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Everett and the Cosmos

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EVERETT AND THE COSMOS

A Thesis Presented

by

THOMAS SEARLES BURKE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

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CHAPTER 1

I stole a crystal from my mom on my second day back from China; the crystal was impressive—slight grey shading, the size and shape of a medium pinecone—but not dramatically different from the other crystals in her collection. She kept all of them in her bedroom (which she'd shared with my dad until five months earlier), on the cluttered, English garden of a desktop of her antique Federalist secretary.

It was an anomaly, that new age hoodoo altar in a house that was otherwise, every inch, filigreed, calculated, and sterile; they were completely alien, the contents of Mom's estate sale secretary desktop: dozens of crystals, incense cones in dusty bags, loose sprigs among bundles of sage, assorted candles, and five small brass urns holding ashes, pebbles and sand.

All of those things were of dubious purpose, in my mind, which is why I wrote the theft off *family-does* as the chunk slid snug into the front left pocket of my jeans; I remembered—very distinctly—Mom snooping through my bedroom, at some point, and stealing my things: partial images of her arthritic fingers prying behind and underneath my bookshelves, Mom supine on my Amish hooked rug making snow angels in a pile of my assorted contraband.

Liberating the crystal wasn't premeditated, but I did see that particular crystal (same grey hue) in a dream the night before. It'd apparently stuck with me from a few hours earlier when I'd done a perfunctory sweep of the house, taking inventory at 1139 Glaubman Lane.

The secretary was in the dream too, though it had tiny metal *folding-locking* legs like a card table; in the dream, we met up—desk, desk contents, and I—at a dusty swap meet in August, all of us plopped down among equally colorful brother and sister swap meet tables and wandering hordes of swap meet dorks wearing fanny packs stuffed with peanuts and baggies of agglomerated loose change; in the dream Mom was at the swap meet too—the new Mom, one I

felt I barely knew—decked out in a purple muumuu compromising said dorks’ calculated aisle space with her waltzing, waving of smoldering bundles of sage. Aisle-cleansing, she said.

That was my dream: me in the dankest corner of the swap meet inexplicably chained to one of the secretary’s *folding-locking* card table legs, answering not only to the looks I got from dorks as the sage smoke dissipated and their eyes refocused, but also pressed by other dorks to explain the significance of crystals, which is the sort of task I’d ordinarily shrug off, but in the dream I knew Mom would starve if she didn’t make some freaking sales. I was all heated-whispers towards the aisle—“Mom! Mom! Get over here! Quit with that sage!”—in between lies about the miraculous properties of certain pink and azure crystals. Mom was so content in that dream, so happy to cleanse—and me? When I looked at my torso it was a composite of over-inflated tubular balloons, twisted, knotted, squeaking at high decibels.

Right then, stolen crystal having had only a moment to adjust to its new home in my pocket, standing over Mom’s altar for only the second time in my life, I didn’t know the true catalyst of Mom’s new bent. Everyone assumed it was the death of my dad that spun her into patchouli-scented oblivion, but I thought her roots in this otherness were there earlier, a year at least. Truth is I only had ideas: I hadn’t been home in over two years. I completely missed Mom placing her first spiritual knickknack on the secretary, and I have no clue when one crystal multiplied into a semi-respectable rock shop.

I wasn’t anti-empowerment for Mom, and I’d never have categorized myself anti-crystal (not that I’d ever given thought to that particular affiliation); on the contrary, it all seemed to have helped her, and regardless of what the muumuu in my dream might have implied, Mom looked slimmer than I’d seen her in a decade (and is it possible for hair to actually grow thicker?). Those crystals and rocks, in a sense, were awesome: earth and glory, etc.

Disconcerting though was Mom's geological display and imagining the kind of person who would buy up the quarry like that. But even more to the point, that collection was disconcerting because I didn't need to imagine who'd own such a thing. Mom was a prototype. Indeed. Just I didn't know why.

She was raised Presbyterian, after all, and so I was too. My grandfather (Mom's side) was an assistant Pastor at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Rochester—the kind of detail Mom repeated to my sister, Sarah, and me on the thousand consecutive Sunday mornings of our childhoods, most often before church and in response to our pillow-muffled whimpers for five more minutes of sleep. And when we were younger and Mom was feeling sorry for herself—usually this was in the car on the way home from church—she'd go on about how, “My family had the minister over for supper every third Sunday of the month, for years. Our lack of hospitality is disgraceful.” On the Sundays Dad was in town and Mom released like that, he'd swerve towards the curb and threaten to u-turn so she could ask whomever the hell she wanted to our nonexistent Sunday supper. That got grins.

But forget supper: she taught Sunday school to the kindergarteners for three years, worked on the flower guild for eight years, and helped with the annual church rummage sale for as long as I could remember. She had the moral tenacity to call people “good Christians” when being a “good woman” or “good man” didn't quite cut it. And Mom would sometimes sing hymns, the timeliness of which would often infuriate me, like a windows-down *Onward Christian Soldiers* as she drove me to school.

In short, I'd never had reason to question Mom's faith.

Which is, among other reasons, why her newfound devotion to crystals—this secretary with spiritual whatnot spilling over its dovetailed corners—is from another dimension. Which is

why, if pressed to it, I'd say the sudden shift in Mom is what made me pluck the crystal off the secretary and slip it in my pocket. It was reactionary, mechanical, and I didn't reflect on it, didn't have time to, because just as the crystal dropped plum against my thigh, I heard Mom behind me: "What are you doing?" she asked.

Mom was standing in the doorframe—she wore flip flops, black leggings and a wool sweater-jacket with a belt. "Hi, Mom," I said. "Just checking out the crystals. Just trying to assess the house, the move, and saw your crystals." I've always been able to do this, to lie, though in thirty-four years it has never been tested beyond petty thievery—it was still uncomfortable, just bearable.

"Are you okay?" Mom asked.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?"

Mom was off kilter; I imagined invisible waves of negativity disseminating out into the world from front left pocket of my jeans—as though a crystal stolen speaks to the natural world like a river stone tossed on a glass-like lake.

She hadn't looked at me, not that I'd seen, and her eyes seemed focused at the corner of the room, on the crease where a strip of fat crown molding from one wall met and kissed another. "You can keep it," she said.

"Keep what?"

"I want you to have it."

I was indignant. "Have what? What?"

It wasn't the Mom I remembered—she remained so calm while I grew distant and unfamiliar, thoroughly removed from myself.

Mom put her arms in front of her and appeared to be pressing all ten fingertips towards an invisible point about four inches in front of her navel. It was obviously some breathing exercise, which I, with difficulty, tried to keep from watching. A ringing phone saved me. I didn't move, but Mom walked towards the cordless next to her bed: we should have had the opposite reactions. Then Mom executed a "Hello?" with an ease that made me wonder how and when she'd grown accustomed to having people in her room stealing things from her.

"Just a moment," she said, and handed me the phone. It was my first phone call in the US in two years—not that it was worthy of the CNN news ticker, but it was monumental for me.

"Hello?"

"Ni hao, stranger, ni hao, ni hao. Ni chi fan le ma?" Dino was my roommate in China—and the only non-Chinese I'd met who'd assimilated to such an extent and/or was sufficiently cemented in geekdom to greet me as the Chinese do: to ask me, *have you eaten?* It was an identifier though, one I welcomed.

He'd been back in the States for five months—we'd flown back to Chicago together on the same flight, actually, though my return was temporary, only a week in Wisconsin for Dad's funeral, while Dino was States-side indefinitely. Hearing Dino's voice made five months feel more like a few weeks.

"Dino, hold on a minute." I gave Mom a meek offering of a wave goodbye (sweaty palm weak but mostly vertical), walked down the hallway and halfway down the stairs. I stopped at the landing and settled on the top step looking down at the large foyer. It was the spot I'd sat in for hours and entire nights at a time—in my former life—wrapped in a blanket and on the lookout for burglars, or waiting in vain for my out of town Dad to come home.

"So, how's it going?" Dino asked. "Are you messed up?"

“Probably. I haven’t slept since I’ve been home.”

“Exactly.”

“Are you at home?” I asked. Dino lives forty minutes away, western suburb of Chicago.

“Yeah, but I’m not sure how long I can take it. It’s difficult.”

“Remember how badly we wanted to find garbage bags? I mean, the really big Hefty cinch-sacks?” I don’t know why it was so pressing a matter, but it was. “My mom has a fucking box of two hundred in the basement.”

“That teacher Xing Lao Shi from Guangzhou? We went out on the riverboat together?”

“I have absolutely no idea what you are about to tell me.”

“Xing Lao Shi wrote me an email and said his cousin in Kenosha—Kenosha, Wisconsin, you believe that?—his cousin in Kenosha is looking for a business partner. Something about selling dried mushrooms to upscale grocery stores. Lots of money to be made.”

“Those desiccated cat scrotums?”

“Exactly. Xing Lao Shi gets the mushrooms by the kilo for almost nothing. All we’ve got to do is bring them back through customs, which is the only complication at the moment, and it’s all profits.”

“Sounds like a drug running operation. And why didn’t you bring them home before?”

“I just got this email.”

“It sounds like a scam.”

“It’s not a scam, it’s easy money.”

Dino heaved himself onto projects—moved swiftly and dumbly through everything for the two years I’d known him. He couldn’t sit idle, to boot, which was probably why his half of our apartment in China was filled with an ever-expanding library of punishable-by-law

pornography and beer bottles. I empathized that Dino needed purpose and validation—that even his loneliness required constant commiseration—and I don't necessarily endorse my particular breed of misery, but I've never dug out and dug up towards community just for community-sake.

“Everett?” Dino asked—pulled me back into the conversation.

“Yeah.”

“How are things at home? How's the situation look?”

Dino meant the house and moving my mom out of the house, which was one of the reasons I didn't renew my contract with the Chinese government, why I'd come home. But he was mostly talking about Mom: she was the situation, how she was faring on her own since Dad died; Dino knew all the complexities, I'd explained them to him over Tsing Tao beer dozens of times.

“I don't know—haven't really had time to assess things. Mom is doing okay, but the house isn't anywhere near ready to move. She hasn't started packing at all.”

“And that's why you're there, right?”

“That's why I'm here.”

“Then get cracking on it.”

“Let's get together.”

“Can't do it until day after tomorrow. My folks have a tight schedule lined up—and my dad isn't doing very well.”

“I meant to ask.” Dino's dad has Parkinson's disease. “How is he?”

“He's worse than he's ever been. I expected that, I guess, but to really fall to the place he's at? It's not so good.”

“That’s not good to hear.” Dino trained me, over two years, to never say “I’m sorry” when talking about his dad—when I’d slip, his thin brows would sink, green eyes darken and gloss over, and he’d give me a speech about how I have nothing to do with Parkinson’s or his dad. Which I never had an answer to, of course, and so I slowly understood and adopted Dino’s conviction.

We agreed to catch up fully when we saw each other in a few days, and while I was glad we were so relieved to speak with each other, part of me thought it was strange that Dino and I would reconnect so easily—we didn’t part on good terms, had two fistfights in our last three months together. In China, those last months escalated so that by the time he had his life packed and was waving his final *zaijian* to our Chinese high school, he and I could barely bring ourselves to shake hands, and only did so for the two hundred Chinese students who’d gathered on the poured cement steps in front of the teachers dorm to send us off.

I didn’t envy Dino’s position his last few days in China—saying goodbye to our lives there, preparing for re-assimilation, but also negotiating his interaction with me while I dealt with the death of my father. Mostly Dino busied himself with packing and goodbyes, but there were also gestures: he brought me carryout Mei Fen one night, for the first time in two years I had daily first dibs on the squatter toilet/shower, and on three consecutive nights Dino sat in my company, silently drinking beer, while I processed through tall stacks of bootleg DVDs, playing three minutes of each and tossing out those that were unwatchable.

Dino did those things for me, but we never had *the talk* about my dad, not like I would have expected—when I told Dino it had happened (if he hadn’t already guessed after half a day of my mysterious OCD behavior), he simply accepted it. No condolences, nothing verbal and nothing physical, not beyond a head nod of recognition; I knew Dino’s reaction was married,

understandably, to his dad's Parkinson's, but I always figured he'd have had things worked out better than I did. And maybe that's exactly what I got: deal with it, he was saying.

It remains a toss up, whether I envy or resent Dino for his resolve those few days.

When I got off the phone with Dino, I didn't move and Mom didn't disturb me—I felt unbalanced sitting there on the stairs, and I was afraid I'd make a human toboggan of myself if I raised even a butt cheek off the carpeted landing.

