariously through him, although it never worked, because he never pursued anyone.

This same routine had happened over and over, and I was beginning to think that the best I could hope for that day, given the awkwardness, was a continuation of the same. But the café was quiet and for a while I could hardly stand to be there. That sense of a vague, un-Brotherly act having been committed continued to hang over us. There was nothing to look at and make idle conversation about, and the awkward silence pounded home the shady reality of my mystery to Tommy.

Finally, he asked me what had been going on at the residence, and this time, I didn't make anything up. I told him that it was slow, that I had beaten Brother Pope at ping-pong, that we'd sat down to a dinner and a couple of prayers, and then a bunch of us had gone into the TV room and watched 60 Minutes (which was exactly what had happened).

His response was blank, and I could measure nothing by his eyes. Maybe the reality of a mundane religiosity exasperated him, or maybe he didn't believe me, or maybe he assumed I had left some grand detail of generosity and sacredness out because of whatever he imagined I had done with Helen. Surely, he might have thought, my take on the weekend's religious activities had been tainted by the pursuit of my own

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desires.

I gave no reaction. What else could I have said or done? The place was empty now except for us, and all I could do was hope for the miraculous appearance of someone or something that would quell the tension.

And then, looking out at the street, I saw a woman, at first only a figure walking toward the café. As she approached I could see that she was dressed in a Tulane T-shirt tucked into a pair of tight jeans; she wore cat-eye sunglasses and high heels, and she walked at a slow pace, taking in the street almost as a tourist would. As she came a bit closer, I could see that she wore her black hair up, and that her lips were full and red and that there wasn't a single blemish to her face. As she opened the door to the café, her curves became more obvious; her breasts stretched out the U and the N on her shirt, and she had these small shoulders, pinned back in perfect posture, and it pushed her back and hips into a graceful line noticeable even beneath the folds of her shirt and jeans. Because there was so much to admire in every detail, because I had yet to take in the whole of her beauty it wasn't until she spoke that I realized who she was.

"You're Angelina Jolie," the clerk said stupidly.

"Yes," she said quietly, taking off her sunglasses, showing her brown eyes and raising one of her perfectly symmetrical eyebrows while smiling crookedly, a move that paralyzed the clerk.

While waiting for her coffee, she turned to our table, to me, and then to Tommy, and she must have been shocked by his indifferent, polite gaze. Even I was, even knowing him as I did.

It must have disarmed her. She smiled in a way that could have been read as an invitation to speak. Once she got her coffee, she took a seat across from us and started reading a newspaper, as if there was nothing at all strange about someone so sexual and desirous doing something so regular.

A contemporary vision of flawless beauty

Of course, we did not speak to her (Tommy for the usual, misguided reasons, myself because of things I hope will become clear shortly). I mention this not to point out the utter regret and frustration of a missed opportunity, but because my own reaction put the finishing touches on my time with the Brothers.

Faced with such a vision of contemporary beauty, Tommy still did not flinch, and seeing this, I realized that the revelation of the normality of life in the Brotherhood had been a much bigger shock to him. That was what had moved his world, and that was what I imagine he remembers most about that day.

As you can guess, I remember other things. In that moment there existed no need to point out the obvious fact of her beauty—the astonishing truth of it, along with her celebrity, overwhelmed that need and left me with nothing but desire, a ridiculous hopefulness, and paralysis akin to what I saw in the coffee clerk. When I'd seen her walking from a distance and didn't yet know who she was, I had planned to fake indifference at the sight of her for the sake of making the point to Tommy that I was in fact living up to his notion of religious life. This would have been to make up for the truthful comment I had made that revealed the dullness of that life, but of course it didn't happen that way.

When she came in and I saw who she was, I found I couldn't stop looking, I couldn't stop myself from imagining what to say, how it might play out (in some fantasy world that didn't involve either Hollywood or the Brotherhood). I acted out the desire. I let my mind wander. I imagined her naked (as thousands of men surely have), I wondered how she would respond to my touch, I tried to gauge the weight of her breasts beneath my hand, I tried to imagine how soft her cheek would be, what her lips would taste like.

The difference was, I did all of this externally, explicitly. My desire was written on my face, and I'm sure that Tommy saw it, and I did nothing to hide it. As Tommy and I continued to sit, and as she drank her coffee, the silence was suddenly awkward for a new reason. It was now the unease of a lost intimacy between us: I could not speak to him of these things that were so natural for me to talk and think about. I

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looked at Angelina Jolie with all the lust my heart could muster, doing my honest best to will her to look at me and want me, thinking all the while how stupid it was that I wasn't supposed to be doing that, how strange it would be to never tell anyone I lived with about it.

Angelina (let's pretend I earned the right to call her just this) finished her coffee and got up, once more looking at us and smiling. She put a fifty dollar bill on the table and walked out, her ass shaking from side to side as she faded slowly out of view, walking back up the street the way she had come, and I watched and watched, over Tommy's shoulder and face, without worrying anymore what he was thinking, until the vision of her had been subsumed by distance.

The Golden Apple

The Golden Apple keeps me company these days, and I enjoy talking with the random allotment of wanderers and wayfarers that make their way here to the corner of St. Thomas and Decatur, either by chance or by force of habit. Both the regulars and the drifters give me good conversation, and they always have something to say that makes me laugh, either while they're here, or later, when the night is over and I'm walking back to the apartment and the thought of something someone said hits me.

Once, not too long ago, Tommy came in, no doubt intrigued by the name, perhaps remembering the days when I used to try to push Kundera on him. He came by himself and took a seat at the bar before he saw me. I told my bartender to give him a free non-alcoholic beer on the house, and tell him it was from Rich.

I watched him receive it, saw the bartender make the joke to him and point in my direction, and then his face turned, and we looked at each other for the first time in years.

He came over and we had a nice chat. He was teaching English at a local college down the highway, had just returned from a visit to Mexico to meet his father, whom he had never met. He went on for a while about how exciting it was to learn through conversation how many things they had in common, how he really felt he'd made a connection (he said they shared so many odd similarities, like an interest in Russian literature and pop art, and believe it or not, a certain skepticism in faith). It was as if he now had a separate place he could call home, and someone who not only could understand him, but who had been waiting all his life wanting to.

I saw that he wore no wedding ring, which of course did not surprise me, but there was something in his eyes, also in the way he looked around the place, that made me wonder if he had come around to the idea of girls. After all, maybe he was just a late bloomer. Maybe he'd just been intimidated out of trying back then. It's hard for me to think that anyone could escape wanting to pursue girls forever.

I told him a bit about how it had gone with me after leaving the Brotherhood, how I'd had to quickly find a place to live, how I'd had to pay for the rest of school on my own (the Brothers had been picking up that bill), how the combination of a For Rent sign on this corner and an experience I'd had with a girl near here—I still didn't have the guts to tell him it was Helen—had led me to invest in starting up the place.

He smiled, said it was good to see me, and soon, he left. I haven't seen him since, and really, I think about him less than I do about Helen and that night, or about the memory of Angelina. Still, as I enjoy doing with any number of people who come into The Golden Apple, I like to fantasize about his life from time to time, to suppose he's found his way, to imagine light-heartedly that maybe there's a collection of people in his life who he can chide and joke, people who are like him, a brotherhood, who realize from time to time the importance of choosing intimacy over that certain sense of sacredness, people he can become a part of so that they can laugh and talk easily about the pursuit of their desires, whatever they may be.

Chris Gerben

St. Joseph Station

But we're all the same
We're all
To blame and what's
That son? Are you hearing
Now all the things unsaid
In the past and now
In the past tense
Town that lays to
Wait in the here
And now I can't
Take the blame
I can't
Take the same
Time where a muse
But I can't explain
I hate the term
But I love its use
And the diaries
And the broken
Verse it's all the
Same with the names
Reversed as I'm growing
Young and going back
To the time before
There was all of that
In the backrooms
And the alleyways
Have I really grown
Beyond my drunken days
And nights with the shades
Pulled down and a desire
To die or maybe simply die
Down like when the music
Stops it just skips
The track like the horn
Of that train
That's clacking as in
Clicking and clacking
And now the window
To the window is

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The window
Closing though I'm not
Sure now if it's coming or
Going to those drunken
Days between these same
Ruled lines and those
Abstract words seeped
Between the blinds
Like light in the night
When I'm only alive
And alone I can tell or I can
Tell to myself
The story that was
There but is passing each
Year and the rhythm
Is the rhythm is
The rhythm of things
I can't forget because
I can't move past
I'm really not finding it
Tonight, this night,
My voice
At home, in the dark
In the wait on the weight
Of my chair that is
Creaking and aching and
Here it goes now
There I go now
Losing it and finding it
Now how hard
Is that?
It's not though the need
To need anything at anytime
For a second read a
Second after the last
Word's been freed from
A momentary place
That is best when heard
In the silence that is
Now in the daytime
Unheard while the poets
And the addicts and
The lovers and the sinners
And the rhythm at
The station is waiting and

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Waiting and waiting
On those straight tracks
Those drunken tracks
Those forgotten tracks
I'm here and they're not
Still waiting

WOODSTOCK

My new roommate is a player. He's also a Catholic, and not one of those half-ass Catholics who don't bother with all the rules. He follows them all, even the ones that deal with sex, which makes being a player a bit difficult.

"You can still get yours," David says, sprawled out on a passed-down-one-too-many times couch in our not-cleaned-enough grad school apartment. "You just don't push it too far." One hand dangles between his legs, the other messes with the cauliflower curls of his wild hair. His thin, string-bean musician's fingers make sure each lick and strand sits just so.

"But it's no big thing, bro," he continues. "You don't have to go the distance. Plenty of other extra-curricular activities are available, and you won't have any trouble finding chicks around here willing to play with parts of the Catholic rulebook a bit. A little something here, a little something there, and it's all good. No blood, no foul."

David calls his women chick and baby, like out of a rock and roll song. He studies piano, and he hammers on the keys like a rock star, too. He spends some eight hours a day locked away in tiny, lonely practice rooms, only leaving to grab something to eat or go to the bathroom. He practices through days and nights and back again, just him and his instrument under fluorescent lights in rooms that don't always have windows and don't always have heat.

When he finally emerges into the sunshine, with growth on his face and his sloppy hair even sloppier, he's ready to hit the bars, meet chicks, and go insane. That's his life: practice and explosion.

I'm not up for exploding that much anymore. I came to grad school to study sociology, the field of people and the hidden reasons for all the crazy bullshit that they do, and I decided to attend Saints Peter and Paul University because faith is important to me. I still very much believe. I opted for graduate housing because of money, and David and I had been thrown together as roommates by the luck of a computer.

"Don't get me wrong," David says. "Plenty of chicks around here do follow the rulebook to the letter of the law, if that's what you're after. Me, I'm all for being pure, but a good boy has got to let go once in a while. A Catholic player has got to play sometime." He pauses, scratches his leg. "Yo, you got a lady friend?"

"I had a girlfriend, but that's over with."

"Well, when you're ready to get back in the game, let me know. I'm the head pontiff around here, bro. I'll get you hooked up, no problem."

"Cool," I say, and we shake on it. Then David goes off to his room, where a cross hangs over his bed, Jesus bleeding and dying, looking down on David when he brings over the girls to negotiate the rulebook.

Sex is never part of that negotiation. David follows the rulebook completely in that regard. I don't. I'm not doing the saving for marriage thing, though I'm not hopping into bed with just any girl who comes along either. I have to love a girl, or at least really, really like her, before doing the deed.

I loved my ex-girlfriend, Eve, and was all set, ready, go for sex. But she carried a copy of the Catholic rulebook, too, so it took a long time to get around to it. We got to other things in the meantime, but the main event was delayed for a while.

We broke up at Woodstock. It was an ugly scene. We went there expecting three days of peace, love

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and all that other '60s bullshit, just like the original one. We even wore tie-dyes and borrowed my uncle's old Volkswagen Bug to get into the spirit of the thing. My uncle used to be a hippie, but he cut his hair, learned to ignore his idealism, and transformed himself into Mr. Corporate Asshole. But he still kept his Volkswagen, an artifact of his former self, and that's what we rode in, listening to Jimi Hendrix, The Who and Crosby, Stills and Nash sing about the time they got to Woodstock, about getting back to the garden.

We found no great garden at Woodstock. Unlike the original, it wasn't held on an open green farm, but on an airport runway. Concrete and crowd surrounded us. There weren't enough bathrooms or security or water, and people grew thirsty and dirty, then frustrated, then angry.

By the last night, things completely broke down. That's when the fires started.

The next day, driving home in that old VW, Eve and I broke up.

One month later, I'm heading out to the middle of the Midwest, starting at Peter and Paul, or P and P as the students call it. I immediately take David up on his offer of dates and hook-ups, and out of his supply, he sets me up with Clare, a brunette from Cincinnati studying social work. She's a nice girl, and is whole-heartedly committed to learning how to help people, though like many grad students, she probably doesn't spend much time with them. She lives in the library, like a storybook princess locked in a tower. As we stumble through the usual getting-to-know-you business one has to slush through on every first date, Clare tells me about swing dancing, which she loves. She also loves Oldies, black and white movies, and anything else from earlier times.

"Swing dancing is great because it's all about the dance," Clare says. We're at a restaurant, doing the standard dinner-and-a-movie thing, and Clare is covered in clothes, effectively wrapping herself up in a cocoon and hiding all her womanly parts and curves. "It's not like at some club where it's too loud and everyone is looking to hook up. Swing is about being a gentleman and being a lady."

"I guess you're not a bar person," I say.

"No, not really." She looks at her hands, which are thin and delicate like the plates on the table.

"People change in bars. They get all drunk and mean and stupid. They're not themselves. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I think so."

When the food comes, I dig in only to look up and see that she's praying. She's got her eyes closed, her head bowed, her hands folded, the whole bit. I look away. I consider myself a semi-holy person, but the only meals I ever pray before are the big ones that involve a turkey sitting on the table.

"Was there ever a time that you did something that surprised you?" I ask when she's done.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you ever do something that wasn't yourself?"

She's silent a moment. She looks at her hands. Then she tells me about how she was once held up, but instead of giving over her money, she attacked the guy with car keys, jabbing him in the neck and the face. The man was so taken by surprise that he took off.

"Something just came over me. I guess sometimes you really don't know what you're capable of."

Just the thought of this sweet and fragile girl transforming herself into a barbarian and attacking a robber makes me wonder what she's like in bed. But there isn't to be any of that. At the movies, I look over at her during a sex scene, and she's covering her eyes, peaking between her fingers. So I never go for any handholding. There is no goodnight kiss either. I put myself in position for it. My head is up, eye contact locked, but it's not happening. I'm not surprised, but even if it was there, I'm not sure I could have gone for it. She's too good. And I'm trying to be good, too.

I tell her I'll call but I don't.

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“Mass is a solid place to meet chicks,” David whispers to me, as we sit in the P and P church. It’s a calm and quiet place. Pictures of Jesus and Mary, those golden halos around their heads like a gold star of saintliness, cover the walls. The P and P student body, every one of them with straight teeth, clear eyes and strong morals, surround us.

The altar boys spread incense. Smoke rises, like the altar is on fire. It reminds me of Woodstock.

“Aren’t you supposed to be praying, not looking around for some ass?” I ask.

“You’ve always got to be scoping out the situation, bro. If you want a good Catholic girl, what better way to meet her than at church, right?”

I don’t argue. What he says is logical.

“And church can be a good first date,” he continues. “You call up a girl, ask her to Mass, and she’s not going to say no to Mass, right? That would be unholy.”

The Gospel reading is the old chestnut about Jesus saving the girl from being stoned. Christ preaches to these guys lugging rocks, saying whoever is without sin should cast the first stone, while the whole time he’s scribbling in the dirt.

“So what did Jesus write in the dirt?” I ask after Mass as we emerge back into sunshine.

“Sins,” David says, leaving me for the music building, where he’s about to begin another eight-hour practice session. “Everybody’s got them.”

I complain to David about Clare’s righteousness.

“I thought she was your speed,” he says. “Yo, don’t worry. I’ll get you a chick that’s more lenient.”

The more lenient chick he comes up with is Elizabeth, who’s from Massachusetts, studies medieval history and appears to be from the 18th century. Wearing a long dress that she sewed herself, as well as round glasses and a bun hairdo full of needles and pins, she looks like she should be baking bread, or boiling water in a big kettle, or sewing a flag by candlelight.

On our first date at a medieval department party, she tells me she’s on medication. “It’s for my brain’s happiness,” she says, smiling, bouncing her head from side to side, as if to shake her brain for a cocktail. “But don’t think I’m crazy or anything. It’s just for a little mental adjustment.”

The party is held in a sterile apartment complex, this boxed environment meant to house the most people in the least amount of space while also offering cracked tennis courts and a green pool. Stepping into the apartment, though, feels like walking into a dungeon furnished by Ikea. There’s no television, no stereo. Candles burn making shadows. People wear cloaks, frilly things and anything black. In a corner, a man with closed eyes strums a guitar, not playing any particular song, just causing sound.

“Yeah, you’ve got to be careful with what you feed your brain,” Elizabeth continues. “Pills can transform you if you’re not careful. I knew this girl who was drugged so badly she was like part of the furniture.” She touches my arm. As the night goes on, and she drinks more wine, eventually carrying a bottle around like a forty, she gets more touchy-feely. At first, her touches are like a feather. Then she playfully punches me. And by the time we end up parked by Lake Michigan, pushing the rulebook for all it’s worth, her hands are like pliers, grabbing and pinching.

At the party, the conversation is dark and heavy, though no one hurries his words or cuts off anyone when they speak. The medievalists talk of history, something that won’t change in a night, something timeless that can’t be rushed. Touring the centuries, they talk of good and bad people throughout time, of the beautiful and evil things they’ve done, of wars, holocausts and inquisitions, of inventions, cures and art.

Elizabeth and I move to a couch. A pair of lesbians, short hair and short skirts, sit next to us arguing about dead royalty. A lesbian is a rare animal in Catholic school, though I suspect these aren’t hard-core ones. They’re LUGs, lesbians until graduation, who are ready to drop their unholy ways and pick up the

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mantle of Christianity and motherhood as soon as they're outfitted in cap and gown.

"Do you think people are good or evil at heart?" I ask Elizabeth, sneaking a peak at the lesbians, hoping they would kiss. We had our arms around each other and our wine bottles.

"Both," Elizabeth says, burying her head in my shoulder. She pinches my side. "Would you believe I was really shy as a kid? I was so unhappy. It took a while to break out of my shell."

"What finally did the trick?"

"Pills." She pinches my nipple. "Do you want to get out of here?"

"Sure," I say, and we stroll out of the apartment dungeon, her hand clamping down on mine like a vice.

It's so hard to be good. Most Catholics don't even try. They go to church once in a while, drop money in the envelope, and think that's the definition of sainthood.

I get disappointed in myself when I act bad sometimes. After I go too far with a girl, or after other things, like after Woodstock, I'll sit and wonder what happened, how things got away from me.

At P and P, I wander campus at night, thinking about things. It's dark and a mist from Lake Michigan settles over everything, so the place has an eerie, quiet feel to it, like the inside of a church. It's what I imagine the world was like the morning of Jesus' resurrection.

I pass the academic buildings and statues of dead saints, stroll by the girls' dorms and wonder what's going on inside the walls, and end up at the Fatima shrine, a replica of the Virgin Mary's appearance to the three Fatima kids when she supposedly revealed secrets about the apocalypse, about the fires and ice or whatever that will eventually kill us all.

A statue of Mary looks up to the sky, and racks and racks of candles burn and flicker, like tiny stars under glass. Students pass by, say a prayer and light one. Others kneel, their eyes closed, noses pressed against folded hands. Some couples sit on nearby benches, holding hands and making out, which is weird. A holy place isn't the first spot I would pick to suck face with somebody.

It's dark except for the candles. When people pray before the shrine, they're outlined in flame. They look like they're kneeling before a furnace.

When I get home from wandering, I'll say a prayer before going to bed. It's nothing too special. Lying in my bed, I'll start with the Sign of the Cross, toss in an Our Father and a few Hail Marys, maybe even an the Apostle's Creed if I'm up for it.

One prayer I always say is the one to St. Anthony, who helps you find lost things. When I was little, I would pray to Anthony, ask him to come around, something was lost and couldn't be found. For whatever reason, a prayer to him usually worked.

I wonder if it would work now.

After the party, Elizabeth and I drive for a while, then park near a beach. Moon reflects off Lake Michigan, looming large and black before us, as we tumble into the backseat.

We kiss, then we do more. She pulls up my shirt. I untie her colonial garb. Then her tentacle hands start reaching and touching, pinching and scratching. I return the favor. Our hands wander and hold and grab until we're finally wrestling. We push and pull each other, and at first, it's playful. Then she pushes me a little too hard, so I give her a strong push back. Then she punches my chest, and I pin her to the seat, holding her down. She looks at my face. Her hands are limp and her eyes are wide and staring.

I stop and let her up. Putting my shirt back on, I hop in the front seat and start the car.

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On the ride home, she stares out the window.

“So, you got to touch her mammaries,” David says, as we hang at Hyde’s, this hot, dive of a bar with sticky floors and bouncers who stand on chairs checking for trouble. David twirls his beer glass, the beer bubbles swirling like the Milky Way. Having just finished a 12-hour stretch of practicing, he is good and ready for some alcohol consumption. “That’s sweet.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I say. The bar is jammed. Pitcher specials have attracted any college student with an ID, real or otherwise, and bodies are everywhere. It’s a big mass. With their similar haircuts and clothes, people are hard to tell apart. The faces all smudge together, and to get anywhere, you’ve got to push and force. Girls hold hands and pull each other along. Guys try not to step on any toes or bump anyone the wrong way, but after drinking a while, they aren’t as careful.

“You guess so?” David smiles, pouring more from the pitcher. He’s been sucking it down all night. That’s the thing about Catholics. No matter how holy they are, they’re not afraid to drink. Being a good Catholic doesn’t stop you from being a good drinker. “Bro, if it bothers you that much, go to confession.”

David and I lean against a railing along the dance floor, watching the girls bounce around. It’s a prime spot. There’s a lot to look at. The floor is loaded with girls acting silly. Among them, brave and drunk guys lurk, maneuvering into position to dance with the ones they want, the girls standing in groups as if circling the wagons for protection.

“I love watching chicks dance,” David says. “The only thing I like better is watching them eat bananas.”

A band fills the bar like an electric current. They control the crowd with bass and beats. When the singer says put your hands in the air, the dance floor does it. When he says jump around, the dance floor does that, too. If the band plays a slow song, the bar grows sluggish. People relax. If they play something fast, things speed up, and the place has all the possibilities of a matchbook.

“I think there’s a direct link,” David continues, “between how crazy chicks are on the dance floor and how wild they are in bed.”

“What do you know about sex anyway?”

“Not much.” The band starts into “Only the Good Die Young.” The Catholic girls sing it without a trace of irony. “Yo, I know enough to say that, at the bottom of it all, everything is about love, not fornication. I don’t mean to be getting all Catholic on your ass, but if you truly love someone, you can lie in bed with them and not even think about doing the deed.”

I laugh. “Come on, David. Get real, will ya? I feel like a dog sometimes, I want it so bad.”

Suddenly, the crowd on the dance floor parts. Two dudes stand in the center. They shove each other, then toss punches. Other guys push their way into the center, followed by bouncers. They collide and entangle, meshing together, collapsing into a heap.

Inspired by the brawl, the band breaks into “(What’s So Funny ‘Bout) Peace, Love and Understanding.” I notice the bass player is wearing a Woodstock tee shirt. He stands still, plucking the bottom notes that hold the entire band together, and watches the bouncers restore order.

David points at the bassist, says, “I wonder if Woodstock was a sucky time for him, too.”

“It couldn’t have been worse than mine.”

“So what exactly happened? Like, how did the breakup go down?”

I look at my beer glass, at the suds floating. “I’ll tell you another time, when I’m a little more drunk,” I say, and David lets it drop. Later, when the band is on a break, I walk up to the bass player. He’s put his bass down, but still stands near it, ready at a moment’s notice to lay down a foundation of sound. I ask him about Woodstock.