Not just with Dino, but I never claimed to have the prescription for how to deal, how others ought to deal with me. Mom was understanding—if not perhaps a bit too laissez-faire—about my need to be weird when I got home: stealing, apparently, was in the category of weird, as was, for instance, ordering a take out bacon cheeseburger on my second night back, even though Mom had already stir fried some horridness for us. Nor did Mom comment—not at first or when it'd clearly developed into routine—on my habit of plopping down on the floor in front of Dad's giant television for meals, instead of sitting to talk with her. Mom would perch on a stool at the kitchen's island, without comment, picking at stir fry or nibbling on dry toast—a puzzled face watching me through the doorway to the family room.

Mom had never done anything like leave the country for two years, but she was familiar with the game: for four decades she'd been married to a man who was abroad six months a year. I appreciated that Mom knew how to handle my distancing those first few days, but her seeming indifference did affect me—I had no aspirations of becoming dad.

CHAPTER 2

“I’m not saying anything about your weight, Everett, and I’m not suggesting anything about you being unemployed, either.”

She came on the fifth day of my return, Mom as I knew her—arrived just after I’d descended from my bedroom for breakfast. She was in the bathroom adjacent the kitchen, door open so we could talk (conversations from the toilet were nothing new, despite years in protest). It was very familiar: Mom on the pot and me, motionless, at the island in the kitchen, unshowered and groggy. “I’m not pressuring you,” Mom continued, “I promise. Plus, I’m going to pay you to help me move.” I heard a roll of toilet paper spinning on a wooden dowel, tissue ripping, and then she continued, “I’ll pay you fifty dollars an hour. Is that fair?”

“You don’t have to pay me to help move,” It was eerie, Mom and me like this again—the appliances and cabinetry ostensibly waxed nostalgic. “Do me a favor and don’t talk about me with your friends, or your guru, or from the bathroom.”

Mom spoke over the sound of the flushing toilet, “What do you mean, talk about you? And his name is Reggie, not the guru.” She came out of the bathroom adjusting the waistband of her track pants.

Before this conversation I hadn’t had reason to worry about Mom chewing the fat (on the whole she’d been no-talk peppered with Reggie-talk since I’d been back), but the alarming speed with which Mom’s articulated toilet-thoughts magic carpeted me back to adolescence had me anxious about the Mothers’ Circuit. Truth was that I always feared *the Circuit*: the mothers—not my mother, in this case, but other mothers, particularly mothers of my childhood friends and the assorted mothers I knew only by name who were my mother’s friends, or former friends. They were hard to differentiate because they were all connected somehow, and were all engaged in an

empty-nest competition to rustle up information on my generation. They sought dirt between chapter analyses at book club, they passed dirt at garden socials: *Oh, just look at those violas and sweet alyssum—and did you see So-'n -So in the blotter?* Right then I was *the dirt*: a thirty-four year old wandering my hometown. And fascinating dirt: a griever some forty pounds heavier than in high school. Because of the Circuit, I walked the streets of the Chicago suburb of my childhood constantly aware of a phantom presence of shrewd and well-distributed sixty-something mothers perpetually on the make; like a harried bishop who'd dropped a bag of marbles in the children's underwear aisle of a department store, I moved about my business swiftly and indiscreetly, all the while sweating in anticipation of the worst.

“Just don't say anything about what I'm doing, okay?”

Mom diverted to a different, insignificant subject (something about someone's wedding registry five years ago), which was the kind of thing she'd always done—and oh how the tiniest things set us off. This surely was my Mom. But if Mom was suddenly barreling down this familiar freeway, even after her 180°, did that mean the change wasn't as significant as I'd figured? It made me wonder what of me had remained unchanged, despite all that was different. I'd learned to reject certain gifts passed through paternal lineage—oh, like a penchant for exploitation, or the ability to move unflinchingly through gauntlets of human suffering—but what about the less obvious in my life?

What were the variables of normal? And was this a normal reaction to a mother sharing her brain-breezes?

What had I acquiesced or accepted with resentment, yet still defined myself by? Independence, chiefly, I suppose, though also my sense of justice, morality, my growing list of necessary evils (mild voyeurism, isolation, abandonment of idealism, and, *ahem*, a loose

observation of a right to personal property). It was all confusing, admittedly, and I needed space again; Mom of the past, or Mom of the present—Mom O’T-future, whatever she was—any hope I had of maintaining rested on her being elsewhere.

“Those place settings, Gosh,” Mom was saying. “Yellow and green like the Green Bay Packers. Is that what you want in your home? You want the Packers at dinner?”

Jesus, I thought, doesn’t she know they aren’t my place settings? That I don’t even own a single plate or bowl, let alone an entire set of plates and bowls—painted, no less, in the green and yellow of my least favorite football team? Not to mention that I hadn’t seen a football game in two freaking years.

It was quicker than usual, but I was jetlagged, disoriented, and so on—my mind shifted to *a default* after just a few moments of my needle in the red. Apparently, events over four days in the United States had transferred China into my bin of defaults. I was very familiar with my defaults, and nothing Chinese had ever been in my repertoire before then: not in China during the forty minute discussion that led to my first fistfight with Dino, not in the eight minutes that led to our second fistfight, not when Dad died. Defaults are like dreams, both in their abstraction and in what they reveal. They act as distractions, like the memory of me at sixteen as recipient of a mid-coitus rejection from Sissy Marlowe—my default after missing the last bus from Lijiang to Wuhan (a *hen ke ai*, *lovely*, town, despite the ban on pooping anywhere but the one very public trough-style town center bathroom facility; I’d caught a stomach bug that required squatting over the trough in thirty minute heats, much to the chagrin of a thoroughly impressed audience of male Lijiang residents who made several collective offers of cigarettes to “help things along”—damn Sissy Marlowe and her puppeteering)

The new defaults that popped into my head when Mom stressed me out: my student Danger Leaf's glasses, the lenses of which he'd waited three months to fix and were just a few days old, as they were stomped to pieces during an afternoon pickup basketball game I'd joined; a midnight dinner in a small mountain town in Hunan Province during a rain storm that I spent huddled under a table umbrella with a young married couple from Hong Kong who—despite my repeated, emphatic pleadings of comprehension and agreement—relentlessly shook chopsticks at me while shouting that religion wasn't *all* dead in the next generation of Chinese; and, very simply, witnessing the three cutest college-bound Seniors in the entire school giggle then blush as their peculiar curiosities in me (their English teacher) transitioned into serious mega crushes.

I hadn't engaged Mom for several minutes during my existential interlude, not that it really mattered—Mom didn't only invent new topics during conversation, but expounded on them ad nauseam. A desire to be alone though suddenly became ants in my pants, so I picked something upbeat to interject with; I was, however, without the patience, apparently, to listen to her for five seconds so that I could find a suitable segue from a point in her ramblings to my issues.

“Maybe I will do something tonight,” I said.

“What? That's good. Not sure what cucumber tempeh salad has to do with that, but it doesn't matter. It's a great idea. Want to come to book club tonight? I'm sure everyone would just love to see you.”

“Jesus Christ. Besides, I haven't even read the book.”

“Is it really that bad?”

“You should go and have a good time. I'll take a walk, maybe. Get some exercise?”

I left without another word. On my way out of the kitchen, I forgave myself for leaving mid-conversation by quick scratching up and down Mom's back with my fingertips, like she used to do to me. "Give me a shout later when you are getting ready to leave," I said over my shoulder.

"You'll still be here?"

"Who knows? Or I'll let you know when I leave, if I go first. Doesn't matter."

But truthfully, I had no intention of leaving the house. What I needed was for Mom to disappear for an extended period of time so that I could snoop. Since I'd arrived, I'd barely had a chance to assess the situation on my own—to see how much crap the family had accumulated, and to figure out how long it was going to take to get my mom moved out and into a condo.

I walked my mom to the front door, kissed her cheek, then stood in the living room and—through a lace window blind—watched her get into the car and drive away. It'd been many years since I'd done it, but the pleasure was still there. What was in the house that wasn't in plain view? Part of me hoped to find my father's hiding places, where he'd concealed all physical evidence of his most shameful and embarrassing ventures. But in truth, I was anxious, and overdue, for any clues about Dad. I bolted the door for an extra five seconds of warning, got a beer from the fridge, then headed upstairs.

When I was younger and found myself alone in the house I'd sift through everyone's shit, though I suppose we all did that. Well, maybe not my dad, it wasn't in his personality; I doubt he cared what was in my dresser drawers or packed neatly into my closet crawlspace. And my sister probably didn't, either. But my mom? I'm sure she was as curious as I was—hell, the bi-annual unannounced room sanitations were circumstantial evidence that privacy wasn't sacred. And so

we were, Mom and I, at separate times, in each others' spaces: a dozen balls of socks piled on one arm and the fingers of the opposite hand prying up the dresser drawer's paper lining in search of the unspeakable—ears keenly aware of a car trunk slamming outside, of a storm door creaking open. By the time I graduated high school, there wasn't a single thing in anyone's room that I hadn't itemized in my mind.

But I snooped so often that I became paranoid, worrisome to the point that I used files and a saw to create cubbyholes in furniture for my secret items, which mainly consisted of cigars and pornography. I guess what I was most afraid of as a young teenager was being exposed as a pervert, which I was. I had access to dirty magazines and movies from the fourth grade on, and was *on to* lingerie catalogs for several years before that. But even with a deep seeded paranoia came an ability to filter common sense out of equations: for instance, as a youngster I thought I'd been slick about obfuscating my explorations of the physical self. Just as soon as I'd realized the wonderful things my hand could accomplish—and for a window of about two years—I thought nobody had the slightest idea why I kept a blanket, pillow, and bottle of aloe Vera in my closet (yes, a tiny chamber of sin there on the floor beneath a hanging assortment of my mother's seldom-worn garments). Though as I'm now painful aware, my masturbatory habits were most likely common household knowledge.

Not that I had any appreciation for, or comprehension of, sex, at that time. For instance, on one of my journeys through my parents' things when I was eleven, I found my mom's diaphragm; it was sitting in their medicine cabinet next to a tube of spermicidal jelly and a plastic insertion tool that looked like a cross between a jagged, bristle-less toothbrush and an oblong shoehorn. I knew the rubber circle had something to do with sex, but its shape, which resembled a small breast more than anything else, had me perplexed. Was it used for nipple

suction of some kind? I showed it to my friend Rick, who was horrified by it. Had he known, in the third grade—as he watched me handle the diaphragm, mock brush my teeth with the applicator—that both were habitually inserted inside my mother?

I headed straight to my mother's room. Inside, a quick glance at the secretary revealed that a grey piece of construction paper cut to the pine cone shape of the crystal I'd stolen had been placed among the littered new age goods. It raised my eyebrows, sure, but I had no time for Mom's games and pressed onward without hesitation into the white on white master bath.

I was less interested in finding anything of a sexual nature—was somewhat repulsed by the thought, actually—but I couldn't help myself. I started at the medicine cabinet, but there was no diaphragm, only a collage of orange and white pill bottles, salves and cotton balls, a tube of cream to treat yeast infections. There were over twenty different prescriptions, some for Mom and just as many for Dad. I didn't touch any of them, but I duly noted a tub of oxycotton and two bottles of liquid codeine.

I then sniffed the wet towel hanging beside the shower, wondered why I did it, then sniffed again and was disgusted with myself. It was a white towel splotted with stains—blood, makeup, or maybe shit that didn't come off in the wash. I never understood that about my mom, that she preferred the impractical (expensive white towels for daily use) because of their cosmetic value, even in a space as private as the master bath. And then to keep using the things once they're permanently stained?

From the bathroom I walked towards the window, looked down over Mom's altar again—what an aberration. And that paper cutout? It made me squint for some reason, which made the shrine appear to be cute—an ephemeral cute, however (remembering that beer consumption and a low blood sugar also figured into the *cute* equation)..

And even though I knew little about it all, the implementation of an understudy crystal made of construction paper seemed to cross a new boundary, and I wondered what Reggie looked like, whether or not he was sleeping with Mom. It wasn't a crazy idea, but the thought of the bed I was standing adjacent to being used for sex—with Dad, with Reggie—was shocking and difficult to ignore. My mind flashed with paralyzing images of Mom, each of which made me feel like a meathead who keeps sniffing and deep-inhaling a soured tuna salad that made ten others before him wince.

I moved across the room to Dad's closet, opened it. My guess was that Dad was the last person to touch the doorknob, and that was five months ago. The inside was jammed tight full of wool suits and pressed khaki pants; the upper shelves were stacked with white, unopened boxes from the dry cleaners; the floor was completely covered with shoes, including ten pair of wingtips, wooden forms within like turn of the century toy insects. Mom assured me (was it over the phone while I was still in China?) that most of Dad's things had been sorted. It was a comforting thought while I was still in China, though the space was clearly untouched. Even then I knew all other Dad-areas had collected equally thick blankets of dust, whether figuratively or literally.

Standing with barely my toes past the closet's transom, I was full of dark ideas, like someone waiting for dad to die so that they could nab his closet full of expensive clothes. Or Mom being completely helpless without a caretaker. They were mostly ridiculous: Mom has more or less lived independently the past six years, and who else would want my dead father's cancer-exposed clothes? My sister, for her son? Perhaps, though she has no doubt already supplied that fortunate boy with a closet full of his own fancy-schmantzy duds. So is it simple projection?

I snapped myself out of it and took a sip of beer—reminded myself that it was a time for practicality. I took a charcoal suit jacket off its hanger and tried it on. It was much too small everywhere but the shoulders, which meant the rest of the clothes were probably all too small, too. It would depend on what Dad had taken in; he'd gained weight during my childhood then lost it in the three years preceding his death. I felt in the pocket and found a business card, one side in Portuguese, the other in English; another pocket revealed a nametag from a conference on international marketing and a small wad of Mexican pesos, which I slid into the left pocket of my jeans.

Contemplating tailor costs and what my closet would look like full of these things, I remembered that I owned only one suit—a college graduation present—for a reason: I only wore suits at weddings and funerals, six times a year at most. Fitting those suits to my body would be wasted effort; I'd never wear them and was planning to shed some weight, to boot. So we needed boxes, I thought, lots of boxes. Hadn't Mom mentioned something about Dad's clothes and the church rummage sale? The Presbyterians would have boxes. I wondered if our church still had the same priests. Did Mom still go to church, ever? How about holidays? I could never guess what changed and what remained stagnant.

And as I was thinking about boxes and transporting goods to the church, carloads at a time, I found my fingers inspecting the jacket and trouser pockets of each garment in the closet, methodically. I was thinking windows down, back and forth, steeple to Mom, Mom to steeple, all while my body—of its own mind?—was frantic, searching, scavenging. I started a pile of booty on their bed, found art: collage on down comforter-canvas *Success's Final Years, Through Pockets*. But this needed to be done, I knew it, I said it, must be done, at some point, no matter what—one can't just donate clothes with the remnants of a dead father still in the pockets.

I did a fine job of transforming a neat, though cluttered closet into a disaster area. My mom—anyone, actually—would be horrified to find that was my first pursuit. Most of me was horrified, save the part of my mind that slapped my face when I was done: “Why fight it?” that part said. “You are what you do, and this is the kind of man you be.”

I closed the closet door assuming, safely assuming, that my mom wouldn't have the heart to twist that particular doorknob. She wouldn't, no way. But there was the art on the bed to deal with. I took stock: seventy-nine American dollars (in bills), six American dollars and forty-three cents (in coin), two hundred Yen, three hundred and fifty Hong Kong Yuan, a yarmulke with *Benjamin Kahn's Bar Mitzvah, April 19th, 1994* printed on the inside, nineteen assorted mint candies, two cigar cutters, fifteen business cards (eight his, seven of others), four ball point pens, five laminated nametags, and six condoms (all different varieties, none with packaging in English).

I put all of these things in a plastic grocery bag, except the currency, which went with the pesos into the left pocket of my jeans. The bag went in my room, and I decided I'd had enough fun for the evening.

Everett=soiled.

Maybe Mom was right: I should have gotten out of the house for a few minutes.

CHAPTER 3

Dino and I met underneath the red and gold Chinatown gate on the first Tuesday after my return; he'd asked me to sit shotgun on a mushroom-oriented expedition to Kenosha, but I'd declined, offered up lunch on Wentworth Avenue as an alternative.

In transit, the train south began elevated, then went underground, dumping me an hour later again above ground—in that hour the temperature rose about fifteen degrees so that when I stepped onto the center-oriented cement Cermak-Chinatown platform, it was actually hot outside; I was perspiring in my jeans and sweater, in October, cooling down only when the lake breeze hit my neck-sweat as I passed through shade. I missed this weather, the city; mobility and heat were doing me well—the best I'd felt yet; I was feeling fine.

I'd only been to Chinatown once before, two decades earlier—Dad brought me on a business lunch with a client. Incidentally, that trip was our only such excursion, just the two of us; I don't remember the circumstances—was seven years old at the time—but I assume Dad was in a predicament, or maybe it was Mom in a pickle: someone sick, Dad needed a human shield for business, one or both of my parents was feeling unusually guilty about my chronic inability to shit anywhere but my pants. What I remember is that Dad and I held hands walking through Chinatown that day—he pointed to a curved tile rooftop, and in my memory from that point on all of Chicago Chinatown was built with the same care and flourish, and held equal mystery, as the Forbidden City. We went into a souvenir shop that day and Dad bought me a faux jade dragon charm, which I still have. Embarrassingly, in some ways I can trace my two years in China back to that lunch date with Dad.

As Dino and I walked down Wentworth Avenue towards 22nd Street—idling past shops full of the same junk souvenirs that were hustled outside the gates of the most tourist infested

pagodas in China (picture the clutter of Mom’s secretary and a gross of the worst toy to ever manufactured)—I wondered why in the hell Dad would have taken what I presume was a Chinese client to this place? Dad was a very successful businessman, worked with clients from around the world, so why bring them to this area? Surely there were more impressive alternatives.

But, fuck it. We were walking in Chicago on a terrific day to be outside. Still, it was taking significant effort, to the point of actual discomfort, to not taint my first reunion with Dino by harping on the obviousness of that place—to continue ignoring the distending tumor of disappointment inside me.

“This place is a joke,” Dino said. Then he hacked up some phlegm and spit on the ground; it wasn’t in protest of Chinatown, but a bizarre gesture in solidarity of our chain smoking friends back in China (the “hhhhkkkk—phhht” hack-spit a familiar sound on twilight strolls the past two years). “We’ve got to get off the main circuit for anything worthwhile.”

“You didn’t bring any mushrooms to sell, did you?” I asked.

“So you’ve been thinking about it?”

“Not for hours at a time, but a bit.”

“Exactly. And you want in?”

“I need to find something. Right now my only lead is to become a substitute teacher—I’ve got an interview next Wednesday.”

“Anything to get back to China. Exactly.”

“I don’t think I want to keep teaching.”

“I wouldn’t teach in China. Or would I?” Dino asked.

“Then just go back. You know they’ll hire you. They hire anyone.”

I got the evil eye from Dino, which I hadn't yet seen—it was a routine joke that stung a little every time, which is why I said it. He didn't have any teaching experience before China, and because I'd had even a little of it in my past—two summers as a day camp arts and crafts coordinator (the single position the camp director couldn't fill)—I got preferential treatment from day one on, all because I'd piped up when we'd first met our new principal and Dino had been too overwhelmed to concoct a white lie; after that initial conversation, and because Dino's subsequently bruised ego affected his performance in the classroom, whenever there was a choice of who to assign mentor of the advanced classes, or which one of us to pimp out to neighboring towns' afternoon English language clubs (paying gigs, no less), I was always chosen, and Dino, perpetually uninvited, dejected, and assigned to the forgotten underachievers, was left to heavy drinking, reinventing ways to handle his dingdong, and waking up his girlfriend (of one month, prior to his departure) with early morning internet phone calls.

“Just two more blocks until we get there,” Dino said.

“Where?”

“To the restaurant.”

“You've got a place? A good place?”

“Kai wan xiao. I've got a great place.”

Kai wan xiao, that my doubt in him is a joke. He laughed about it then, but he knew as well as I did that our really nasty fights were mostly the result of doubting each, doubting of essential human abilities, the severity of which never let us fully trust one another (suspicions, insecurities, etc.)—yet we trusted each other more than anyone else for those two years. So we fought.

Dino spoke Chinese much better than I did, had no reservations, like I did, when it came to layering the languages of our conversations; he'd miraculously studied *Putonghua* for nine years before we went to China, he at the age of twenty-six.

"I know," Dino said as we neared the building, "but don't let the inner-snob come out until you try their food." Had the restaurant Dino picked out had a front porch, its patio furniture would have been in the breakdown lane of the Stevenson Expressway.

I considered "inner-snob," and as far as I could tell it wasn't meant that way. It felt like a general comment or observation, a non-specific, which was strange. We passed underneath the drip-hum of the precariously balanced AC unit on the crumbling lintel and stepped into the restaurant, and it occurred to me that Dino must have been lonelier than I'd thought. Kindness as the new *modus operandi*—laudable, sure, if it weren't for the suggestion of significant change: we were still fresh off seven hundred consecutive days of lambasting each other with insults.

The interior of the restaurant was mainland China; at that time, I hadn't been away from China long enough to appreciate its likeness, but in thinking back, when I try and understand how desperate we were right then for a tangible *good*, I'm surprised Dino and I didn't trade our wallets for bedrolls and camp out indefinitely on the restaurant's linoleum floor.

There was nothing special about the restaurant—it was Guangdong Province-pedestrian—which is exactly what made it so familiar to me: square tables along the walls, circular tables snug between structural columns, mirrors on a few of those columns, a television mounted in an upper corner playing a bootleg soap opera VCD, and on the tables were only toothpicks and water-discard bowls—for when the orange plastic chopsticks and all-white porcelain dishware had been rinsed in boiling water at the table.

The proprietor was a thin woman with a plump, round face, likely in her late forties; she was excited to see us and addressed Dino by name— *Dino* inserted without accent into a long string of Mandarin, none of which I understood, none beyond the Americanized *Dino*. They spoke in Chinese, though for introductions Dino switched to English; it was another gesture I could have taken as an insult, but didn't. Her name was Xin Hua, and although I was anxious to place this lunch in a context, before I had a chance to insert the who's and what's, Dino was leading us to a corner table, already ordering food even as we sat down.

Xin Hua and Dino were back and forth like old friends until all the food was ordered, at which point the entire restaurant was suddenly overborne by the roar and whistle of a wok moving over an intense cooking flame. Finally, I leaned in towards Dino. "You know her?" I asked. "This place? You've actually been to this place before?"

"What's so strange about that?"

"When would you—how? You just wandered into this restaurant? Of all the dumps in Chinatown, you come here?"

"It's not a dump, just wait until you try the food. And Xin Hua invited me here—we met at a public gathering a few months ago."

Public gathering? That's no Dino-speak, and it reminded me of Mom's explanation of crystals. "What kind of public gathering?"

"I'm very interested in telling you about it."

"So tell."

"I've got a DVD here for you, too." Dino produced a color-printed pamphlet from his bag, opened it up to show there really was a DVD inside—he knew I was easily impressed with

free or cheap DVDs, that I'd become somewhat of a sleuth when it came to obtaining high quality bootlegs in Pingnan (where we lived in China).

"What is this?" I asked as I inspected the rainbow reflections of the disc's underside, traced the authentic raised print on the disc's face.

"It's a DVD that explains a little bit about the Falun Dafa."

"You're in the Falun Gong?" I no doubt sounded indignant, though it was inadvertent, was knee-jerk.

"I hope you'll watch it."

"What kind of show is it?"

"Falun Dafa practitioners are being persecuted in China right now, which is one of the reasons I want to tell you about it."

"*You* want to tell me about it?"

"I do.

A strange one, even for the sometimes remarkably unpredictable Dr. Dino—I didn't know where it all was coming from. It was taking substantial effort to tread, where we were, to determine what this shift in Dino meant. Dino kept talking, but my mind wandered; a mounting suspicion inside me felt familiar, reminded me of another friend I'd been close to in college. We'd lost track of each other after graduation, but about five years out of school that friend got in touch with me to ask if I'd be interested in investing with him: I researched his proposal—a dial-up internet service provider home kit something rather—and determined it to be a genuine pyramid scheme. That poor guy contacted all of his estranged college pals and offered them the same opportunity. No one bit. Sad is that none of us ever spoke to him again, and sadder yet is that he may have actually believed in the project (his despicable father-in-law had duped him

into not only shelling out his nascent nest egg but to also sever ties with one of his only potential support systems).

The difference was that Dino wasn't asking for money, he never asked for cash in reference to Falun Dafa; there was a subtle promotion of volunteerism though—whenever Dino and I talked about Falun Dafa, starting with that first conversation at the restaurant, I always felt an underlying suggestion that I donate at least thought to Falun Dafa. Even that felt intrusive though, despite the fact that he never outright pressed me for my time and thought; Dino angled towards a collective moral obligation, and who wants those shackles?

“How involved are you in all this?” I asked Dino.

“I'm devoted to it.”

“To a religion?”

“Falun Dafa isn't a religion, it's a way of life, a practice.”

“Tai chi?”

“Yes, there are exercises.”

“Praying?”

“You might better understand me if I said yes, but it's not how you'd think. I'm not practicing a religion.”

“How is your dad doing?” I blurted across the table. Completely inappropriate, and no part of me attempted to categorize it otherwise. So many of the choices Dino made revolved around needing a constant, a rock, a heavy focus—that essential, amorphous focus/distraction. It's why he maneuvered through life at a cantor, approached everything wholly, with good pacing and confidence—but also with his eyes closed and his hands clasped behind his back so that when he collided with obstacles he was an unbalanced mess, his face ultimately skidding

across gravel until he stopped. But he never had a choice; those projects were a requirement of his particular emotional composition, and the worst part was his inability to imagine the potential devastation at the end of a total-self investment.