“That was fucked up and evil.” He looks at me, taking me in with a bass player’s eye, of one usu-

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ally accustomed, unlike a lead singer or guitarist, to being in the background, to watching action instead of making it. "What's wrong with rock and roll? Fuck, what's wrong with the world?"

Woodstock was pretty messed up. By closing night, all these kids, all these clean-cut, suburban kids with designer tee shirts and nice haircuts, just went insane. I don't know if they were high or angry or bored, but they started destroying things, overturning cars, groping women, ganging up on people. Then they started the fires.

When all the craziness of Woodstock broke out, Eve and I were in a tent, trying to sleep, trying to forget that the world outside was flipping out, trying to not let it get to us. Normally, I'm a little freaked out by camping as it is. You're in a tent, in the middle of nowhere, with nothing but dark all around. The woods will be full of noises, of things scattering in the leaves, jumping in the branches. I'll want to sleep, but I'll be thinking of what could be out there, about what could be coming to get me.

At Woodstock, it seemed like everyone was out to get Eve and me. The night was loaded with noise, of car windows breaking, of stands being torn apart, of things collapsing. It gets to you. Eve and I were scared and edgy, and we were a little bit drunk, and a little bit high. We yelled at each other. We picked fights. But there was nowhere else to go but that tent, so we got even more on edge, even more jumpy and angry with each other.

Things escalated, then they got out of hand, and that's when it ended.

Direct from David's connections, the next girl on the hit parade is Teresa, a public relations major from California. She wears a top that's strappy, a skirt like a belt, and her face is covered in so much makeup that it looks shellacked. I get the impression that she isn't one to follow the Catholic rulebook.

As she sips on diet soda and munches on a salad, Teresa talks about ex-lovers. "I never let an ex ruin a song for me," she says. "If a song has baggage, I don't let it stop me from listening. I don't want to give that person so much power."

"But sometimes there's too much baggage to get away from, don't you think?"

She cuts a tomato on her plate, mulls over my question. "I suppose that's true. I still remember this guy I dated when I was fifteen. One night we had a campfire. It was dark and we were alone. The world seemed perfect." She sticks some food in her mouth. "To this day I can't touch marshmallows."

We're eating at one of those gaming restaurants. Basically, it's like an arcade for adults. The place is full of row upon row of video games. Their blips and beeps are everywhere, and people walk around with drinks in their hands, acting like little kids.

"But that's OK," Teresa says. "I met him years later and he remade himself into a loser. That didn't stop me from having sex with him, but he was still a loser."

"That's funny."

"Yeah, you can never tell exactly how someone is going to turn out. Look at me. I'm from California. I've remade myself several times. I've been Goth girl, punk rock girl, bad girl, Republican girl, whatever."

After eating, we play a gun game. The gist of it is to kill anything that moves. Staring at the screen, Teresa's face changes. She squints her eyes, grits her teeth. Her hands grip the gun like she knows her way around such things. Then when it's done, she smiles and offers to buy me another drink.

After killing a good many people, we go to another bar and drink too many mix drinks. Later, as I drop her off at the door, we look at each other, not saying anything. I suppress a shiver. The moon is low and all that romantic junk. She smiles. "Do you want to come in?"

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It's a good question. Part of me doesn't want to, part of me wants to be a good boy and go home.

"Sure," I say. I stay until 4 a.m. I would have left sooner, but I'm not sure what the protocol is for a one-night stand. Not having had any, I don't know how long you need to wait before leaving. I figure you just can't fuck, lie there for ten minutes and go.

So I wait two hours. I thought that was long enough. I promise to call her, but I don't.

The Catholic guilt overtakes me soon afterwards. It won't leave me alone. I take long showers, scrubbing all over. To rid my clothes of any trace of her, I throw them in the washer. To stop any temptation to call her again for another stand, I chuck her number.

Still, the guilt won't leave me alone, so I head to confession. I tell the priest everything, all the dirty details of my stand. It's dark in the confessional booth, which makes it easier to reveal things. People will do a lot of things in the dark that they won't do in the light.

The priest listens without comment, then tells me to say three Our Fathers and two Hail Marys, simple as that. A few prayers and the slate is clean. I'm pure once again, transformed back into a good person.

Walking home, I look up at the sky, at these clouds reaching up, like a tower into heaven. The wind slowly blows them over. They crumble down. I sneeze, and someone passing by tells me, "God Bless."

"Do you usually get this mixed up about the deed," David asks me. He's playing sex consoler, even though he never did it himself.

"No, not this bad," I say. We're in our apartment, and on the TV, MTV shows a special investigative report on Woodstock. The piece is somber and subdued and about as serious as MTV gets. "I never had any guilt with Eve."

"Was this the first time you went the distance without her?" David has this way of never saying the word 'sex.' He always uses all these other terms for it.

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe you're not ready yet, bro. Maybe you haven't put her behind you."

"I don't know," I say as the phone rings, mercifully ending David's amateur psychology session. It's one of his babies on the phone. She's new. I think her name is Sara.

David never sticks with just one woman, and I'm not sure why. I know he tries to be a Catholic player, but maybe there's more to it than that. Perhaps he enjoys the feeling of something new, the first ripples of infatuation, lust or maybe love. Or perhaps it's because the girls get all revved up and want to go further than he's willing to go.

I turn up the TV a bit. Harsh music blasts, and on the screen, a huge audience pulses and moves with the tremendous beat. It jumps and pushes and rages. Then there's fire. All the while, MTV investigative reporters wax poetic about Woodstock and its meaning. They talk about how scared they were, about how music is meaner now, more full of hate. One brings up "Lord of the Flies," another talks about the LA riots.

I can't take anymore of their bullshit. I stumble upon CNN, which is reporting about NATO bombings somewhere in Europe. I look at the pictures of crumpled and burning cities and give up on TV.

David tells his girl to hold on a second, and he cups the phone. "Yo, just tell me one thing," he says. "Was the nooky good?"

"Yeah. It was intense."

I wasn't lying. It was intense. In the middle of it, I sort of lost control. I was so in the moment,

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and so full of heat and need, that I went crazy. My hands ran down her body and scratched her shoulders, her back, and I kissed her hard and used my teeth, and called out, and moved her body the way I wanted to, moved it with all my strength.

“That was kind of kinky,” Teresa told me afterward, her head on my shoulder.

“Yeah, it was a little scary,” I said, more to myself.

“Scary?” She laughed. “It’s just sex.”

I wonder about that night sometimes, and about other nights, too. I’ll wander campus around midnight, or later, and I’ll think about how even the good boys can do naughty things, and bad things, and much worse things. Then I’ll say a prayer to St. Anthony and think of what I’ve lost.

Around me, the winter’s first snows fall, sparkling like glitter, like ashes blown from a fire.

Out of his address book, David searches for another date for me. With each turn of the page, he let out a “no” or “maybe,” finally settling on Mary. “She’s a first-class chick,” he says, and passes me her number.

Mary is from Minnesota. She studies photography. On our first date, she wears corduroy pants that go swish-swish as she moves, and she spends a lot of time pulling rabbit hair off her thrift store tee shirt.

“Yeah, I have a bunny,” Mary says. We’re at the college town’s art museum. Artsy places like museums usually make for a good date, especially if you’re with artsy, photography grad students. “I’ve had bunnies all my life. In high school, I used to pet them so much I’d be covered in fur during class.”

“How did that go over?”

“It didn’t make me look very cool. I looked like Bigfoot come to life.” She laughs. Her face falls easily into it. It’s like a bowl of water, the slightest touch, the slightest joke, and it ripples and chuckles. “But I’ve given up acting cool. I tried that in undergrad. I joined a sorority and did all that bullshit. It wasn’t me.”

The museum’s paintings seem off in some way. They all look pretty, even perfect at first, but something isn’t right about them. The colors clash, or the shapes are odd, or the faces are ugly, or the landscape is too flat or too hilly or too bare or too full. The pictures present a flawed world, where the normal is transformed into something not.

“At least they usually get the eyes right,” she says. “That’s the most important part.” She then stares at my eyes. I can’t really return her gaze. I’m too busy looking at her pierced eyebrow. “Whenever I meet someone new, that’s the first thing I look at. It’s the gateway to the soul, you know.”

She keeps searching in my eyes, so I say, “What do you see in there?”

“A very complicated man.”

“Well, you’d be right.”

She laughs again. I look at her piercing, wondering if it hurts, the hard metal against a face so easy and ready to laugh.

She then goes on a soliloquy about eye color, about how she still remembers the eye color of all the guys she’s ever dated, and how she knows the color of all her friends’ eyes. To prove it, she lists them for me: Katie has blue eyes, Kathleen has deep, deep brown ones, Fern has funny green ones and Jessica’s are a green so dark they’re like olives, while Jamie has little specks of gray in hers like broken glass.

“And my bunny, he has black eyes like a marble,” she says. “Unless he’s scared, then they turn even blacker, full of smoke and oil and scary things.”

I remember Eve’s eyes at Woodstock. We were in the tent, and outside, the kids were whooping and screaming like savages, like Indians out of an old Western coming to rape and pillage. And I looked in her eyes, and fear was there, like she was a white settler, and I was an Indian coming after her. Or maybe it

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was like she was the Indian, and I was the white man, stumbling upon a new world, and wanting to take it all.

Then I thought I had drank too much, or smoked too much, and it was all crap and silly, and I just wanted to hug her, make her relax, make her stop yelling and arguing and just relax. But the noise kept up outside, and the world had gone completely crazy, and I was thinking that maybe I was the white man after all, on a new continent, with everything possible and nothing holding me back.

“So, you want to know what went down at Woodstock?” David and I are at Hyde’s, and I’m drunk, drunk enough to talk about what happened. A cloud of cigarette smoke hangs in the air, like a plume from a forest fire.

“Let me tell you,” I say. “It was fucked up.”

“I kind of figured,” David says.

“In that tent, let me tell you, that was really fucked up. Like, it was nuts.”

We’re at our usual spot along the rail. The girls look good. I feel like pulling it out right there and taking care of business. The band is playing something hard and fast, and all the dudes are slamming into each other on the dance floor.

“I tell you, it was like there was something in the air,” I say, banging my fist against the rail in time to the music. “I’ll never forget, this kid came up to me and said he was the ‘Mudman.’ He had mud all over the fucking place: on his tee shirt, on his sandals, on his shorts with all those damn pockets. He looked like the Creature from the Back Lagoon.

“So, he says to me, ‘I’m one of the Mudpeople. Come and join us. We’re rising up. We’re going to riot.’ And I was like, ‘why?’ And he was like, ‘There’s no rules here. It’s a new universe. Don’t hold back. Give in to-’”

“But what happened in the tent?” David says interrupting me.

“In the where?”

“In the tent? Isn’t that the important part, bro? That’s what caused you to break up, right?”

“Yeah.” I look down at my hands. All the while, they had been beating against the rail. “You’re right.” I drink down the rest of my drink. “Hey, you want another one?”

“Sure,” David says, and I go off to the bar, rubbing against some young women as I push through the crowd.

Later, a fight breaks out on the dance floor, and I have an urge to jump in. Two dudes in baseball caps beat the crap out of each other. One is small and fast and the other is big and ugly like Frankenstein, and they’re going at it, pushing bouncers aside, and I want to get in the middle of it. I even start walking toward the mess before David catches up to me, grabs my arm and pulls me back. “Yo, what are you doing?” he says. “You’re flagged, bro.”

One thing I’ll always remember about Woodstock is the fires. Big bonfires sprung up everywhere, and the kids threw everything into the flames: concert tee shirts, soda bottles, lawn chairs, pizza boxes, souvenir stands, ATM machines, whatever. The fires went high and the kids danced around them, covered in mud, half-naked and out of their minds.

Mary makes the cut and we go out a few more times. One night, we’re hanging at her apartment. Reproductions of Van Gogh paintings cover the walls, and we’re sitting on the floor. Her rabbit is in my lap.

“He likes you,” Mary says, eyeing me, taking a sip of wine. She smiles. I’m earning major points because the rabbit is taking to me. “You look very cute.”

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I pet the rabbit with the lightest touch, just a finger, on top of his had. If I used any more force, I'd scare him away.

"I got to get my camera," Mary says, downing the rest of her wine, rushing off. Soon, she's standing above me, camera at the ready.

"OK, no more smiling. Just be real. People always act differently when a camera is pointed at them."

"I'm petting a rabbit. How do you want me to act?"

"No defenses. Get in touch with your inner self. Be free."

I try to ignore the camera and be free, whatever the hell that means. I look at Van Gogh's mad swirls, then at the vulnerable rabbit under my hand.

"Oh," Mary says. "You look so damn sad."

Mary and I go out riding. The smell of fire is in the air, of people burning their leaves, and then it's gone. Mary and I talk about eye color.

"So what color would God's eyes be?" I ask.

"Well, assuming there is one, I say she has blue eyes like a clear day."

"How about Satan?" The road narrows. The trees close in on us, reach over the car. I speed up. The wall of woods blurs, becoming a solid mass of black.

"They're probably red, like the inside of an oven, or maybe gray like a mushroom cloud."

"How about me? What color are my eyes?"

"Deep blue, kind of like a summer sky before a thunderstorm."

After a while, we come out of the woods and end up at Lake Michigan, this big and dark sea interrupting the flow of the land. Without asking, I park the car near a beach. We both stare out at the water and the emptiness of it all. There's a moon and you can see the surf breaking white at the shore, and a line of light cuts through the water to the horizon. Outside of that, though, the lake is black. It mixes with the sky.

We hold hands and kiss a bit, but you can't get close in a modern car with those bucket seats. So we go to the back seat and her kisses are gentle, but I push things. I've been a total gentleman until now. Tonight is different. We're in the dark and the lake is big and looming near us, and I'm tired of holding back. I tell her it will all be good, that she's beautiful, and all the while she keeps looking in my eyes.

After I drop Mary off, I drive to a liquor store and pick up a bottle. I open it as soon as I park outside my apartment. I don't feel like moving, a box of nails seems to rest in my gut, so I drink right in the car. Time passes. The engine ticks as it cools. I watch the clock on the dashboard, try to guess when the minutes will change.

I take another long sip and a warmth passes through my body. I push the cigarette lighter to heat, wait, pull it out to cool, then push it in again. I drink some more. When I finally go inside, I pass David's room. His door is open, and he's at his desk reading a Bible. I watch him for a moment, his head down, his lips mouthing the words he believes as truth. The desk light shines on him.

"What's the good word," I say. He looks up, startled. His face is full of concentration.

"There you are," he says. "Where were you tonight? Wait, it doesn't matter. What are you doing tomorrow? There's a party for this girl who just turned 21 and it should be loaded with..." He trails off, notices the bottle, then stares at my face. His smile hangs empty and slowly disappears.

"I planted tonight," I say.

"Planted?"

"Yeah, I planted." I take a long drink. "I fucked Mary."

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“You did the deed? This is a good thing, right? Why do you look like crap? What’s going on?”

I don’t answer. Moving into his room, I lie down on the bed and look up at Jesus hanging and dying on the cross. Spying down on me, he looks sad and tired.

David sits on the edge of the bed. “What happened at Woodstock?”

“What are you talking about?”

“What happened at Woodstock? What happened between you and your ex-girlfriend in that tent?”

Jesus keeps looking at me, deep down into me, into my eyes, into my brain. I can’t look at him anymore. I close my eyes, everything goes black, and I think of what sins of mine he’s written in the dirt.

from

Dean and Chantilly

Chantilly loved Dean's mom, Vicky. She knew her through Dean, of course, but also, over time and talk, through Vicky herself, and she felt secretly privileged to call her Vicky when most people outside Dean's family just knew Vicky's snobby, professional name, Victoria. Chantilly loved every-unflinching-thing about her except one fact: that she was Dean's mom, not her own.

Vicky was a former Playboy Playmate, July, 1976. That issue celebrated the USA's Bicentennial, and on its cover rose Vicky out of a hollow, white frosted cake. Decorated with stars and stripes, the cake announced in cursive blue and red: Happy 200th Birthday, USA! Vicky, with both hands out in front of her, clasped one of its candle-sparklers, and with long level legs she leaned into the sparkler as if to blow it a kiss, to blow it out. Her white Playboy Bunny T-shirt rode up in back, exposing the arch of her ass, and her tits sloped into the shirt, exploding her nipples into its fabric like red fireworks. Atop her head, balanced slantwise, she wore an Uncle Sam top hat. The caption above her read: "Victoria: She's Patriotically Sexy."

Vicky's centerfold unfurled like the American flag. It made up the background, and right on top of it she lay naked. Her head rested among the fifty stars. Her blonde hair, billowing outward, covering most of them, appeared windblown, as if the flag were hoisted up a flagpole, and her blue eyes looked moist and heavy. She had a youthful face, pale and round, a chubby lower lip and soft jaw line, the only sharpness at her nostrils. With rawness, intrigue and passion, she stared off into the distance. Her body diagonally stretched across all thirteen stripes. In her left hand, she cupped her left breast. Her right hand overlay her right thigh, her legs spread slightly to display her pubic hair. It was brown and glossy, and formed a shallow pyramid. The centerfold: a celebration: an invitation. It seemed as if Vicky were offering herself to America.

Her physical endowments were listed as the following:

Bust: 38"

Waist: 24"

Hips: 34"

Height: 5' 7"

Weight: 120 lb.

In the other pictures, which looked like snapshots, Vicky acted out scenes. One of them: wearing blue jeans and an unbuttoned, red blouse, she saluted the Washington Monument. Another one: topless, but clothed in penny loafers, white knee-highs and a plaid schoolgirl skirt, with reading glasses and her hair in pigtails, she stood at the front of a classroom, next to a pull-down map of the USA, her tits dusted with chalk, a pointer in her hand marking the location of Washington, DC. And another: naked, she lay on a raft floating in a swimming pool filled with dollar bills.

Playboy discovered Vicky in her hometown, New Orleans. She worked nights as a waitress at a Bourbon Street bar, and days she attended Delgado Community College. Her plan was to earn her associate's degree while saving enough money to move to Baton Rouge and transfer to Louisiana State University, where she'd major in drama. Since the age of fourteen she dreamt of becoming an actress. One of the rich and famous. But more that, simply acting out someone else's life appealed to her.

At that time she was living with her godparents. They were her maternal aunt and uncle, her mom's sister and brother-in-law, and since they were strict, abiding Roman Catholics, they treated Vicky,

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their godchild, as one of their own six children. They took her in on Monday, February 14th, 1972, Valentine's Day, between 3:30 and 4 PM, after she ran the three blocks from her house to theirs. She was fourteen years old. Moments earlier she got home from school and like always dropped her books on the sofa and stepped into the kitchen to eat an after-school snack. She found her parents dead. Her dad at the kitchen table, slack-sunk into a chair, his chest open with holes, his cup of coffee in front of him on the checkerboard tablecloth. Her mom on the linoleum floor, holes in her chest also, shrimp entrails stuck to her hands. The kitchen reeked of raw shrimp. When Vicky left for school that morning, her dad sat at the table, drinking his morning coffee and reading the Times Picayune sports page, while her mom stood at the sink, de-veining shrimp for supper that night. Fried shrimp with dirty rice, her dad's favorite meal for Valentine's Day. In the sink set a colander of cleaned shrimp. On the cabinet, on top of soggy newspaper, set a pile of shells, veins, and heads. Vicky didn't scream or cry. She burst out of the kitchen, stopped to grab her books up off the sofa, then ran to her godparents' house. Her godfather, an officer with the New Orleans Police Department, answered the doorbell, found her on the front porch, hugging her books. Until then an only child, Vicky gained four brothers, two sisters, and two new parents that day.

The police never caught who murdered her parents. Her dad worked unloading cargo on the docks of the Mississippi, but everybody, including her godfather, knew that he also worked on the side as a smalltime bookie, and the police figured the murders had something to do with that. Not a robbery, as Vicky's family didn't have anything worth stealing, as nothing came up missing from their house. The murders looked more like executions. Vicky's mom probably was a bystander. At first, the case was a priority with the NOPD because of Vicky's godfather, but after a while it stagnated. An open case. A mystery.

Vicky never returned home. Her godparents picked up her clothes and belongings for her, but she refused to take them so they had to buy her new stuff. The only things she did accept belonged to her mom: pearl rosary beads, the sole heirloom her mom owned, and her holy card of Saint Expedite, her favorite saint. Keeping alive her mom's tradition Vicky prayed to him on Wednesdays, the Day of Mercury, which honors the Messenger God of the Romans. Saint Expedite is syncretized with him, and multiple conflicting myths explain his sainthood. The one Vicky liked best, the one her mom used to tell her, was that he was canonized in the streets of New Orleans.

When New Orleans, in the late 18th century, was a Spanish Colony, the priests of Our Lady of Guadalupe commissioned a statue of the Virgin Mary for their chapel. They wanted the statue to be grand, exquisite and heavenly, something that would enlighten the chapel and elevate the church, something that could come from only Spain, their mother country, and they requested it to arrive soon, for the people of New Orleans, according to the priests, needed desperately the Virgin Mary in their lives. Sending those explicit instructions they didn't have to wait long. Much sooner than anticipated, and not at all expected, one breeze-heavy day the ship from Spain arrived. But instead of carrying just one crate to be delivered to the church, it carried two: one marked "Virgin Mary," the other "Expedite." The priests hurried out to the street and pried open the first one to find the statue of the Virgin Mary, more glorious than they ever imagined. But what should they do with the second, mysterious crate? Should they accept it? To what or whom did Expedite refer? The priests congregated. Their excitement over the possibilities of what lay inside it spread among them, throughout the streets and all the way back to the docks of the Mississippi like hot wind. Since the first crate carried such glory, they believed the second crate housed another present, something extra from Spain for their grace and devotion. They opened it.

Inside set a statue of a Roman centurion. He wore a navy military uniform with a dragging, corrugated red cape. He carried no weapons. Instead, with his left hand, he covered his heart; with his right hand, he held up a cross engraved HODIE, which in Latin means today; with his left foot, he stomped a crow. All three actions seemed to balance his body and give him the courage to lead a hundred men.

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Never before had the priests seen such a statue. They were amazed. Who was it, and why had they received it? They searched the crates, but found no answer. Then they read the markings again: “Virgin Mary” and “Expedite,” and it struck them aback. Both of those were names. Spain had chosen them, their church, and the city of New Orleans to proffer to the new world a new saint.

Saint Expedite, Patron of Urgent Causes. The patron of those who want to avoid delays, who seek fast solutions, and who desire financial success. He acts not tomorrow, but today. Especially Wednesdays.

That’s when Vicky would visit Our Lady of Guadalupe. As custom, she’d take a glass of water and an offertory candle, set them down beside the statue of Saint Expedite, forming a triangle: glass candle statue. She didn’t know why that was custom. She did it because her mom did it, lit the candle, knelt and prayed.

Sometimes New Orleans sightseers would sight-see the church. If they snapped pictures of her praying to Saint Expedite, she prayed harder.

If she couldn’t visit the church, she prayed at home to her mom’s holy card. She arranged the triangle in the bathroom. That was the only room in which she could be alone. Her godparents had a three bedroom, one bathroom house. She shared one of the bedrooms with her two girl cousins, the two youngest boy cousins shared another, and the two oldest boy cousins shared the last. Vicky’s godparents slept in the living room on the sleeper-sofa. Vicky never missed praying on Wednesdays.

Days months years: the same prayer.

“My Saint Expedite of urgent and just causes, please intercede for me with Our Lord Jesus Christ. Succor me in this hour of affliction and despair, my Saint Expedite. You who are a holy warrior, you who are the saint of the afflicted, you who are the saint of the desperate, you who are the saint of urgent causes, protect me, help me, give me strength, courage, and serenity. Hear my plea.

“Please, my Saint Expedite, take me away from here. Guide me, deliver me, and give me another life, a new life. I’m thankful for my godparents’ taking me into their home, for their clothing and feeding me, for their watching over me. But I want to be on my own. I want to be my own person. I promise I won’t run away from life ever again. I’ll run straight at it, head on. With your help, my Saint Expedite, I will succeed. Please, I’ll do anything. Just give me a sign.