Had he the chance, Dino would have jumped on that dial-up internet scam my college buddy touted—not only would Dino have offered money, but given the opportunity to, he'd have stood on street corners distributing company pamphlets wearing a sweatshirt with the company's logo on the chest, a logo that was the result a logo-creation contest he'd had the initiative to advertise in the local paper; he'd have been the non-essential nut and bolt of that almost-organization. And he'd have kissed someone's stinky feet for the initial nod to come aboard.

Dino had the good sense not to respond to my question about his dad—didn't even produce a sideways glance, which made me doubt whether the question had actually come out of my mouth. Instead he embarked on a short parable on self-sacrifice and purity—what it meant to face his own history of defilement and neglect. “Truthfulness, compassion and tolerance,” he kept repeating. He'd changed his lifestyle, was denying himself all things pleasurable until they were no longer pleasurable. I didn't understand.

“I don't drink anymore,” he told me. The Dino I knew was a heavy drinker.

“So you don't want a beer?”

“Not really. But I wouldn't have one now because I might enjoy it, so I'll deny myself beer until I don't want it anymore.”

“And then it's okay if you have a beer?”

“Then it won't matter if I have a beer, because I won't want or need it.”

“But will you derive pleasure from that beer?”

“If I thought that was possible, then I wouldn't have the beer.”

We had the same conversation about food. On the table in front of us was a feast of what I had to admit was the best food I'd had in months. Dino didn't eat anything but white rice and some sautéed bok choy. "I only want to eat what I need. But please, go right ahead. That's why I ordered it."

I was already dismayed, but tipped further, towards perplexed, as conversation moved to masturbation and sex.

"I don't do it," said the man who I'd once come home to find passed out drunk and naked in his desk chair—his bedroom covered in a layer of multifarious pornographic pictures that he'd printed off on his low-dpi inkjet-printer.

"You don't do it *anymore*," I corrected. I'd hoped he'd wince, laugh, any sign that the Dino of our past had been conjured up, even if briefly, but had no such luck.

"Correct. I don't do that anymore."

"So you just stopped?"

"Just stopped."

"Just like that?"

"It takes discipline. I have to work hard to remain pure."

"But the body has needs. You don't relieve yourself?"

"I'd enjoy it if I did. So I don't."

"And then what happens, it builds up and you have wet dreams?"

"I'd take pleasure from those, too."

"But you can't stop those. The backup has to come out."

"I stop them. I wake up and stop myself."

"What if you can't? What if you sleep through it? The stuff has to come out."

“I try and wake myself up. If I can’t, I feel terrible about it.”

“Will you ever get married?”

“Maybe.”

“And will you have sex with your wife?”

“If she wants me to.”

“But isn’t sex pleasurable? Wouldn’t you experience pleasure?”

“I would try not to.”

“How is that even possible? You’d have sex and try not to enjoy it?”

“I’d do just that. I know it’s hard to understand, but this is what I’m doing now.”

“And it’s not a religion?”

“No, it’s not a religion. Everett, I’ll answer any questions you have. I know it’s difficult to understand.”

I found that I was unable to process much of what Dino was saying; we both must have sensed that and shifted to lighter subjects. In fact, we didn’t talk about anything of substance for the rest of our meeting—parted ways without another mention of Falun Dafa, though as we got up from the table, Dino gave me the hawk’s eye as I put the Falun Dafa DVD in my doggy bag with the leftovers.

The train rolled slower on the ride back than on the way there, slower than I ever remember a train going, but that wasn’t the only reason why everything felt heavy with impermanence. The pace begged for closer study of the environment through the laminated safety glass. It encouraged scrutiny. Because of time, I recognized the haste revealed through light paint roller marks of white on tar rooftop graffiti—conversely, the occasional meticulous

graffiti artist's mural work popped as pure visionary. It must have been my excitement to see Dino: why I was only now noticing sun faded beer posters hanging behind plate glass store fronts, steel mesh street corner garbage bins with divots the height of bumpers, and so, so many people seeming to pace the sidewalks in permanent recoil.

Just before the El train went underground, an after school group got on board and the empty seats around me were suddenly occupied by middle schoolers. Usually, when empty space fills with lip smacking, arm slapping, and screaming kids, even in moderately sized areas, I motor out post haste, but three boys sat down in the row behind me—sharing two seats—and the first snippets of their conversation interested me enough to stay.

“Say Volkswagen. Seriously. Say Volkswagen.”

“No, I don't want to.”

“Just say it, the last one. Volkswagen.”

“Volkswagen.”

I didn't notice what they looked like, but I could tell from listening that the boy in the middle was an immigrant, and that the other two were not. It was the immigrant and one other boy who were doing all of the talking.

“Now say violent violet.”

“No.”

“Yes. Last one. Violent violet.”

“Violent violet.”

Two boys erupted.

“How about vinegar and walnuts. Say vinegar and walnuts.”

“No.”

“Just say it. It doesn’t matter, just say it. Vinegar and Walnuts.”

In China, I couldn’t understand most of what my Chinese students said to each other—they may have been just as merciless—but at least then, as an ignoramus, I didn’t find myself squirming in a fiberglass train seat, at least not like this. I thought of the swap meet dream I’d had earlier, where my body was a scrambled bird’s nest of tightly packed balloons.

“No, nothing more.”

“Come on, last one, last one. Promise. Vinegar and walnuts.”

“Winegar and Valnuts.”

“He said winegar and valnuts!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Oooow! Quit squeezing my hand! Okay, okay.”

“I’m not saying anything more.”

“All right, last time. Now say Oprah Winfrey.”

“No, no more.”

“Come on, last time. Oprah Winfrey.”

“No.”

“Ooow! Quit squeezing! Okay, I give up, no more.”

“No more.”

“Just the last one though, this one, the last. Oprah Winfrey.”

“Oprah. Winfrey.”

“Now say why do veterans in Wyoming and Vermont wear vests.”

“No.”

“Just say it.”

“Say what?”

“Why do veterans in Wyoming and Vermont wear vests.”

“Why, what?”

I kept hoping that their teacher or whoever the hell was leading this troop would intervene—this wasn’t a new game. Both boys were obviously bright, and desperate, and because of that I felt sorry for them; it made me wonder how either of these boys, once they’d lived a few more years, would come to reconcile something like this train ride, and what the train ride represented about their families, their destinies.

It can be devastating to own the experiences that make us recognize how terribly wrong we act as children—and yet I still said nothing to those kids on the train.

A sporty version of Mom—white sweatband holding silvered bangs off her forehead, limbs streamlined in a cobalt track suit—was sitting on the cement front stoop writing in a leather-bound journal when I got home. She looked cool, which was something new for me to process. And she sat as though without worries: another first. Coming up the sidewalk toward my mom I tried to remember her ever looking so relaxed and at peace, confident, but nothing came to mind (I did have an image, but it was invented: Mom in her youth, for some reason, younger than I’d ever seen her, reclining on a lawn chair babysitting someone else’s children—but even then she was fidgety, lips tight in a grimace, outwardly dissatisfied with the positioning of a two-fold mirror redirecting sunlight to the underside of her chin).

“Sit down for a minute, would you?” Mom asked.

“I don’t want to interrupt,” I said.

“Please, just for a few minutes.”

I sat down, and because there wasn't a good way for me to disguise my interest in the content of her journal, I just asked. "I never knew you kept a diary?"

"I've taken it up recently. Reggie suggested it."

"Do you show him what you write? Does the book work with the crystals?"

"I haven't shown anyone—that's not the point."

"What kinds of things do you write about?"

"That's one of the things I want to talk to you about. Did your sister talk to you about your Dad's church retreat—the one he went on right before he died?"

"Sarah hasn't talked with me since...no, I don't know anything about it." I hadn't spoken with Sarah since the funeral, and even then our discussion didn't stray from the tight orbits surrounding practicalities and generalities—Sarah was seven when I was born, and despite occasional harassment during what was otherwise many consecutive years of indifference towards me, we coexisted independent of each other. Sarah was married and had two young children: she was busy and had long since established a life that didn't include family beyond seasonal phone calls and occasional holiday visits. I knew because when I'd left home for college, I'd sidestepped some in that direction, too—at a year into China, I'd gone as far as claiming to Dino that I'd estranged myself even more than Sarah had.

"After you left for college, your father and I stopped going to church every Sunday. Actually, I went on my own for about a year after that, but your dad, when he was in town, without you around, he just stopped going. There wasn't much discussion of it, no defining moment that I can think of—just your dad one morning said he'd rather relax, and so he did."

"Why would going to church have had anything to do with whether I was around or not?"

“From the time we first discussed having kids, he talked about the importance of community in your lives.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“You don’t think it’s important?”

“No, what I’m saying is, when did Dad become so interested in being part of a community?”

“You get it from him, you know.”

“Don’t say that.”

“You do.”

“Get what?”

“Your need—that need from deep down in your soul—to be a free spirit.”

“Is this what you write about in your diary?”

Mom stuck her pen in between the pages to mark her spot, then reached out towards my hand, placed her palm over my knuckles. “This is important,” she said. “Let me get this story out.”

I didn’t move my hand—her touch was comforting, even though unfamiliar. Or was it really unfamiliar? For a moment I doubted the roots of any hostility I held towards my mom, though also towards my dad—especially my dad. I felt suddenly and desperately unsure of much.

“When your dad was diagnosed with cancer, everything became immediate: he practically begged for surgery that afternoon, expected to transition into chemo that same night. He wanted back to normal, like that,” she said as she snapped her fingers. “But that’s not how it works.”

“And so he started going to church because he had cancer? That doesn’t sound strange to me.”

“To watch your dad go through such trauma—to witness that resurgence of faith—was one of the most difficult things I’ve ever done. And when I say resurgence, I’m not even sure that’s the most appropriate word: I could easily be convinced that Dad found his true faith, for the first time in his life, in that final stage.”

“But you told me at Dad’s funeral that you’d stopped going to church?”

“I did.”

Mom and I slowly turned our heads from left to right as we watched—and listened to—a white sedan, apparently with no muffler, drive down our street; the female driver waved to us, and Mom waved back.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“I have no idea,” Mom answered. She removed her hand that’d been resting on mine and pantomimed rubbing a crystal ball: “Whoever she is, I see a visit to Merlin’s Mufflers in her near future.”

I appreciated Mom’s nonchalance towards the mysticism, but I doubt she related her crystal ball routine to her altar and sage, at least not like I did. To me the connection meant her newfound fascination with this *other* was temporal and unsubstantial—carried the approximate value of what I now considered Dad’s faith to be worth, which was practically zero.

The movement of gears in my grey matter must have been transparent though, or at least it was recognizable to a mother. “Okay,” she said. Then she gently hit me in the shoulder with her journal as a segue into the story she’d been trying to tell since I sat down by.

“Your dad went on a weekend retreat with church when he had just about, well, it turns out it was about four months before he died. It was an all male spiritual excursion to central Michigan, of all places; your dad had been on these before, but never gave me details of their experiences. And as you know, before the diagnosis we hadn’t exactly been peas and carrots for several years. It’s okay for me to say that, isn’t it?”

“I’m well aware.”

“The men came back from this retreat on a Sunday night, and I happened to be checking my email in the den when I heard your dad fumbling with his keys trying to get them into the door, which was very odd, but I just thought—well, whatever, so the men were up late playing poker or something. Finally he opened the door, and once inside he started yelling for me. There was an urgency in his voice. He sounded like one of you kids. ‘Donna! Donna!’ he shouted. I was scared out of my mind.”

“What happened?”

“He fell onto me, dropped to his knees, sobbing, and told me that he’d felt an urge to talk about his cancer with the group in Michigan. Until then he hadn’t told anyone about it, you know, which I knew wasn’t good, but once an idea was in your dad’s head. Apparently, all forty-plus Presbyterian males put dad on a table, surrounded him, each put a hand on part of his body, and they prayed out loud, in unison, on their own, prayed intensely. They were all in tears by the end. And your dad? He wasn’t the same after that. Church became his life; that’s when he started calling you more often—I know, calling you, *period*. But by then, unfortunately, he didn’t have the means to communicate with you.”

CHAPTER 4

We weren't exactly disciplined when it came to getting moved out of the house; I was over ten days in, and we hadn't even discussed a plan. Apparently Sarah, my sister, had come by a few weeks before I returned and cleared out all the homemade collages and whatever other shit remained in her old room, but in the short time I'd been back, Sarah's several weeks-old gesture remained the only step any of us had made towards emptying the house of our past.