“My Saint Expedite, help me to prevail through these difficult hours, protect me from all those who want to harm me, respond to my plea with urgency. Bring me back to the state of peace and tranquility, my Saint Expedite. I will be grateful to you for the rest of my life and will speak your name to all those who have faith. Thank you. Amen.”

The sign, to Vicky.

The answer to her prayers, Playboy.

When the photographer approached her working in the bar on Bourbon Street she felt flattered. She listened. He was on assignment, he explained, canvassing America in search of Miss Bicentennial. Perhaps she’d heard of it? The past year he’d traveled all around, the country, suburbs, city, and he’d seen-scrutinized countless women. She had the look Playboy wanted. She resembled every American woman and, at the same time, only herself. If she’d agree to a test shoot, it could lead to anything or nothing. All he could promise was an opportunity. He handed her a business card, the phone number to his hotel scribbled on back. He said he needed her answer before he left New Orleans, within the next few days.

Vicky gave it right then, Yes.

After that, everything happened expeditiously.

Her test shoot. Her call-back. Her telling her godparents about it.

She tried to make them understand. For the first time she felt as if the world had cracked open, as if it were letting her inside. She had a past, present, and future, and all three were capable of change. She

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could do anything, be anybody. But her godparents wouldn't listen. How could she let some man take naked pictures of her? She doesn't care if the whole world sees her naked? What would her parents think, God bless their souls? Shameful. Disgraceful. Indecent. Immoral. They pursued her into the kitchen. She braced against the sink. Behind it, through the open window, a breeze swept into her back, then died out over the stove. Her pot of jumbalaya steamed. Her tongue seemed to sweat. She tried to explain, to clip together her thoughts and feelings, but everything came out wet. At once her godparents said it: Sin: Sinner.

Vicky stopped talking against their talk. They wouldn't forgive her, she knew, as she'd broken their values and their trust. Because of God they'd taken her in. Because of God they'd let her go. Right or wrong: it was, to them, that simple, whereas to her, it was something over which she prayed but admitted ultimately in her heart she'd never understand. She wished her godparents could be like that, recognizing that not all things are either right or wrong, but just are, or that they could have faith not only in God but in anybody-anything. Vicky just knew she'd made her choice for her own well-being, and whatever consequences followed would be her responsibility. Unlike when her parents died, she took control.

Her godparents told her exactly what she expected: if she left for the call-back in Los Angeles she could never return home.

Vicky strode past them, out the kitchen, into her bedroom, and packed. The stuff of her life crammed into a suitcase. Now and then, some of her cousins would approach and peek into the bedroom. Vicky, still packing, would explain the situation, not blaming her godparents or herself, and she'd apologize and say goodbye, and they'd step into the bedroom, hug her and say goodbye, too. The older ones acted compulsory, the younger ones shaky. Her two oldest cousins weren't home, so she'd have to leave without saying goodbye to them, which bothered her. She figured she'd never see them again. After packing, out of respect and courtesy, she walked back into the kitchen to say goodbye to her godparents. Her godmother, in an apron, stood over the stove, stirring the jumbalaya that Vicky put up for supper, while her godfather sat at the table, reading the Times Picayune. They peered at her as if they didn't know her, or as if they didn't want to know her anymore. She stared back at them, motion-dead: holes -- red, gashing holes -- covered their bodies. Yet they were alive, stirring reading peering. Without saying goodbye, Vicky rushed out and left.

And she never stopped leaving, and she never returned. After becoming famous, sometimes she wondered what her godparents thought of her, if they followed her career, if they ever forgave her, if they'd try to seek her out like long-lost family, but they never did. Neither did any of her cousins.

She would've been easy to find. Her celebrity as Miss Bicentennial spread across America, then, in the 1970s, initiated her film career. Starring in a series of B-rate action skin flicks, she also became publicly known as Cleopatra: *Cleopatra's Escape from Alcatraz* (1979), *Cleopatra Meets Tarzan* (1981), *Cleopatra: Queen of the Mummy Men* (1983), and *Cleopatra vs. Dracula* (1985). The movie that started it all was 1977's *Cleopatra* and Antony.

The Ides of March, 44 BC. Outside the Senate Building in Rome. The senators' assassination of Julius Caesar, who was Cleopatra's lover, that's how the movie opened. Pregnant with mortality, Cleopatra fled to her home, Alexandria, Egypt. The senators let her go. They didn't want decadent Egypt affiliated with the Roman Empire anymore, so they cast it aside to rot. Alone again Cleopatra ruled, no longer as Rome's New Isis, but as Egypt's Venus Queen.

Egypt then bloomed: the land of pyramids.

The Roman Empire, however, soon shifted regimes, a coup against the senators followed by a triumvirate, and before long Rome's policy toward Egypt broadened into requital, absolution, and occupation. Mark Antony, one of the triumvirs, trekked all the way to Alexandria, waving the flag of diplomacy. His

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reputation, though: unwieldy as an empire. Cleopatra expected him to attempt to kill her.

The night of the festival in his honor, she decided to act first. She asked Antony to sneak away with her, to let her give him a tour of her kingdom's sculpture garden. A place of heroes, gods and goddesses, with a view of the pyramids cast against moon-and-star light. Of course, she knew he'd use it as an opportunity to murder her, but she'd try to seduce him instead. If he fell in love with her, Egypt would be saved.

What happened next was the movie's goriest sex scene.

On their tour in the garden, from out of nowhere, Antony brandished a dagger and held Cleopatra helpless. He whispered into her face there was nothing she could do, she was going to die and Egypt was going to belong to Rome again.

So she kissed him. The dagger sliced into her neck. Blood cascaded, and she kissed him harder, and more blood, more kissing, and then it happened. Antony cut Cleopatra's clothes away and threw aside the dagger. Its blade sunk into the sand. He lay her down, himself on top, and kissed her back. She overturned him. She'd been playing weak all along. Now, she straddled him, her neck throbbing and blood trickling down her body. There, in the sand, among the sculptures, they fucked.

After that, they lived together as queen and lover. When Octavius Caesar, another of the triumvirs back in Rome, heard the news about them, he became suspicious and angry, and he demanded Antony's return. Antony refused to leave, but Cleopatra convinced him that it would not only be right for them but for their countries. He should make formal his relationship with her, should clear up Rome's objection toward Egypt, and should act expeditiously so that he could return to her soon.

When Antony arrived in Rome, Octavius wanted him to pledge his allegiance to the empire by marrying his sister, Octavian. Lepidus, the third and last triumvir, agreed with Octavius and even issued an ultimatum: if Antony married Octavian and ruled with them as the Roman people desired, then they'd spare Egypt and Cleopatra's life; if not, then they'd wage war against Egypt, conquer and enslave its people, execute Cleopatra, and banish him to Actium, where he'd live out his decision on sea and rock.

Reluctantly, Antony complied, and the next day, married Octavian, and later that night, consummated their marriage. The next night, though, he rushed off to Egypt and confessed to Cleopatra, pleading for her to take him back. She knew that Rome would soon declare war and that, based upon his reputation, if anybody could defeat Octavius it would be Antony. As a ruler, she'd planned on that contingent. As a woman, she'd secured him for herself, for that very reason. She told him that she'd take him back under one condition: he must defend Egypt, defeat Octavius. So Antony prepared for war.

The decisive battle occurred at Alexandria. The Roman army, like a wave of men and metal, composed of hundred-soldier divisions led by centurions, who were under the direct command of Octavius, had fought all the way through Egypt, driving the Egyptian army back, onto itself, overtaking shore, sand and city, and at length crashing down upon Cleopatra's palace. Antony proved no match, and he realized it was almost over. When Roman soldiers flooded over the wall and through the gate, he searched for Cleopatra to notify her. She waited for him in the sculpture garden. She was topless, and an Egyptian cobra slithered around her neck. Death by snakebite, she told him, calm as incantation, would assure her immortality, and she wouldn't allow Octavius to execute her and take that away. With one hand, she squeezed-agitated the snake, and its fangs punctured her chest. She fell to her knees. The snake slithered down her body, onto the sand, where it crept among the sculptures. Standing over her, Antony pledged his love and told her that she wouldn't have to enter the afterlife alone. They'd kiss in eternity, he cried. Then he unsheathed his sword and fell upon it.

After Cleopatra, faint with venom, watched Antony die, she could hardly last any longer. She dug out of the sand a phial of antidote, uncorked and drank it. Thick in her throat, then slight and dissolved, it

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worked painstakingly as a prayer. Air swelled open her chest, and regaining herself, she knelt beside Antony. She didn't remove the sword from his midsection or close his filmy eyes. She just waited, and at that moment, Octavius and his soldiers besieged the garden. They stood out against the sculptures. As soon as Octavius caught sight of Cleopatra and Antony, he ordered his soldiers to secure the rest of the palace. Alone he approached her, sword in hand, to execute her. But the closer he neared, the more he noticed the puncture wounds, swollen crimson, above her breast. He asked if she were immortal, and she replied, Yes. She rose to meet him. He let loose his sword. He asked if she'd become his queen, if she'd rule with him over the Roman Empire. She whispered into his face that she already was, that she already had been, and then, right there, beside Antony's blood-wet body, she embraced and kissed Octavius, and he kissed her back. That's how the movie ended. It was, to say the least, historically inaccurate.

Not long after the last Cleopatra film, Vicky met Steven. She was in Houston at a charity event hosted by the Oilers, which took place in the Astrodome, one of its Texas-sized conference rooms decorated noisily as a banquet hall. By the end of the night they were tipsy toward each other. They had so much between them the same: their modest pasts, wealthy presents, and creative futures. They sneaked off to the football field. Lit only by security lights, the Astroturf appeared soft. Vicky removed her pumps and Steven his loafers. They strolled the length of the field. Then, in the end zone, as if there were nothing else to be done, they kissed and fucked.

They had an expedient, public courtship, and married in celebrity fashion. Not long after that, they moved to Sugar Bend. Vicky never made another film. She swung her career in a new direction: philanthropy. Her charity, The Saint Expedite Foundation, helped runaway kids, and at first, it received a lot of media-play. The Catholic Church issued a series of statements about how it didn't endorse her lifestyle, beliefs, or, in the end, even her charity. Late-night-talk-TV, AM radio, grocery-store-checkout-counter-tablets, they all broadcast it. The controversy. The spectacle. But as fast as it blew up, it faded away, and Vicky postured herself like a professional, welcoming both the noise and then the silence. Left alone with her charity, she governed it. Steven played football. Subsequently, Dean was born.

All that, of course, is public knowledge, but Chantilly heard the story from Vicky herself. Many times they sat at the kitchen table, conversing like two friends. Chantilly was welcome to visit Dean's house whenever she wanted, even when Dean wasn't home. She started doing that after Vicky gave her and Dean *The Sex Talk*.

Vicky said, "Dean told his dad and I that you've been having sex. He said you've been doing it outside, out there on the golf course of all places. And he told me you don't love each other. Well, okay. I'm not going to try and stop you, but we have to talk."

This was after their first/only date. It was mid-autumn. Their routine of fucking outside had gotten brisk. So tonight, for the first time, Chantilly sneaked up the balcony into Dean's bedroom. She eyed the room. It matched what she'd expected. On the walls hung a collage of sleek cars and bikini girls, and above the bed the only sports-related thing: a team poster of the Oilers, faded and frayed, as if it'd been tacked up a long time ago during Dean's childhood. The players looked like little blue action figures. Dean sat beneath them on his bed, hunched over. But before Chantilly made her move, there was knocking at the door and Vicky speaking behind it.

"I'm not going to come in without your permission, though. I've talked to Dean about it, and he said you'd be over tonight, Chantilly, and you'd probably want to take off. I understand, but listen. I'm not out to get you in trouble or mind your parents' business. They can parent you themselves. This is between you and Dean and me because you're involved with my son. Why don't you make yourselves decent and let me in?"

Dean wore navy sweat pants and white T-shirt. Chantilly wore only a nightshirt as usual for late-

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night meetings, but she felt fully clothed. “We’re decent,” she said.

Vicky entered. “Why don’t you sit down?” she asked, but Chantilly continued to stand. “Okay. Listen. I don’t care you and Dean don’t love each other. Really, I don’t. That’s only one reason for having sex. Besides love, there’s sex to make a baby. There’s sex as in rape, which usually isn’t about sex at all but other things, perverse things. And there’s sex for sex’s sake, to just feel good. And let’s face it. Sex feels good. It was made to feel good so that we’d have it. That’s only natural. And if it doesn’t feel good, then you’re doing something wrong. Am I right or what?” Vicky looked at Dean and Chantilly, and Chantilly looked at Dean, and Dean looked at Vicky. “It’d be stupid, even impossible, to try and stop you from having sex. So, instead, I want to make sure you’re safe and responsible. Do you know how dangerous it is having sex out there on the golf course? In the middle of the night? Some alligator might crawl out of the lake and mistake you for humping animals!” They all chuckled a bit, but it was true: the river, marshes and lakes were inhabited by alligators, and of course, there were neighborhood stories about man-eaters. Like the time that old blind lady dove into her swimming pool without looking. The police only found a few fingers and her floating head. “Dean said you’ve been responsible about everything else,” Vicky went on. “All I’m asking is that you make informed choices. So, please, I know this might sound ridiculous, but I’m serious: only have sex inside. Promise me that?”

Chantilly thought about it. Dean, she realized, had already made up his mind, but she also knew she could persuade him otherwise, but why do that? Vicky spoke to her as a real person, lay it out for her to decide after all. Chantilly was free to try it on, model it, wear it around or take it off. Like skin and clothes, she felt, it was her choice as to how it fit. If she’d agree, it wouldn’t mean conformity. It’d mean comfort. “Sure. Okay.” She said, “I promise.”

Vicky then talked more about sex, the usual topics. Chantilly sat down on the bed beside Dean, and they just sat there together listening to Vicky until she finished, yet she didn’t box up the conversation and store it away. She left it open, letting Chantilly know that she’d be there for anything, anytime. Walking out of the room, she called out over her shoulder, “Remember, I’m here for you. And now that I’m done, if you want, you two can go at it. But please, if you’re going to get loud, turn on the stereo or at least something. I don’t want the whole house echoing with bedsprings and ‘Oh, Gods,’ if you get my drift,” and with that, the door latched and Vicky had left.

Chantilly wondered what it was like for Dean to have a mother like that. Always, Vicky would be naked. Anybody at anytime could rent her moves or go online to look at her. Not only the Playboy website, which was the most obvious and flattering, but many others with hit-pop-up-hit of pictures, some candid as a wave, others grossly and digitally distorted. Men took her body, did whatever they wanted with it. They left nothing to the imagination. How many men have jacked-off to Vicky? From 1976 until now, probably thousands upon thousands, all their cum directed toward her. Even Dean’s friends, like everybody else, didn’t have to imagine her naked. While at his house for dinner, they’d sit at the kitchen table, chew on a piece of catfish and see her tits. Not picture what they might look like, but recall the actual pictures of them. How many of his friends, too, have knelt down and closed their eyes and jacked-off to his mom? Chantilly heard stories in the school hallways. Students both envied him and laughed at him. But what of him? What did he do? She struck up the subject one night in his bedroom. They’d just finished fucking and, twisted among the bed sheets, were lying there, talking about the usual things, the latest movies and music, threats of terrorism and school massacres, lots-n-lots of homework, and all she did was prop up an elbow, ask what it was like. Dean freaked out, though. Without putting any clothes on, he stood up, out of bed, and stomped across the room. He hovered over his computer. He said something along the lines of: did she really want to know what it was like? Did she? She’d never understand, but if she wanted to see for herself, then she’d better take a look. So she got out of bed. She stood beside him, naked. They

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looked at Vicky, who was naked too, on a website. The picture of her took place in outer space, and it was disproportional. On top of Earth, its swirl of green continents and blue oceans, sat Vicky, large as God, her legs spread, a space shuttle flying into her vagina. "Fucking see," Dean said. "That's her body. That's all."

What it was like for Chantilly: her stomach swelled full of emptiness. She felt as if she were seeing Vicky for real, as if the computer, like a time machine, had opened up a window through which to look, and as if, even more than that, Vicky didn't care, as she were the one really doing the looking, watching Chantilly open up herself by staring at her. At that moment, Chantilly seemed to become a trace of herself. What before was inside her disappeared. The only parts of her that worked were her eyes and stomach. It was unreal, yet sensible. Vicky turned herself into a scene in order to save what she was. Nobody, not the thousands of men, not Dean's friends, not even Chantilly, could see beyond her image. They grew hungrier and hungrier. Meanwhile, Vicky was stripping them.

An appetite that couldn't eat. That was a vicious thing.

Sometimes men stalked Vicky. Dean's family had an unlisted address and phone number, and their house was situated in the gated section of Sugar Bend, but still, with a touchy letter or physical phone call, men would somehow find and reach out to her. The worst it had progressed was last summer. A man trailed her around Houston for three weeks. One instance: at her favorite store, the Saks Fifth Avenue in The Galleria, she was trying on blouses for an upcoming charity event, then after she decided on one, the man approached the sales associate and asked her to return to the dressing room in order to bring out the other blouses Vicky tried on and sell one of them to him. He was poised and well-dressed, and explained to them that Vicky looked like the exact model of his wife. It was his wife's birthday, and she was, to say the least, an exquisite woman for whom to shop. Flattered, Vicky helped him pick out the blouse, the light blue one with the scoop neck. Another instance: when, one lazy afternoon, she met a friend for iced lattés at Starbucks, she spotted him sitting nearby, swallowing, staring. Maybe all the caffeine hastened her mind? Even though she took notice, she thought nothing of him. The moment lapsed. And then the last: the man showed up at her house. When she answered the doorbell, he introduced himself. He said it might be a tardy introduction, especially since he'd run into her a few times before, but he was a neighbor from a few streets down, and it'd sound peculiar at best, he knew, but might she permit him to sneak a look at her wardrobe to get more ideas for his wife? Vicky reckoned realized reeled straight away. Within seconds, Steven was with her, and within minutes so was Sugar Bend Neighborhood Security. The man, still on the front porch, showed them his ID and explained. SBNS listened. When everything got sorted out, they explained to Vicky that it seemed to be a big misunderstanding, neighbors getting off on the wrong foot, that sort of thing. The man apologized, but Vicky refused it. She asked that he not come around anymore. Steven said that next time he wouldn't call SBNS, he'd take care of things his own damn self. SBNS, to settle the situation, did file a report, and they told both parties that they'd patrol more often for a while, for both their sakes. As the man walked away, down the sidewalk, back to his house, he never looked back, as if he didn't have to, as if he'd see Vicky countless times again.

That was another story Chantilly heard from Vicky. Like all the others, it helped Chantilly absorb who Vicky was. Chantilly could never get enough. She wanted to know what it was like to . . . or what it was like when . . . but she didn't understand fully any of it, any of her. They'd sit at the kitchen table, sipping iced peppermint tea, talking away the afternoon. Often Chantilly would reciprocate, but never in the same depth, and never about Reed or Dean. She thought sometimes that Vicky revealed so much in order for her to do the same. It didn't work, though. So Vicky didn't parent her. She even said one time that wasn't her part to play. She just became Chantilly's deep-felt friend. And that's why today, Sunday, July 6th, 2002, after the scene on the soccer field, after yelling, telling everybody about her abortion, Chantilly ran all the way over to Dean's house.

A Regular Paradise

I pass by a teenage girl wrapped tightly in a white sarong. She sits at the water's edge, gathering clumps of wet sand in her hands, attempting to sift it apart. Her vertebrae extend out through her browned skin like a gothic arch, and her feet are brushed clean by the small waves of the slowly approaching tide. The water is still too cold to swim, but a few children splash around her in the surf and the lifeguards up the beach pretend to pay attention.

Behind us, bikers cruise loudly along the narrow strip of flattened sand between the hotels and the boardwalk. At the Main Street ramp, they roll up and onto Atlantic Avenue, which runs the length of Daytona Beach. I follow them and am instantly a part of the seething Bike Week crowd, large and determined to get somewhere fast, but where I don't know. Joe and I parked a few blocks from here last night, in a vacant lot, and slept in the bed of his truck under piles of T-shirts and jeans to keep warm. At dawn, a passing man tapped me on the foot and said, "Time to get up." I groaned and sat, but he was already gone. Yawning, I tasted the tar in the freshly paved road as it settled on my tongue. It was thick and almost tangible; black, oily bubbles emerged from the asphalt and when I hopped down to stretch, I popped them open with my bare feet.

Last summer, I showed the kids at the juvenile home how to pop them if they wanted. The girls shrieked at first, worried about burning, permanent discoloration, I don't know; the boys were tough and unfazed. It was morning, our break from school time, fresh air before round two. In a minute, we'd file back inside, and, because it was Friday, I'd give them the option to read from the *Odyssey* with me, or attend a bible study with Mr. Jim, the poorly-dressed man that owned the facility.

"Bible or *Odyssey*?" I asked once back inside, slipping on my hairnet to enter the kitchen. "Mr. Jim is here."

Samantha Byrd, the new girl, colorless in the cheeks and with the palest blue eyes, asked "What's the *Odyssey*?" Her head was visibly dented, planed like the roof of a house at forty five degrees; no doubt she was hit or dropped repeatedly as an infant. I wasn't allowed to read their case files, but quickly enough I'd learned that if I really wanted answers, their bodies were legible enough.

"The *Odyssey* is the story of a man trying to get home to his family," I said. "He's been gone for twenty years, lost at sea, all the usual stuff. I like it, but it is thousands of years old, so you might find it boring." She'd arrived the night before in the back of a police car, six months pregnant but hardly showing.

"It's cool," said Walter, my current favorite. A fat boy with wild ADD, he sat in the corner and read disintegrating issues of *National Geographic* with religious intensity. "Lots of fighting," he said.

"It's your typical sad old man story, Samantha. Lots of magical type stuff," I said. "So it's pretty much exactly like the Bible, only it's got a more exciting cover." I held it up and pointed to the crude water-color; a broken warship struggling to outrun flying thunderbolts. "So," I asked. "Bible or *Odyssey*?"

"*Odyssey*," said Walter. "That's what I'm talking about."

"Yeah," I said. "I know that's what you're talking about, but you ain't supposed to be talking at all without raising your hand."

"Sorry, Mr. Matt," he said, raising his hand.

"Don't say sorry, just raise your hand." I looked back to Samantha and ignored Walter's raised hand until I assumed he'd forgotten what he wanted. Finally, I said, "Yes, Walter. What do you want?" I

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finally asked.

“Can I write a letter to my mom?”

“Is it letter-writing time?”

“Well then can I read the *Odyssey* with you?”

“Can you give me a moment of peace?”

“Can we stop asking questions, Mr. Matt?”

“You can,” I said. “But I’m still waiting for that show of hands.”

Samantha was the only one to join Mr. Jim for Bible study. They sat at a table in my office where Jim nervously read and explained passages from the New Testament. Jesus hung on a cross, spoke to his father, wondered where his friends were.

I read Book Five and to the delight of the kids that sat around me in the dayroom, the gods were angry yet again. “Hey Mr. Matt?” said Walter, “How come these gods are always getting so angry about everything? I mean, they know they’re gonna live forever, don’t they?”

“It does seem a little bit absurd,” I said. “Doesn’t it?”

Jim’s pathetically monotonous tone carried into the dayroom and distracted me. Wishing I could slap some color into his cheeks and still retain my job, I passed the book on to Walter, who read it with his usual dramatic flair— Poseidon had a deep, bloodthirsty voice. Homer, oddly enough, had a bad British accent. I went back into the kitchen to check on lunch.