If anything, I was having some successes settling back into my childhood bedroom; and the number of hours I spent in the confines of those four small eggshell walls was accumulating quickly. I placed blame on the journal Mom bought me (a la guru's prescription), which I used as an excuse to hole myself up.

The journal was, in theory—and in practice, at least partially—a good idea, and I attacked it in vigorous eight minute sessions. The contents were illuminating, even though some entries, without a context, might have been difficult to understand. Regardless, here are a few of the sections, verbatim:

That one night at Club Hawaii Hawaii (can't explain the redundancy). Had serious drunk on for so early in the afternoon, was drinking with American visitors. Drunk enough to force my way into bathroom stall with seven scared kids—they were already hiding in there, and I joined them. In stall, snorted whitish drugs up left nostril from giggly kid's upside-down pinky nail. My American friends didn't understand when I came out of the bathroom and began dancing on a tall speaker; no one else was even on the dance floor. Because I was so drunk at the time, I remain uncertain whether or not any of those kids from the stall were students at my school.

One of the friends I made in China, a Canadian named Hank, thinks he killed a man. He told me so when he was very drunk one night. Told me that he'd been taking a weekend in Hong Kong and met up with some Spanish women. He said they were too drunk and shouldn't have been walking around. Hank said he was very drunk, said he hardly remembered it at all, but a man tried to rob them. Hank beat up the robber. He doesn't remember it all, he kept telling me that, but he thinks he remembers the girls trying to stop him, but can't hardly remember, that he kind of remembers being on top of the guy and swinging both fists, that there may have been a body not moving. He said he woke up in the morning covered with blood.

This is the same Hank who asked me to "check out" the Bible as a favor to him.

Sitting at favorite outdoor restaurant across the street from school's front gate with Xiao Liu and William. I was trying to translate to them after many beers. William speaks English and should have understood. My Chinese is terrible, and I wanted to share. I simplified it as much as I could. Two things scare me, I said. One: I am not living the life I am supposed to live. Two: I am living the life I am supposed to live, exactly as I'm supposed to live it.

The problem with having a journal is that I didn't want anyone to have access to the unfiltered goods, not like that, and I became paranoid about privacy—undoubtedly the result of my own probing of the house, in particular my attempts to sniff out the hiding place where Mom kept her journal.

And, something about my journal entries was really making me sick.

It was all collecting inside me, and like a maniac, after only two days of journal use, I took to hiding my journal in the drop ceiling of Dad's abandoned workshop in the basement; there was no lack of evidence about the great lengths I went to ensure my own privacy, yet I thought nothing of digging through attic crawlspaces and cardboard boxes full of Christmas decorations just to see what my mom was writing.

That became my routine: constantly writing in my journal, but also coveting Mom's version. The combination had me spending increasingly more time in my room—plus, I suspected that my frequent trips to the basement to hide my journal were becoming obvious to Mom, so that also contributed to my decision to stay put in my room. I was, admittedly, turning a bit crazy.

And other than journals, I had jealousy growing inside me, maybe even resentment. Why should Mom—or anyone, anybody other than me—succeed at reshaping their doomed life? My self-entitlement assured me that I deserved a bite: the crystals, the deflections, the forward movement. Further, I decided that Mom had learned it—the shift was not genetic, not hereditary, not as far as I could tell. Yes, chances were good that I wasn't predisposed. But did Sarah have those genes? After all, her husband, her children, her annual phone calls. I was twisting myself around very strange ideas, and those led to outright fabrications. Fact is that nothing disguised our dysfunction as a family. We'd all been bruised by bumping heads when we'd carried on under the same roof. I hadn't ever repainted my bedroom; pencil scribbles were still on the eggshell walls next to my headboard. Nonsensical: indeed I had that bug.

It was about a week and a half into my return, and several days into an escapism I repeatedly substantiated to my Mom by soulfully shaking my journal in the air every few hours

when she'd find the guts to knock on my door. My paranoia was seriously fueling my agoraphobia, and visa versa. Frightening was the frequency of my sophomoric prognoses vis-à-vis my interminable misery and isolation—oh, woe. Was. Me.

But that mindlessness was required, compulsory alone time—perhaps best thought of as a natural period of gestation, the self-loathing cocoon emerges as an ambitious moth. Or something. But more to the point, I had to get good and sickened with myself. There is, after all, a human threshold to how long one can lounge sideways in a bed doodling in a journal (when I wasn't mustering through those ten minutes of words on the page, I was sketching out elaborate patterns and designs, all in the vein of basic camouflage, then resting the drawing on my fat stomach, wiggling them both so that through squinted eyes the drawings hovered above the paper).

My limit in that room was approximately one hundred and fifty hours, or close to six days: a nice run, considering there was nothing to show for that period of time, other than a missed substitute teaching job interview and a few compiled fragments of two years in China that I hadn't yet begun to process.

Mom made a sound, a pleasant “Uhhm?”—like the second tone in Mandarin, the rising tone—when I walked into the kitchen. I must have been a surprise after my tenure in the layer, especially appearing in present condition: hair still wet and cheeks flushed from the steam shower, torso wrapped tight in a somewhat topical *I climbed the Great Wall of China* t-shirt, and a backpack slung over my shoulder. Backpack contents included a comb I'd meant to throw away, my journal (yes, out of the bedroom, but paranoia lingered) and the crystal I'd taken from Mom almost two weeks earlier.

“Good morning, Mom,” I said, and I gave her a kiss on the cheek. My goal was to get Mom to ask, who is this new and enhanced son that is I?

“Well. Good morning to *you*. How great to see you up and moving. Did you finally get a good night’s sleep last night?”

“Nope,” I declared to the open refrigerator. “I just realized it was time to face the world.” I was very hungry, but on a cursory scan, everything said organic flax, or had tiny green colonies expanding where the plastic wrap was loose.

“How about I make you some breakfast?”

I thought, why not let Mom be Mom on a renaissance day like today? “Sure, breakfast would be great,” though I’d keep a close eye on breakfast’s contents.

Mom hopped up from where she’d been reading a book at the island in the kitchen, began rummaging through the pantry and refrigerator. “How about pancakes?”

“Perfect.”

Mom had her back to me, and I moved towards the large, hard cover tome Mom had been looking at; I slumped down so I was leaning on the island, both elbows on the butcher block. I peered diagonally so I wouldn’t get caught: the typeset was in calligraphy, and **BALANCE: COSMOS, YOU** was next to the numbers at the top of each page.

I attempted to translate the following into Mandarin, though without success: What kind of road apples be this?

“Mom, whacha reading?” It was impulsive, but given the circumstances, I thought playfulness and ignorance might make the most effective pry bar.

“A very interesting section on the balance of the universe. Proportions. Harmony. Did you have a chance to study any of those Eastern philosophies in China?”

“What, like feng shui? Like, a yin-yang?” I said as I wet my finger with my mouth and began carefully flipping through the pages of Mom’s book.

“Please don’t lose my place, Everett.”

“Don’t worry, I looked. You were on page sixty-nine.”

Mom made a noise—not a Mandarin second tone, but a Cantonese second tone, low-mid to high rising, a noise the blind would associate with an agitated Hong Kong cabdriver: “Ehhrruuuhh.” An upsetting sound, to be frank, and it had a strangely revelatory echo.

“What is it? What?” I couldn’t believe my mom was about to make a sixty-nine joke—preparations for imminent shame and revulsion began.

“Everett,” Mom began. She twisted around, pointed the unidentifiably-old box of Aunt Jemimah pancake mix at me, shaking it slightly as each syllable parted her lips: “Did you just say page sixty-nine?”

I was alarmed, prepared for nausea. “Mom, don’t. Please.”

“Sixty-nine: I don’t believe it. You don’t see the significance? It’s staring you in the face!” Mom came over to me, reached towards my backpack, “Do you have a pen in here? There must be a pen...”

I flailed, twisted my back from her reach in a semi-violent motion. “Mom, get out of there!” I didn’t mean to react as strongly as I did, but what could be done? “No, Mom, I don’t have a pen in there. I don’t have anything in there.”

Mom closed her eyes and put her tiny chins to her chest, started into some controlled heavy breathing exercise.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m not afraid of you or anything.”

In sync with a deep breath, Mom moved her arms—sleeves lightly dusted in pancake mix—in front of her, brought them to an elegant ballerina’s second position. I didn’t remember Mom ever dancing? Her eyes remained closed; two more deep breaths, me watching curiously, until she spoke, “Everett,” exhale, “this is an excellent display of the chaos that resides,” inhale, “in an unbalanced environment. We were warned, but didn’t react,” inhale, “quickly enough. And so here we are.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?”

Her arms were still in second position, her eyelids remained on full display, and mom started in again about the sixty-nine. “Yin-yang. Don’t you see? It’s not a mistake—there are no mistakes. We must always seek out life’s indicators. And you know what?”

“What?”

Mom opened her eyes, smiled. “The two of us? We must have some powerful energy. This is big.”

“The page number sixty-nine, because it looks like a yin-yang?”

She nodded, *kept nodding*, her chin dipping, then ears going back with such dramatic flare that a third-grader impulse to push her down surged through me—knock her to the ground and shatter her cockeyed confidence.

“That’s crazy,” I yelled. “And stop nodding your head like you know something that you don’t. Sixty-nine is a sexual position, Mom, not a sign about chaos.”

Still nodding, “Know what else?” she continued. “Your sister’s birthday is on June 9th.”

“So what? What the hell does she have to do with any of this?”

“Everything is interrelated. Everything.”

“You’re living on Pluto, Mom. This is bonkers. I don’t understand?”

“Actually, Pluto isn’t a planet; most gifted astrologers have known that for ages.”

“No, this conversation.”

“What you don’t get, you choose not to get. You don’t allow yourself to see the full spectrum. You’re missing all the peripherals, Everett. It’s a shame.”

“I don’t invent things, no.”

“Neither do I,” Mom answered. She was calm, had—despite my own blown fuses—carried an air of rationality throughout the entire conversation (stopped nodding though, thank God). Part of me was impressed by Mom’s fortitude and resolve; but those attributes, especially in relation to such totally outlandish assertions? Mom was growing foreign to me so quickly that I was getting woozy.

Okay, I said to myself as I left the kitchen. Okay, again, as I grabbed my wallet from the hall table drawer and walked out the front door. “I get it!” I shouted at the street. No shit: I’d been slightly hasty regarding accolades and envy.

I don’t remember ever walking down Glaubman Lane crying—no skinned knee sniffles or lonely teardrops during an unnoticed runaway. I hadn’t felt close to Mom in years—couldn’t, I realized, at that point even argue that we’d ever been close—but that conversation had my body crumbling in on itself; part of me thought I was actually seeing the peripherals, or, more specifically, I was watching those peripherals collapse onto me from all directions.

In my despondency (not to mention that sobbing on the sidewalk had my interest in encountering a member of the *Circuit*—or, heaven forbid, members, plural—at an all-time low), I kicked it up to a medium trot and attempted to rationalize the previous ten minutes, sans implications. It was a typical parent-child relationship, I thought, but in the inverse: radiant with unsubstantiated confidence, Mom was the teenager selling violent, drug-fueled, drunken orgies

as *the* right of passage for any well adjusted individual, and I was the parent: not buying, thank you.

Yes, good, a scenario, I thought, and I followed with pragmatism—this is a type of relationship that does occur in nature. Stop. Breathe. Naturally occurring; wrap your head around only that.

But of course it was far greater, and I was inconsolable. Like a strongman pulling a canoe paddle across a bathtub, waves of misery traveled from my shoes to my head, and back and forth, splashing and gurgling in fantastic moments based in a surreal world that Mom probably could have understood better than I.

I blamed China.

Okay, what I really blamed was myself for who I was in China, but placing collective responsibility on the citizens of the world's most populous nation was far easier than processing and accepting.

I'd simply gotten too comfortable in China: *tai shu fu* (of the thirty or so total number of phrases I'd picked up, too comfortable was one of them: *tai shu fu*). Over two years in China I grew to see myself as nothing more than a hollow entity who moonlit as a near-celebrity.

My teaching gig was laughable at fourteen total hours of classroom teaching per week; I laughed, and so did my school. I had no office hours, no office or professional space of my own to speak of, though I did sometimes re-appropriate another teacher's desk for ten minute blocks when I was too lazy to return to my apartment between class periods. There was no set curriculum for my classes, which meant no lesson plans: fourteen slightly-varied monkey dances per week, a luxurious sixty minutes of mindlessness for my lucky students every seven days,

though even their life-break of a class, my class, was often cancelled and replaced with silent study hall.

I wasn't responsible, nor required to enter my heart or mind into my teaching in China, and while I may have spent my first six months in Pingnan attempting just that, the people I was around weren't willing or able or allowed... I don't actually know why there wasn't reciprocation.

It wasn't embittering, I adjusted. I was one night stands, so to speak, never really on anyone's radar, even when I was the main attraction. A one night stand translated into one class period at a time, one school visit at a time, one drunken escapade at a time. It was foreign, that unaccountability, and I maintained it by being my moderately competent, mildly amiable, mostly unmemorable self.

I'll bet there are several thousand young adults in Guangdong Province who remember crossing paths with a certain gwei lao (gwei lao=white devil=me), and even to this day they may still know my face; but then I consider the twenty-four months I lived in China and all the men and women I tried to know but never did?

And Mom? The house?

I didn't want to continue as, and hadn't realized I'd always been—feared like bloody murder that I'd remain, indefinitely—an outsider and the stranger, no matter where I was. Worst of all, I could blame no one but me.

The crisis was real. And the crisis was me.

BURDENING ETHAN

The night my son Ethan was conceived was nothing—maybe that’s a half-truth, to be honest—but compared to some of the other shit I have done, it pales. Not to say that it was meaningless, I mean, there is a growing boy because of the night I spent with Sarah. But one night, one stupid fucking night—not stupid in the sense that the situation was stupid, though it was in a lot of ways, but that we were stupid. I was stupid. No, we were stupid, it’s collective; it’s not like I told her I was wearing a condom and all I had really done is open a package of Alka seltzer.

I was in New Orleans when it happened—not the sex, that was in Grand Rapids—but in New Orleans when I found out for sure, almost for sure. I had thought before, maybe, that I was the father a long time ago. I had heard through someone that she was pregnant, but she never talked to me, so I figured: if she doesn’t say anything, doesn’t try to contact me, how could it be me? But I guess I knew somewhere inside that he was. I felt it, not to sound nasty, but I felt it in my balls, like they were jumping into my stomach. And if anything knows, it has got to be my balls, cause they are the little darlings that did the busy work. Anyway, so my balls knew, and so I guess I knew too, but I didn’t really know, you know?

There I was in New Orleans, living and keeping on, and I get this phone call from my parents, and they are like, Sit down and listen, and so I did. And they said that the state troopers came to the house and were looking for me. And I said, For what? And they said they were going to tell me for what. And I asked again, So for what? And they said, To get a DNA sample. Why, I asked, and they said, Because there is a girl that claims you are the father of her three-year-old son, and she wants you to pay child support. And I thought, Whoa! And said, You’ve got to be kidding me! And they said, straight faced, I’m sure their faces were as straight as hell, they said,

No, we're not kidding. And I was like, Oh shit. I didn't say that out loud, not to my dad, but you know. So then I say, Well, who is the mother? And they say, Sarah Jehnson, and I was like, Fucking-A! Fuck-ing-A! But I didn't say that out loud either. And they were like, Do you know a Sarah Jehnson? And I said, Yeah, I know her. Then I said, So what now? My father laughed like I had just asked him to loan me a million bucks to run for governor, and then there was silence. Right before they hung up, my mom asked, Is it possible you are a father? Maybe, I said. Jesus Christ, said dad, and then again with the laugh. I told them I would talk to them later.

Sarah Jehnson? Sarah fucking Jehnson. Fucking Sarah Jehnson! I knew this might happen, shit, I already said that I knew I might be a father, so now I guess it's for real. I am a man of responsibility, so I packed everything into the bed of the El Camino and I headed back north to Muskegon. Did the whole trip in one haul, no pussy footing around, just hauled ass and got home in eleven hours, all nine hundred and sixty-four miles. I was hazy; I hadn't cleared anything or told anyone, just left, and while I drove I couldn't think of anything but nothing.

Couldn't go straight to the Troopers when I got back, so I went and saw a buddy first, Tricky. It's not his real name, but you know, my real name isn't Worm either. (You say it more like *WHUrm* than *Worm*, and it makes sense—Worm: Tequila: Mexico: El Camino: my car) When I saw Tricky, he was like, Shit man! What the hell are you doing here? And we went out and got trashed, and I told him the whole story, and he was like, Goddamn, man! I remember that night! That's when we all went down to the lake skinny dipping and you got it on with that hot chick. Are you serious, you knocked her up, just one night? Fuck man, that ain't even worth it! And I was like, *No* shit, man.

But Tricky is a hell gun and he didn't give a shit anyway. I mean, he gives a shit about me, but he doesn't give a shit that I have a kid; he does give a shit that I have a kid, but you know, he doesn't look down on me because I am a father. He just told me that he thinks I ought to have gotten laid a lot more times if I am going to have to pay child support. You know, he said, Give a little to get a little. I guess I see where he is coming from, but shit, man, what am I supposed to do?

I slept over on Tricky's couch and awoke to his mom as she turned on the tube. She said that she didn't mean to wake me, but that she watched Good Morning America every morning because she just loves that Jane Pauley, then whispered, And I even like that Bryant Gumbel, even though he is black, then she blushed. Even though Tricky's mom insisted that I keep on sleeping, an idea my righteous hangover begged for—not like I haven't had worse, but you know—I got up off the couch and sunk into a chair next to Tricky's mom at the kitchen table. She got a cup of coffee and ruffled my hair as she placed it in front of me, and I was like, Thanks a lot, Mrs. Tricatorella, and she answered, Anything for my favorite boy, and gave me a kiss on the forehead.

Tricky's mom is the shit, cool as hell. So when she sat down at the kitchen table with me, I sort of spilled my guts and told her everything, starting from when I went to New Orleans eight months ago—flashing back to when I was twenty-one and with Sarah—and ending with, And here I am, drinking coffee with you. Tricky's mom sat smoking butts and drinking coffee, listening to the whole thing.

I wasn't expecting a miracle, or maybe I was, especially since things made more sense as I talked about them, but Tricky's mom didn't really say much. Maybe I wanted her to say she would take care of the kid, or tell me that it was a strange dream. Instead,

she held up her coffee and said, *Salut*: you are a father now. Bringing her up to speed also brought me up to speed, in a sense, but I was still lost. So I asked her, What should I do now? Should I go buy Pampers? She looked at me and laughed, a laugh like when she had caught me necking in her basement when I was younger, not like my dad's laugh. She didn't mean to, but her laughter suffocated me.

I told her that I didn't know what to do, not even what I should do when I finished my coffee. She said that I should shower and go and see my son, and then, in some kind of possessed confidence, told me that everything after that would come naturally because I would fall in love with the boy.

Not that my parents and I have a terrible relationship, but you know. They told me when I was eighteen that I was on my own, and so I am. My dad still works even though he must be at least sixty-five or something, and my mom works at the laundry mat, but she isn't as old as my dad. They weren't at home when I got there to look for Sarah's address.

I still have a key; they never took it away, forgot to ask for it or something when I moved out. I took my shoes off after I stepped in—learned that even before I was allowed to play outside as a kid. The house smells like it always has, like stale cigars, over-microwaved something, and rotten fruit, all fused together with mold and must. It isn't a dirty house, but anyone can see that it is lived in, like my father is sitting in his chair and my mom is at the table even when they aren't there.

I found the letter on the kitchen table, I didn't see it right away because it was partially underneath a potholder, but it was visible enough so that mom and dad could

torment themselves with the sight of it every time they sat down. It said that I had thirty days to contact the state police, and it told me where to go, but it didn't have Sarah Jehnson's address. I stuck it in the pocket of my jeans, looked through the phone book, and wrote down the information on all five Jehnsons.

I've never been to Sarah's house, but the city isn't that big, not like New Orleans. I stopped at a Citgo to fuel up the El Camino, and after draining the pepper, I walked over to the payphone. Everything was normal, but something funny was happening to me. I'm not sure what it was, but everything I saw was associated with babies: the thick wire connecting the book to the phone looked like an umbilical chord, the car next to mine had a 'baby on board' sticker, and the man behind the counter looked like he had a diaper on underneath his overalls, stuff like that. At the phone, I rang up each of the houses, asking for Sarah. I got her house on the third try. It was just the machine, thank God, but it was Sarah's voice, I knew that, saying, Bernard, Rita, Sarah, and Ethan can't come to the phone right now, but... blah, blah... as soon as we can. Thanks, and have a nice day. I clicked the phone down before it beeped.

I stopped at a diner for a cup of coffee and a sandwich before I went over to the house. I was going to go to the house, sure, Tricky's mom sounded like she knew what she was talking about, but I didn't know what to say or do. Sarah probably hated me. Wouldn't she? Shouldn't she? But, *hell*, she never even told me that she was pregnant, so what are you going to do? Around one o'clock, after six cups of coffee, I got into the El Camino and drove towards the house.

I stayed in the car after I found the place, a small house, smaller than my parent's, but bigger than Tricky's. It didn't look like anyone was home. I didn't have the radio on

or anything, I just looked at the place where my son and his mother lived. And then I started thinking, Hey, maybe this boy *isn't* mine after all. It was simple: what if she was whoring around and picked my name out of a hat, like maybe I was DNA sample number ten? But then I thought back to that night, the night when we went to the lake to go skinny dipping.

We were still young then, I hadn't been legal to drink for more than a month. Damn, I had forgotten, it was one of Sarah's friend's birthday, Daisy, fucking Daisy's birthday, only she was turning nineteen, and they all had fake id's. That's how they got into the bar. I was there with Tricky, Paul, Tommy, and Randy, and we had gone out to try and hook up with some girls, which is exactly what we did. These girls were just out of high school, and being that it was summer and all, we were in the mood for loving, you know?

We closed the place down at one o'clock, already drunk, but there were about ten of us at the bar together that were serious about the evening. We decided that we would buy some beer and meet at the state park where there are these big old dunes with trees growing on them that you can jump off and roll down right onto the beach—if you go far enough, you'll go straight into Lake Michigan.

We made a bonfire by the lake, and while we were sitting around getting drunker, we all started pairing off, you know, forming couples. And I was paired up with Sarah. She looked great, really sexy. She was wearing these little jean shorts and a tank top; to be honest, she is one of the most beautiful girls I have even been with.

Tricky got things going by starting a game of truth or dare; to make a long story short, we all ended up skinny dipping. Actually, we weren't exactly 'skinny' dipping, we

had boxers on and the girls were wearing bras and panties, but it was close enough. The lake was cold, not so cold, but enough to get the blood pumping. I remember seeing Sarah's outline, especially when the clouds would pass by the moon, and I could almost see Sarah completely, with her wet underwear barely covering her. I wanted her pretty bad.

I guess the feeling was mutual, because when I swam over to her, Sarah wasn't bashful. We were in water only up to our knees, and she stood there and looked at my see-through boxers as I stared at her see-through bra and panties, and I moved in and kissed her, and she kissed me back. We kissed and played with each other for a while in the lake, then went to the fire and got our clothes and headed up the dune. Sarah put my shirt down on the sand like a blanket and got on top of it, and I got on top of her.

Things were hot. I was close to getting inside of her a couple of times, and she wasn't resisting, so I finally told her out loud, as if she didn't already know, I said, I want you. And she said, God, I want you too. So I said, I don't have a condom, do you? And she answered, No, but... can't you just pull out when you are about to finish? And I said, Yes. I can.

Pretty soon I was about to come, and I told her, and she said, Not yet, and grabbed by butt and pulled me deeper. I felt it coming, it was already there. Fuck, I said, and it was happening inside her. She moaned; I, again, inside, and then pulled out—the rest onto her belly.

We walked back down to the bonfire where everyone else was waiting, and Tricky gave me this look like, fucking-a, man, she's hot. Nice work. Sarah and I sat down on opposite sides of the fire. I guess we were trying to act like if we pretended that it

hadn't happened, then it wouldn't have. I had a half a beer, then told Tricky and the rest of the guys that we had better get back. That was it.

I sat in the car outside Sarah's house for almost two hours going through that night; I could remember almost every detail, like that we were burning wood that had been at a campsite on one of the dunes, that the radio was playing Paula Abdul's new song *Rush, Rush* over and over again, that Tricky had told a joke about fat women and the girl he was paired off with slapped him in the arm, and then he gave her a hug to make up for it. I remembered every little thing, even that Sarah was wearing a white bra with flowers sewn on it that hooked in the front.

At three o'clock, a car pulled into the driveway, and I ducked down a little so that nobody would see me. Sarah got out of the car, and I have to admit that she still looked good, though maybe she had a bigger butt now. She walked to the car's back door, opened it, fumbled around with something, and then out popped a little boy. I sat up in the seat and strained to look at the child. He had brown hair, like mine, not like Sarah's. But I couldn't get a good look at him. The boy was holding a bunch of papers in his hand and a backpack in the other; she must have picked him up at school. I watched as the two of them walked into the house, and just before the door shut, Ethan turned around and looked outside, in my direction, like he knew I was there, though I doubt he did.

I saw him. My boy. What is probably my boy. And I chicken shitted out and took off, drove fast. I got the hell out of there.