Samantha stared blankly at the wall of my office. Her eyes were vacant and ballish, even bewildered. Her hands kneaded the pale blue shirt I’d given her during Intake. Knotting it tightly only to untie it, she used the surface of her thigh like an ironing board, smoothing away the shirt’s wrinkles with her palms. Her sweatpants bore a faint rust-colored smudge, the residue of another girl’s menstrual blood that never came out in the wash. Unaware of the stain, I had given them to her with the T-shirt after she’d eaten the night before— peanut butter and jelly, macaroni and cheese, milk and an apple— I served her at the table in the dayroom, the food smelled natural but oddly sterile, like a dollar bill that had lived through the wash cycle, or the cinder block walls of the center’s dayroom that were scrubbed spotless during chore time.

Samantha sat mute in my office, being unnaturally absorbed by the hard wooden chair on which she sat. Christ breathed his last and gave up his body; Jim asked, what can we learn from this? I’d just learned that parents in Indiana could have their children arrested for being pregnant and under eighteen; apparently, it is considered an act of incorrigibility. Simple, efficient, transcending: that God is all good I had always taken as a given. Jim muttered nervously about eternal life, but I wanted to ask: do we really have that kind of time? I mean, Lunch is on the way. *Odysseus* struggled on his splintered raft and behind him, *Calypso* faded away. “Things happen for a reason,” Jim said. “We fall. God catches. Cause and effect, you see?” Samantha smoothed down the hair along the top of her head. She tucked her arms inside her shirt and looked out at Walter as he read. Who does God catch again and how long does he wait? Causality: I cooked hamburger casserole; heat from the stove filled the kitchen.

I follow the bikers down Atlantic Avenue and meet with Joe at Stella’s Beach Café. I order a salad and breadsticks without comment, having lived through enough abuse searching for vegetarian options the night before. I’d asked around for a while, finally settling on a slice of shit cheese pizza after one too many vendors had asked if I was some type of faggot.

“If by faggot,” I said, “You mean vegetarian— then yes, I am.” He stared at me and laughed, sucking on the end of his black, wet cigar.

“I thought so,” he said. “Hey man, as long as you love the one you’re with.” He handed me my slice of pizza along with a paper napkin that didn’t quite look up to the job.

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“Do you really sell something called the Giant Biker Sausage?” I asked, pointing to the sign above his booth.

“Hell yeah,” he said with a nod. “We were designed to be carnivores.”

Joe elbowed me in the kidney and said, “You’re going to get us killed.”

“Five bucks altogether,” the vendor said. “Now that’s what I’m talking about.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I said as I paid him. Joe and I sat down on the curb and he said, “Just try to play it safe.”

“Jesus, Nancy,” I said. “Just relax already. We’re working against a system here, don’t you see that? And you just want to let them walk all over us, totally reifying my position as the patsy vegetarian and his as the violent, bearded, I don’t know, sausage-eating biker.”

“But you’re wearing a sweater and converse sneakers,” he said. “And you are a vegetarian.”

“Don’t try to sucker me into some absurd semantic argument,” I said. “Just give me a minute of quiet, that’s all I ask.”

“What’s semantic about this argument?”

“What’s not?” I asked, but the drone of a thousand passing motorcycles swallowed my words. I tried to make a few more points, yelling, but unable to hear, Joe waved me off. When I finished the slice, I leaned back against a telephone pole and closed my eyes.

The edges of Atlantic Avenue begin to fill with parked bikes and cars, their owners trudging toward Main Street, its booze and cover bands. They pass by Stella’s, where I stab at my salad with a plastic fork. A group of bikers step, oblivious, over a stain on the dotted yellow line, where Holly Brown’s blood had pooled that morning into a spot no larger than a dinner plate. Seagulls hover over our table, vulture-like but more polite. In the evening heat, the air above Atlantic Avenue undulates as it rises.

I heard it before I saw it.

I brushed my teeth by the side of Joe’s truck, rinsing my mouth out with stale water from a bottle I’d opened the night before. Too foul to drink, I poured what was left into the grass. Joe was refusing to participate in any hygienic act, citing the spirit of Bike Week as his inspiration. When he spoke, his teeth were dull and flat, a permanent whitish moss growing slowly outward from the gaps. It happened while I was pouring out the water.

Losing the oncoming traffic in the glare of the morning sun, a woman backed her truck into the road. Sheet metal is forgiving, but loud. We heard it clearly enough, I think. What happened happened with a pop; Holly Brown, thirty years old, was thrown from her motorcycle; the bike slid safely between the truck’s wheels, coming to a rest in a bed of hydrangeas that surrounded a picnic area. I saw the sliding bike and the sparks as it skidded to a stop. I saw the truck, yellow and domestic. The shocks must have been old and soft; it didn’t look like it hit a bump. We were eight blocks away.

A man screamed and I knew that she would die.

I read about it later in the newspaper, a hundred times in a row, trying to fill in the gaps, until I wondered what, if anything, I’d actually seen at all.

The man I heard scream was her fiancé, Jason. He was riding behind her on his own bike. He hit the truck too, but wasn’t injured. Holly’s lungs collapsed, and Jason pulled the driver of the truck out by her hair and knocked her down with blows to the face.

Joe ran toward the scene to help but couldn’t find the courage by the time he arrived.

I stayed behind and watched as the paramedics and police arrived; shrill sirens cut through the damp air, and absentmindedly, I made the sign of the cross on my chest.

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I heard later that she was the sixth biker to die during Bike Week, although the man who told me this mentioned that last year was much worse. Emergency workers collected evidence and questioned survivors, constructing a story, hoping to learn what happened and why. Hotel crowds gathered on the sidewalk; the sirens called them from their rooms.

The driver of the truck sat on the curb with the police chaplain. Blood dripped from the gash on her face to the legs of her jeans. The body of Holly Brown was covered with a blanket and Jason sat alone over her corpse.

They'd been high school sweethearts that went separate ways after graduation, finding new lovers, getting married, getting divorced. They met again last year and Jason had recently proposed. Sixty stitches later, the woman driving the truck chose not to press assault charges. The police blamed no one: she lost the oncoming traffic in the morning sun, and backed her truck into the road. I opened a new bottle of water and took a sip. Thirsty, spiritless, tired: I take it as a given that God can do what He likes, but I always forget that He does. It took four policemen and a paramedic to restrain Jason when his fiancé was finally loaded into the ambulance.

I gave Samantha her own clothes to wear at her hearing. She smiled and left with my co-worker Kylie, a round woman with curly hair and a yellow convertible. The top would be up on the way to the courthouse, but Samantha said it looked cool anyway.

Walter asked me why that girl was here. "She doesn't look like a criminal," he said.

"But you look exactly like Al Capone, right?"

"Well, at least I'm a guy," he said. "That sort of automatically makes me a criminal."

"Now that's college talk," I said, "Honestly Buddy; I don't know why Samantha is here. I'm not supposed to know and it's not my business. Which means it is definitely not your business, and finally— you need to raise your hand before you talk."

Samantha returned after dinner, so I heated up what was left: baked chicken, green beans, and orange slices. I slipped some extra onto her plastic tray because the other kids were already playing cards and board games.

"Thanks," she said, picking at the chicken. "I'm pregnant, you know?"

"Really?" I asked, feigning incredulity. "Congratulations."

"Judge says the only reason I'm here is cause I'm pregnant. I can go home as soon as I have my baby."

"Well, congratulations again," I said. "Make sure you write use a letter. Just give me your dishes when you're done and you can have game time." She pushed her food around the partitions for a few minutes, mostly for show, and then she drank her milk. She dumped her dinner in the trash and brought me her plate.

"I'm not really hungry," she said, sitting down on the couch and staring blankly out the window. I wondered where the baby's father would be on a Friday night. He might have gone to her hearing, although they wouldn't be allowed to talk. Maybe he was older, legal. Did he know that Samantha was here, wearing sweatpants and eating waxy chicken with a plastic fork? Or maybe he was absent, even unknown. Why wasn't he locked up? At nine o'clock the kids went to bed, climbing onto their waterproof mattresses which exhaled each time their bodies shifted. I made a habit of saying good night to everyone individually, although I was often ignored and occasionally instructed, in a mumbled whisper, to go fuck myself. But this was a good group. Walter, drumming on his chest with his fingers, asked if he could read ahead in the Odyssey.

"Sure thing," I said.

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“I want to read about the Cyclops.”

“But we already read that.”

“Yeah,” he said, “But I liked it.”

“Okay, but you’re technically reading back then, not reading ahead.”

“Words, words, words,” he said, dismissively. “Good night, Mr. Matt.”

I turned off the hallway lights and paused outside Samantha’s room where she sat on the bed with her hands in her lap, smiling. In the dayroom, the spotless tables reflected the few bars of fluorescent lights we left on after lights out. The kitchen sink was filled with sticky bowls of half eaten chocolate ice cream— half eaten because it tasted like the industrial plastic bucket that it came in. I clicked on the motion detectors that hung above the hallway of bedrooms and called out a final goodnight. The day ended like this: Samantha said goodnight and I wandered back to my office where I opened the window and sat in the cooling breeze that trickled through the screen.

On Main Street, we’re stuck in a line of pedestrians, all of us sucking down the exhaust fumes that waft over the police blockade that separates the sidewalk from the bike-filled street. My legs are exhausted from walking all day, being tapped awake in the cold morning sunrise by a disappearing stranger; my body sunken, confused, and baffled. I struggle to push my way through the crowd and suddenly, there’s a hollow, a space between two buildings, a cell, twelve feet square; I withdraw my body from the snaking mass with a pop; I sit on an empty barrel.

Somehow, this space has gone unused, has not been sold. The silence is all the more overwhelming because there ought to be, probably was earlier, a Ted Nugent tribute band here. Or women selling beer, with flowers taped on their nipples, a river of ogling men rubbing shoulders as they lurched forward in perfect time to the flash of their cameras. I name this place a sanctuary.

A man appears next to me with a stack of novelty 100 dollar bills. His vest sports a picture of Jesus, and a patch that says, Riding for the Son. The bills are gigantic, folded in half; he passes them out to passers-by, explaining that it’s a free gift that will last for eternity and a whole lot more.

“Christian Bikers,” I whisper to Joe. “Riding for the Son. Where do you think that they’re riding to?”

“I dunno,” he says.

“Does Jesus tell him where to ride?” I ask, rubbing my chin. “I mean, does Jesus give him directions?”

“Why don’t you ask?”

“Okay, well who’s more reliable, in your opinion,” I start. “Rand McNally? Or Jesus?” I light a cigarette and rub my chin again. “How long do you think they have to ride?”

“Eternity.”

“And a whole lot more, I guess.” I approach the man and ask for a piece of the fake money. Next to Franklin’s portrait, in the tiniest print, is a pared gospel story. Christ is born of a virgin, crucified, and rises again. Best to leave out all his loser friends, I suppose. But his mother made the cut. She sat at the foot of his cross, after all, bathed his body with scented water and placed him in the tomb. And it was her body that carried the boy, pushed him out, and expelled the slick and bloody creature into a manger somewhere and once upon a time. The man distributes the evangelistic cash, and the street begins to fill with the crumpled bills.

I wonder who, if anyone, will clean up the mess.

When it’s late enough to drink, we stand up and aim our bodies toward the one bar that seemed as if it wasn’t entirely dependent upon the angry, racist bikers to stay in business. The crowds on Main Street have thinned and shifted; pedestrians have found their bikes and have joined the cruise line, which grows louder and denser as the sky darkens. Salty moisture gathers at the peak of street lamps, obscuring the yellow beams;

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standing on crates above the crowds, half naked women sell cheap beer at five dollars a can; college boys on Japanese sport bikes offer rides to every girl they pass, and the police gather at intersections to complain about the noise. Joe, because he doesn't know how else to say what he wants to, pats the Christian biker on the shoulder as we pass.

At Froggy's Saloon, we stand apart from the crowd to watch and observe. The bar is more like a fenced-in outdoor pavilion, the size of a gymnasium; there's barely room to walk between the bodies that crowd the floor. By my count, there are ten cages in which lingerie clad women struggle to look sexy as they move to songs that were never meant to accompany dancing.

"Is this Black Sabbath?" I ask.

"Nope," he says, cracking open a Busch N/A, the remnant of an adolescent pact he'd made with God stipulating abstinence in all things— "It's the Nuge," he says. "Stranglehold. Again."