I drove around trying to look at the scenery, trying to think of anything but my son and his mother. I decided to get some beer and go to the dunes. It was starting to get darker and I went to the place where we had had the bonfire that night. It looked like

everywhere else on the beach, but you know, just to be there. I sat down in the sand near the water. I drank quickly, alone, watching small waves lapping onto the shore over and over again so that I wasn't bored.

Suddenly, a car was driving towards me on the beach. I didn't get up; I'd already had about eight beers, so it wasn't very difficult to just stay where I was. Turns out it was a cop car. A cop looking for people doing things on the beach that they shouldn't be: having bonfires, having sex, drinking. And there I was, a dumb shit escaped from his playpen with a slew of empty beer cans scattered around me.

The cop was being nice, but then he ran my license. Turns out that I had a warrant out for my arrest, so he put me in cuffs. I didn't resist or anything, I stayed in compliance, a man of respect and accountability. He took me to the station, put me in a cell and asked me some questions. Then they told me to wait. For what, I asked? For the state trooper to get here. Oh, I said.

Within an hour the trooper was there. And after four hours in a cell, they let me call my parents—Tricky's phone wasn't working. I had to get someone to sign for my release, because I had been drinking, and it took another hour for my dad to get there. He signed. They gave me instructions, and asked me, You understand that you can't leave the state under any circumstances? Yes, I said. Where the hell would I go? But I didn't say that to the police lady. I just went out to the car with my dad, who was complaining about having to ruin tomorrow for this bullshit, and I said, Thanks dad, anyway. You can just drop me off at my car and I will meet you at home. And he asks, You coming straight home, or do I have to tail you? And I said, Shit dad, it's not like I am going to go to Canada or something. I'll follow you home anyway, he said.

Dad tailed me the entire way home. He even flashed his brights at me when I stopped to get gas, then he pulled in and got gas too. He asked me, You gonna pay for my gas since I had to drive down here because of you? I looked straight at his chest. Sure, Dad, I'll pay for it.

My mom had a pillow and a blanket on the couch for me to sleep on, and the three of us barely spoke before they went to bed. Mom said goodnight to me, and Dad said, Keep it down because I have to go to work at a God awful time tomorrow, got it? Sure. Got it, dad.

Before, when I had been snooping around the house for Sarah's number, I felt like I was in the house I grew up in, but now, it was like I was at a stranger's. In the end though, it was just a place. Nothing familiar, but everything exactly where it ought to be. I slept. Maybe I didn't sleep at all. It felt like I hadn't slept ten minutes before my dad was in the next room slurping on his coffee and asking me, What the hell do you plan on doing today? I'm not in the business of harboring criminals for a living.

I got a cup of coffee, and as my dad was getting ready to leave, he told me to take care of business, he looked me right in the eye, turning my shoulder with his hand as he stared, and said again, Take care of business. When my mom came out of her bedroom, she didn't say anything, just stood in the doorway watching me. I didn't bother looking back. I put my jacket on and got ready to leave, but she was blocking the exit. She had this look, an emptiness: not like she was going to kill me, but like she would eventually have the same look when I saw her in a casket.

We reap what we sow, she said, And there is no way of getting around it.

The trooper station was like any other police station, sort of smaller than I'd expected. The lady who helped me was Officer Ringbaum, and had she not been wearing a uniform, she probably would have been hot. But instead, she was horrifying with her sharp bronze badge and utility belt filled with ass-kicking tools. She acted like I was the fiftieth guy coming in that day to take a DNA test. I was given a stack of papers and she told me where to go. I would have liked to tell her where to go, but you know, especially with all of those weapons, so I just kept quiet and cordial.

I went to the St. Josephine Hospital in town; it's the same hospital where I was born. There were more people in the emergency room than I would have imagined, people with swollen ankles and sweat on their faces. Even a guy with a nail sticking out of his forearm who was sitting still, so still, but his face looked like he was a sneeze away from losing it all.

It was quiet in the room, except for some kids playing with a newspaper, making boats and pirate hats until they were scolded by mom. Then an old lady was rolled into the back rooms from an ambulance. She was half on her back and half on her side, and the way she was I could see up her dress, all the way from her stubby legs to where her old stockings ended and inner thighs collided. I didn't mean to look, but I did. I felt bad that I did. She didn't see me, I don't think, but I felt badly after I had done it. I couldn't get the picture out of my mind. She reminded me of my mom, except that I felt sorry for this lady. She was totally helpless, immobilized, and everyone could see her wrinkled privates and there was nothing she could do about it.

Two weeks to get the results. Two fucking weeks. Fourteen whole fucking days until I know that I am a father, I mean, know for real. With nothing to do but worry about what to do next.

Day six of the wait, I landed an apartment and job through a friend of Tricky's at a Christian Conference Center run by Baptists from Calcutta who split their time between running a 36 hole golf course/conference center and going to mass. They kept saying to me, Come and pray with us, but I told them, It's not my thing, no offense. But the Abadinas are nice people, and it's a decent job. Nine bucks an hour, five days a week; I am on the custodial/grounds crew.

Day twelve of the waiting, Tricky and I went out to the bar and got drunk. Mr. Abadina gave me an advance on my first paycheck, so I treated to a night of drinking—fopped a pile of money on the bar in front of us. Tricky is easy to talk to, even though sometimes we sit and don't talk. But there are never any awkward times when we don't have anything to say. Eventually I started talking about the kid. Ethan. My son.

Tricky, you know, I been thinking about the kid a lot.

Yeah, man, I'm sure. Still think it's positively yours?

Yeah. I mean, it's got to be.

So what happens when you get the test back?

I'm not sure, child support, back child support, and that could add up. But it's up to Sarah.

Talked to her yet?

No.

Seen the kid?

Yeah, but just for a second.

Tricky didn't ask anything more than that, and I didn't tell; we just took a drink. It was the first I had spoken of spying on Sarah and Ethan. And now that I was talking about it, it seemed both unreal and all too real at the same time. I wasn't sure whether or not I wanted to be a part of Ethan and Sarah's lives. I didn't know if they wanted me to join them. To tell the truth, I was scared, scared out of my mind.

Tricky, you want a shot? How about SoCo?"

There was an actual court date for the release of the DNA results. I had to get off work, which was all right, except that Mr. Abadina pointed out that I had only been working there for a short time. No shit, man, but I have got to do this thing. Part of me wanted to postpone the hearing, say that it was impossible to get out of work. But then there's that man of responsibility thing.

I didn't really sleep all the night of the thirteenth day and the fourteenth morning, and when I was showering and drinking my coffee, all I could think of was my mom saying, We reap what we sow, and her eyes, those sunken eyes.

I put on a tie and dressed nice so that I would be respectable for the court. So they would see that I was no dummy off the streets. I guess everyone does that, even the dummies, but I looked good. And I figured that Sarah would probably be there too. And I might as well look nice for her too. Shouldn't I?

Tricky's mom had offered to come with me to the hearing, but I said that it wasn't a problem, that I didn't mind going alone. But as I walked from the El Camino to the

courthouse doors, I wished that she had come. I wanted her to be there and give me a kiss on the head like she always does.

I walked into the courtroom and saw Sarah. She was on one end of the room talking with some lady in a suit. Not a suit with a tie like Trooper Ringbaum's, but a nice woman's suit with stockings and a skirt. Sarah looked at me when I walked in, and maybe she tried to smile, but she turned away too quickly. I stood in the doorway for a minute because I didn't know what to do, then this guy who was acting like Rusty the bailiff from the People's Court asked me my name, and I told him, and he showed me to a chair. I was on the opposite side of the room from Sarah. Then some lady walked over towards me and introduced herself. She was the district attorney, and she told me the proceedings would be starting very shortly. I looked around the room for Ethan, but he wasn't there. I figured that was probably best, in case it turned into some kind of screaming match or something. But I didn't think that was going to happen.

I am a father. Ethan is my son. The whole thing only took twenty minutes. I owe fifty-seven hundred dollars in back child support. I will pay four hundred dollars or eighteen percent of my salary a month until Ethan is eighteen. Eighteen until he is eighteen. Is it coincidence?

Sarah was waiting for me at the exit.

Hi, John. She said it simply and without expression.

I said, Hi, back. I could tell that she was nervous, irritated, maybe, and anxious to do something. Accomplish something.

I guess I'm the father, I said. I sounded stupid. It was awkward to say—the first time.

Yeah. You are his father. She paused, took a breath to speak, stopped, then finally spoke. John, you know, I didn't mean for all of this to happen this way. I hadn't planned it to be like this, all of this, it is just that, well, you are the father. And I need money to raise Ethan.

Even though I understood what she was saying, it still felt like being mauled by a dozen baseball bats. She was right, but fucking-a. What could I do? So I said, I understand.

I left with the obligation of sending a check within two weeks, and was feeling like I was being jerked around like a crippled, old hound dog. I got in the El Camino and drove to Tricky's. When I got there, I had to sit in the car for a couple of minutes. Somehow during the ride home my eyes had started watering. I hadn't cried for as long as I can remember, not since I was little and my dad had called me a "squirting sissy." I'm not sure why I was crying, it's just that I felt so fucking, so fucking, lonely.

Tricky's mom couldn't believe that I didn't ask to meet Ethan. She said it was unjust. I started to get pissed about it too, pissed about the whole situation. But then again, I told Tricky's mom that maybe Sarah was trying to make it easy on me, sort the whole thing out so that I could be as removed as possible if I wanted to be. I mean, what if the kid didn't like me? I know Sarah doesn't like me. She made me feel like I was the biggest mistake of her life. And maybe I was, but that doesn't change anything. Tricky's mom told me that I should seriously consider meeting the boy.

At work, I thought about what it would be like to introduce myself to Ethan. Hello, son, I am your father. Hi, there, call me dad, son. And then I thought about my dad, and I couldn't decide whether or not I would have been better off had he not been around. I think mom would have been. And Ethan? Would I be better off without Ethan? Hell, I even thought about Sarah and I getting married, was that my responsibility too? But there hadn't been any sexual energy between us, not one little volt from either of us. It was business, that was a business meeting. Women in suits and everything. And a bailiff, and a judge that said I owe a lot of money. And a warning that if I didn't pay it, I would end up in the clink. Behind bars. Imagine that, in jail for a kid that I didn't know I had, because I hadn't paid for the child I don't know.

Work was lifeless. This one day I was placing a piece of flagstone, and I dropped the damn thing right on my foot. I didn't even notice until one of the guys I was working with asked me if I was okay. I wanted to feel it, sort of, and I did later that night, but not right then. Maybe that's hard to understand, but it was to the point that nothing really affected me. Except my thoughts. And my mind was racing all of the time, like I was waiting for a horse to come around the track that I had bet the El Camino on, and it just wouldn't turn the corner. I was crazy during the day and couldn't sleep at night. I was miserable until Mr. Abadina told me that checks were coming out in two days.

I convinced myself that I was going to meet Ethan. There would be an ultimatum. My choice. Me and a check, or no check at all. Sarah would have to deal with it. They would have to deal. We all would. And there was no turning back. I called her and told her that I was coming over. She hesitated for a second, but gave in. She told me to come on Saturday morning.

Not knowing how much money I would be able to give them made me nervous, I didn't know how much the check was going to be. Mr. Abadina had given me an advance, and that would be taken out of the check for sure, and then there were my own payments, apartment, car insurance, food, gas. I didn't have any new clothes to wear to see Ethan, and I didn't want to wear the same thing I had in court, so I used my credit card and went to K Mart, bought a new shirt, and a Detroit Lions jersey for Ethan. Then on the way to the checkout, I saw some footballs for sale, so I got one of those, too. A quick fifty bucks.

I tried my damndest to get myself pulled together Saturday morning, but nothing seemed right, my shoes felt like they didn't fit, my pants were tight after going through the dryer, my stomach hurt from the Cheerios and coffee, my gums ached after I brushed my teeth, I wanted to go to the bathroom, stood and tried to pee for five minutes, couldn't, and as soon as I left the bathroom I had to go so badly that it hurt, but I still couldn't go.

I wrapped the football and jersey in newspaper, which looked ridiculous. I drove over to Sarah's and sat in the car for a minute, checking myself in the mirror. And as I looked at myself, I wondered how I would feel if someone that looked like me walked into my life and told me that I was their father: I would be scared out of my mind—one step away from being told your mother is a real life goat. I got close to starting the car back up and driving away, but I didn't. I breathed and walked up to the door. Rang the bell. I felt like such a damned idiot. A fool. Who in their right mind wants me joining their family? My own family doesn't even want me around.

Sarah's mom answered the door. She shook my hand, but she didn't act like she knew me, liked me, or wanted me anywhere near her home. There were toys and trucks and army men scattered around the house, but no sign of Sarah or Ethan. Sarah's mother told me to sit down, and that Sarah and Ethan would be back from the park any minute. I sat down and watched TV. They had it on the sports channel and although I was left in the living room by myself, I didn't touch the remote. I just sat and stared at golf.