The closest dancer, brunette and wearing pink, has a system in place. She does the same move over and over again. The man holds his dollar in his mouth, and she beats his face to hell with her enormous breasts, snagging the cash in her cleavage.

"That girl looks like Rachel," Joe says. "She looks just like Rachel."

"You want me to buy you a dance?" I ask. "You know, get your ears boxed by a gigantic pair of tits? It's only Bike Week once a year."

"No, I can't do that," he says. "It's not right."

"Suit yourself," I say, but I try to hand him a dollar anyway.

"But," he says, "I am going to go watch her dance for a while." He wanders off to the closest barstool where he sits down and pretends to scan the crowd. At the front of the pavilion, a spotlight shines on the DJ booth.

"We do this every night," the DJ says. "It's tradition. Please sing along." He waves an American flag back and forth, and one of the cage girls, momentarily freed of her duties, wraps herself in a sea-green sheet and holds up a fake torch. Someone presses play.

God Bless the U.S.A. Lee Greenwood, I think, although for all I know, it could be the Nuge again. A few people sing along, raising their beers high above their heads. The girls don't stop dancing and if anything, they seem to be making more money. I spot a guy trying to pass one of those fake 100 dollar bills as a tip, and I think, truly, deeply— God Bless the U.S.A. The anthem, patriotic feelings in general, fade out and are forgotten. Another power ballad about love gone awry begins to scream from the speakers and I epiphanize: This song and the DJ are one in the same: he's wearing vintage Nikes, tight jeans, and a Steelers windbreaker— the song sports a bitchin' guitar solo, a double bass drum, and a section in the middle that seems to be a conversation between the lead singer and the devil— they're both so tremendously behind the times that they've inadvertently fallen right back into style. After a few more songs, I find Joe and tell him I'm heading back to the truck.

In the dim light of the streetlamps, I can't tell the difference between the shine of the fresh asphalt and the darker tint left on the road by Holly Brown's body. Or maybe I'm just in the wrong spot and I'm watching the traffic drive over an altogether different, meaningless stain; gasoline will discolor pavement too. But no, this one's the size of a plate, and it doesn't seem to have spread. Bikers have the thickest blood, I've heard; they live in the wind and they drink the rain. Still, I think, it's smaller than I remember. I walk clumsily, my legs trembling and weak. I know Holly Brown walked this morning too, if only to her bike, and how different were our bodies then? The sun rose and we both stumbled, sojourners, from sleep into the crescendo of the morning light. Her body lies broken somewhere, the sixth biker to die this week. Half a million more cruise round Daytona Beach, and Jason the ex-fiancé, sits somewhere and waits for something. To go back to Pennsylvania? To collect her body? To get the joke?

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In the newspaper, he said he lost it. He watched Holly die and he lost it. He punched that woman in the truck until his hand broke and then he got on the ground and he cried. The chaplain offered his services. Someone else offered a cell phone. He didn't think that any of it was real. Until four police officers pulled him away, he sat on the ground and moaned from the throat.

This is what I know to be real: Holly Brown is lying on sheet metal; her skin is ice. I will get on a plane in the morning and go home to Indiana. Joe will never tell his fiancé about the dancer that looked like her, the one he watched for hours. There was a girl this afternoon, no older than sixteen, sitting at the edge of the water, sifting handfuls of wet sand through her hands. Didn't a stranger touch my foot this morning, while I slept in the truck? I try to map out these moments in my head, a constellation to chart the positions of one to another, casual or causal connect-the-dots, I can't decide. Giant, fake 100 dollar bills are swept up by the breeze and are carried into corners, doorways, and under cars. I reach the truck and lay on the hood, smoking cigarettes and watching moths bat themselves to death against the glass shell of the streetlights; they fall slowly.

At the airport in Daytona, I sit at a bar to wait for my flight. I order a club soda and drink it slowly, smoking, trying to calm my wrecked and throbbing stomach. The actual flight won't bother me, it's just the waiting. The waitress, plump and bored, looks like a girl I once knew from the juvenile center. I can't recall the name of this girl, and I remember her face only because she shared a room with Samantha Byrd, the pregnant girl with the sloped head.

The ice melts in my glass.

After she attended court and I served her baked chicken, Samantha went to bed. In the morning, she writhed on the floor in pain and bled through her sweatpants. Kylie took her to the hospital where the baby was expelled from Samantha's young womb, collected and cataloged by the nurse standing at her side. She spent the night in recovery and was released to her parents the following evening.

What part, if any, she played in the miscarriage, I don't know. From what I've heard, it's not an act impossible to the determined mind. While she waited for her father to collect her, I gave her back her own clothes. I offered her a bowl of ice cream or a glass of juice, more for my sake than hers, because I couldn't stand to watch her sit there looking empty and unoccupied for another second. A lifeless body, a crooked head, a broken hand; for that punch line, we will wait forever. She thanked me but accepted neither.

I wake up, dozing, at the bar in Daytona. The bored waitress is standing in front of me, smiling politely; her make up looks like frosting on a cake.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm heading out, so I need to settle up with my customers."

"Sure," I say as I hand her the cash. "Can I ask you what time it is?"

"It's just two o'clock right now. What are you doing here?"

I ask, "I'm sorry?"

"I mean, are you from Daytona or are you leaving Daytona?"

"Oh," I say. "I'm leaving."

"What are you leaving for? This ain't such a terrible place, is it?" She collects my cup and ashtray and says, "We got sunny skies, lots of young people, beaches, nothing's too expensive— you know, a regular paradise."

"Hell," I say. "Maybe I should stay."

"Oh, I'm just teasing," she says, tapping out the ashtray in the trash and tucking her apron into a cubby under the bar. "I'm sure you got people back home."

Waiting is what I'm doing here.

It isn't until I'm on a plane again, looking down on snow-covered fields, that I begin to feel, in

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any real sense, like I am going home. The farmland below is divided neatly into square miles; county roads intersect at right angles, and the odd clusters of mature trees look more like deserted islands than salvific oases; they are afterthoughts painstakingly arranged into the barren landscape that stretches between cities. I'm eating a bag of pretzels, which surprisingly enough to the flight attendant I chose to tell, doesn't satisfy my hunger. I've been trying to read, but the motion of this discount airliner is unforgiving and unrelenting; I can't stay focused, my attention wanders. Like the night Samantha Byrd went home, and I lost a game of Jenga to Walter, a boy so easily distracted that he couldn't write with a pen without covering his paper with blobs of ink.

Does it matter that Holly Brown once had a daughter? A picture of the two ran next to an interview with Jason I read this morning in Daytona Beach. A tomboyish girl, brown hair cut close to her head; she had large ears and was in love with horses. Once, the girl slipped through her mother's legs and took a breath. Six years later, she died of an unexpected blood infection. I read the article closely, but I don't remember the girl's name. I wrote three letters to Samantha Byrd but she never responded. Jason rode his bike back to Pennsylvania and he lives alone.

For me, time will treat this like a dream that I'm piecing back together, convinced that I'll find meaning, moments after waking. Like ice wrapped in a clear glass of water; it will stretch and pop; crevices will appear and shift; it will disappear completely but be cooler to the touch. It will be saving, illuminating, anecdotal; something to tell my friends or not: I saw a woman die. Give me a minute, and I'll tease the meaning out. If any god has marked me out again, my tough heart can undergo it. Crucifixion is easy when you're in on the joke. My stomach thumps and flops, rolling through my gut like a misshapen apple. I am going down, that's sure. The plane hits the tarmac and I stand to stretch my legs.

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James Matthew Wilson is a Ph.D. candidate in the English Department who will receive his MFA in poetry in May 2005. His poems, translations and essays have appeared in several literary and scholarly journals, and he is completing his dissertation, "Catholic Modernism and The 'Irish Avant-Garde.'"

Tony D'Souza's short fiction and poetry has appeared in five countries (US, UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand) receiving awards and recognition from *Black Warrior Review*, *Stand*, *The Journal*, Prentice Hall, as well as Pushcart Prize and Bread Loaf nominations. Current work is appearing or soon forthcoming in *The Literary Review*, *Front&Centre*, *Nimrod*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Tea Party*, and others. His first novel, *Whiteman*, received a number of bids from major New York publishing houses and will be released early in 2006 from Harcourt. He served three years as an AIDS educator in West Africa after graduating from Notre Dame's writing program in 2000.

Jayne Marek writes poems, fiction, and plays, and teaches creative writing, literature, film studies, and women's studies. Just finishing the MFA at Notre Dame and wishing for the perfect slice of Snickers pie.

Francisco Aragón's book, *Puerta del Sol* (Bilingual Press) has been recently reviewed in *Indiana Review* and *Rain Taxi*. Newer poems have appeared in *Jacket*, an online journal edited by John Tranter from Australia. He is currently co-coordinating *Poetas y Pintores: Artists Conversing with Verse*, a joint multidisciplinary project between Notre Dame and Saint Mary's College and which is being sponsored, in part, by the National Endowment for the Arts. In addition to his editing for Momotombo Press at the Institute for Latino Studies, he is also editing an anthology of Latino poets for University of Arizona Press.

Matthew Apple ('97) has been living in Japan since 1999. Since then he has taught at junior high, senior high and university, earning his second master's (M.A. in TESOL) from Temple University Japan along the way. He currently teaches as a Lecturer at Doshisha University in Kyoto, and plans to get married in August before visiting the World Expo in Nagoya. His fiance is keen about robots, too.

Ann Elizabeth Palazzo received her MFA in 1993, and was a recipient of the William Mitchell Award the same year.

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Amy Wray Irish, MFA 1998, has been published in *Ariel*, *100 Words*, *River King Poetry Supplement*, *Dánta* and *Wazeejournal.org*. Her recognitions include 1st place in Chicago's Hirshfield Memorial Poetry Contest. Amy and her husband, also a writer, are currently writing their first work of fiction.

Sara Swanson earned her MFA in 2003 and was the Nicholas Sparks writer-in-residence for 2003-2004. Her work has been published in the *Arkansas Review*, *Tampa Review*, and *Connecticut Review*. She's from southern Wisconsin but is now living in Mishawaka, Indiana.

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Dawn M. Comer received her MFA from Notre Dame in 1998. Since 1999, she has worked as a Visiting Assistant Professor at Albion College, but will soon be taking time off from teaching to write while staying home with her son Elliot. "The Roswell Diaries" is part of *Born Beneath Pedro's Sombrero, Raised in a Corn Palace*, a short story collection about fictional characters connected to real American tourist attractions. She is also working on *Life Spans and Lived Spaces*, a collaborative memoir, with friend and co-writer Jane Holwerda.

Jessica Maich is a 1997 graduate of the Creative Writing Program. She teaches at St. Mary's College and lives in the South Bend area with her family. She is currently working on a chapbook titled *Twenty-Four Questions for Billy*.

Blake Sanz, a graduate of the program in 2001, teaches writing and literature at Louisiana State University. He's had stories published in *RE:AL* and *Xavier Review*. LSU is the first non-Catholic school he's been affiliated with, and no longer having that particular kind of religious angst immediately around, he felt he needed to write it into a story somehow.

We here at the "Chris Gerben Preservation Society" (MFA 2001) couldn't be more delighted with the inclusion of his work in this journal. This particular writing is from what we at the Society sometimes call his "lean years." Nonetheless, we are excited to continue the work of preserving Chris Gerben's legacy despite any shortcomings of the author himself. Please feel free to contact us directly for information on how, for a low fee, you too can join the uphill battle, by emailing our patented Chris Gerben AutoBot emailer at cgerben@gmail.com.

Exiled in the suburbs of Philadelphia, John Crawford works as a journalist for a respiratory health magazine, spending his days dealing with hacking, coughing and mucus. He received his MFA from ND in 2001.

John Dethloff currently lives in Columbus, Ohio, and makes a living by working for an insurance company, which is slowly, surely rotting his soul while he slowly, surely finishes his novel.

Matthew Ricke, an MFA candidate at Notre Dame, is from Fort Wayne, Indiana. He has published work in the *Denver Syntax*, and writes a weekly column for *Whatzup*, an entertainment newspaper published in Northeast Indiana. He hopes that the skills he acquires at Notre Dame will help him, upon graduation, secure employment as the driver of a German race car.

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