Twenty-eight minutes later, Sarah and Ethan walked in the front door. She looked at me with a surprised face, like she hadn't expected me to be sitting on her couch. But there I was, looking at Ethan who didn't acknowledge my being there. Sarah told him to run into the kitchen and get a snack with Grandma. I felt so stupid sitting there.

Goddamnit, she had done it on purpose. I was upset but also in a state of weakness. She asked me if I had been waiting long, and I said, No, not really. And then she said, Well, that's your son, Ethan. What do you think?

What do I think? You make me wait for a half an hour to meet my son, you don't even introduce me, and you want to know what I think? I think you're awful. And I am getting damn close to telling you so.

I think he is very nice, I said, But I would like to meet him, talk with him, you know? Did you tell him who I am?

Sarah got a serious look on her face, and seemed dazed, by the question or the situation or both, I didn't know. She shrugged.

What did you tell him, that I am a carpet salesman? Does he have any clue as to who I am?

Sarah wasn't looking at me, but said, No. He doesn't know who you are. I never told him.

Don't you think it would be a good idea to let him know? I'm not sure I would have said so, but her unwillingness to let me into Ethan's life made it all that much more important to do so. I didn't want her to get the best of me, to let her take the money and run. I was suddenly prepared to lay it all down and become his dad. Even if it was just to spite Sarah, though I am not sure if it was entirely because of that. I had a sudden flux of intuition that told me I could be a good father. A better father than mine, at least. I wanted the job. And for a brief moment it felt like I was married to Sarah, that I could share anything. I told her that it was my right to know Ethan, and that if she didn't let me, I would get a court order that would say I could, among other things. Sarah nodded okay, and then told me to wait for a few minutes while she talked with Ethan.

She was gone for about five minutes, and then came back into the room holding Ethan's hand. Ethan was beautiful, a beautiful boy that was shy and afraid of meeting his father. I couldn't blame him. Sarah announced it, to both of us boys, Ethan, this is your dad, John. He wants to meet you.

I held out my hand to shake his, but he stayed next to his mother on the other side of the room. Sarah didn't urge him to come over. I put my hand back at my side. Then I remembered the jersey and football.

Ethan, do you like football? Ethan shrugged his shoulders. I got you a little something, a present. Do you want to see what it is? He shrugged again. This time Sarah nudged his back, and Ethan walked over to the couch. I handed him the presents and I wished to hell that they were instantly wrapped with a big bow. There was the sound of

the shredding of newsprint and then the football was in one hand and the jersey was in the other.

I looked at Ethan and he was smiling. The gifts had made him happy, I had made him happy. I relaxed. Do you want to try the jersey on? See if it fits? Ethan looked at Sarah and she nodded approval. He put it on over his shirt, and it was a little big, but he would grow into it. He held the football in his arm like Barry Sanders, and the smile on his face won me over, again. I fell in love. I got weak from love. I asked him if he knew how to play catch.

Yup.

I asked Sarah if she would mind if we went outside and played catch for a couple of minutes. She said alright, but that Ethan would have to have lunch in a few minutes, and that that was all we could play for.

I suddenly knew why fathers like to play catch with their sons. You get to shoot the shit while you play, and you get to see a growing boy try and get better, and with each toss and reception, he does. I asked him what he likes, and he said, Pizza. What he hates: Olives. School: Fun. Favorite things: Baseball and football and the park and pizza. Girls: Yuck! One of them kissed me in school the other day. Mom: mom. Detroit Lions: What?

And what do you think of me? Do I seem nice? Do you like your dad? Do you love me too? You know, son, I am part of what made you. Have you learned about the birds and the bees?

Sarah came out after about ten minutes and said that lunch was ready. That was my cue to hit the road, even though I wasn't ready. I said goodbye to Ethan, he went inside, and Sarah stayed outside to talk. She didn't say much, except to ask for the check.

Then she commented on how she had hoped that it would be for more than it was. I asked her when I could come back; she asked me when I was going to have more money.

I have come to grips with the fact that I don't make enough money. Not enough for just me, let alone to pay for Ethan. Sarah can't understand that. I have asked for more hours from Mr. Abadina, but now that winter is practically here, there is less and less to do. I am afraid for my job, that it will suddenly vanish. I can't spend any less on myself. What can I do, knock off a convenience store? Rob a bank? Threaten Mr. Abadina? Ask my dad for money I know he won't give?

We reap what we sow, right, mom?

Sarah has asked me to stop coming to the house. She says that I don't give her enough money, and that I haven't earned the right to see my son. Instead of orphaning Ethan, it is me who has become the childless father, the parentless child. I find myself dreaming at night, not dreaming while I am asleep, but thinking about my life before Ethan: walking down Bourbon Street, drunker than hell, seeing women flash their tits for a plastic necklace; sitting on the beach, drinking beer after laying a stone patio for eight hours; storming down the highway in the El Camino—needle buried—with nowhere to go and nothing to worry about, deciding where to go by the compass in my gut. And I guess I wouldn't be so sad, except that I didn't choose this, any of it. Sometimes I try to picture the night Ethan was conceived, but I can't anymore. I can only see Sarah at her house, standing in the doorway with her mother standing behind her, telling me that enough is enough.

And sometimes when I do fall asleep, I have nightmares. I dream that I am falling down a spiral staircase, I dream that I come out from work and my car is stolen, and I run after the people that are driving it and I can't catch them. I have seen Ethan drown in Lake Michigan; I swim all over the place and I can't find him. I have dreamed that I am in mediaeval times, and a man in a metal mask is fighting me, and then he stabs me with his sword and I bleed all over the place and die.

Tricky is working for a guy that sends him all over the country to do construction. His boss gives him and the other workers thirty bucks apiece each night so that they can go to the bars. I haven't been out for a beer in weeks. I stopped by to see Mrs. Trickitorelli the other day, and she said that Tricky called and may stay in Little Rock for a few months—she said he has a job and wants to hang loose for a while.

I have been getting these letters from the district attorney's office saying that if I don't pay the full amount of the child support, that I may be in serious trouble. I still owe over six thousand dollars, and I have been paying for almost four months. It is either sell the El Camino, or ask dad for money. Can't hurt to ask.

Hell no. What do you think, that we had you and planned on paying for you to live for the rest of your life? To be honest, son, your mother and I were once in a situation like you are in. And do you know what we did? We supported that child. No matter what we had to do, we made it work. For eighteen years we gave that child what it needed, and do you know what we got in return? Well, I am going to tell you. We got a son that couldn't keep his goddamned dick in his pants and ended up with a son of his own, a son that he can't pay for. So I ask you, son, would you give your son money if he asked you for it?

I walked out of their house without saying anything, but the answer is yes. Yes, dad, I would. I wish to hell that I could give him the money right now, but I can't. I just don't have the fucking money. I just don't fucking have it. And there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

I suppose it was inevitable, but the police arrested me. Ten months I have, Ten months to think about how your unwillingness to provide for your son affects not only you, but the child you brought into this world. And if after your release you are brought in front of me again, I will not hesitate for a single second to make you pay dearly for your irresponsibility.

Had you asked me before I was sent to jail if I could handle it, I would've said no. But now that I am here, I'm alright. I feel like I can breathe for the first time since I got that phone call in New Orleans. I work in the mornings as a janitor at the library, of which all of my earnings go directly to Sarah; I get to eat three times a day, though the food is shit awful. And at night, other than having to listen to Slim Terry snore, I sleep pretty well. The nightmares have all but stopped, though they reappear once in a while. I have just one, and other than that one, I don't recall anything that happens at night, I just remember falling asleep, and then it is morning.

The one dream that I have is this: I am looking at myself from the top corner of a room—I'm old with silver hair and wearing a dirty tee shirt and jeans. I am sitting in a chair and watching the Lions play on a tiny black and white television, and it is a great game, but it is snowing so I can't really tell what the players are doing, though I know it is fantastic. Then the reception on the TV gets worse, so I watch me get up and try to fix

it, but the picture gets more and more fuzzy. Finally, the picture is clear as day, and I waddle as quickly as I can to my chair and sit down just in time to see the Lions do a trick play that wins them the game in the last seconds of the fourth quarter. I see myself look around the room for someone to cheer with, but there is nobody.

Then, out of nothing, I am no longer watching myself, but I am me again. I suddenly realize what I have done, like when you remember that you left the stove on, or forgot to pay the car insurance while you are getting pulled over by the cops. It dawned on me that Ethan—a grown up Ethan—had come to see me, that he had been in trouble and needed my help, and I told him to go fuck himself. I couldn't understand why I had done it, but I was sure that I had, as sure as I have been about anything, more sure. And my heart crinkles and rips like newspaper in the hands of a kindergartener.

STIFF COMPETITION

My friend Tom had a tape in with his cassettes that casually sat right next to the Fine Young Cannibals and UB40. The title of the tape was handwritten— *For Thomas, My Love*—by his mom in blue marker.

I wanted that tape, badly. Whenever I was over at his house and Tom was in the bathroom or talking with his dad, I'd want to slip it in the deck for a quick listen, or 'borrow' it and stick Funky Cold Medina in its case until I brought it back; I even considered outright stealing it and just playing dumb if he ever questioned me.

With everything we did back then— all the shared hideousness and stupidity—I never grew enough of that particular sort of pluck to invade that space of his. If anything was sacred back then, and, admittedly, very, *very* little was, the relationship between Tom and his mom took that title.

That being said, my best friend Tom and I were two irreverent, nearly-irreproachable misfits—fourth graders who lived like pint-sized merchant marines on weekend passes, always willing and always able to find something to stick our winkies in, metaphorically speaking. When we did things it was with little or no remorse; even then, we had a waning sense of morality.

We were the kids from down the street that mowed your lawn for five bucks; we were the small-framed dudes in the park smoking pipes of cherry Cavendish; we threw ninja stars at squirrels; and we were the townies that rode around Northwestern University's campus yelling at coeds and stealing hood ornaments. We were mildly

masochistic, substantially sadistic preteens with burgeoning, though powerful, sexual appetites.

We never really got caught doing anything, and even when we did, we were still prim and proper in the adults' eyes; we would blink a tear, apologize, and go back to being like bleached sheets drying on the line. I suppose we flew below the radar of unmistakably demented behavior. Other people in our school consistently drew the attention of our superiors from us.

Joyce McCoy, for example, was one of the least grounded people I have ever known; she was the type of child authorities kept their eye on. Occasionally Joyce would work the ropes during one of my failed attempts at double dutch jump roping, but in the fifth grade, I knew Joyce best from sitting next to her in social studies—we were both in the last row by the windows, next to the radiators. In the winter, our school's furnace would crank heat throughout the school, such that Mrs. Fischer—who was maybe juggling the early stages of menopause, forever talking about the temperature—made us keep the windows open.

So while Joyce and I watched snow drifts form on our textbooks and listened to Mrs. Fischer interrupt lessons with her “Aren't all of you hot? My, it certainly is hot in here...” Joyce would take the ring off her finger and put it on the radiator, using the heat source like it was cast-iron hibachi. She had amazing patience, Joyce did, and she'd let it cook for almost an entire period. Then, in the middle of one of Mrs. Fischer's sentences, she'd take two pens in her hand like chopsticks, pick up the suspiciously cool-looking ring, and drop it down the shirt collar of the poor, unsuspecting boy in front of her, who'd end up with circular third degree burns from his neck to the small of his back.

Joyce McCoy ended up in a juve home because of a stunt she pulled the summer after fifth grade. She stole a school bus and drove across Howard Street into Chicago. She was tiny, and because she couldn't see to steer and press the accelerator at the same time, she crashed into a streetlight. That was brass, beyond our scope.

Even though Joyce was small, she could beat up all the boys, all of them except Bradley Jones, who was big and mature—he had a mustache when we left elementary school. Bradley said he'd had sex with Joyce in the boy's room in the fifth grade—a story he recounted to our gym class in the locker room on several occasions while we changed into our polyester shorts and flung heavy, wet paper towel balls at each other.

Sex for Tom and me, in the fifth grade, wasn't quite a reality. It wasn't for lack of an entire library of videos and magazines at our disposal, to teach us—but we definitely weren't getting any real action, not like Bradley was.

Tom and I spent a lot of time with a buddy of ours, Matt, who lived near us. Matt's dad had a taste for pornography, which was great because Tom, Matt, and I did too. Tom and I spent, I would guess, well over half of our fifth grade afternoons at Matt's perusing movies and comparing raunchy letters to the editors.

Both of Matt's parents were lawyers and worked late. Babysitters never lasted long, never spoke English very well, were always afraid of Matt's misanthropic older brother and the family's neglected golden retriever; basically, we had a house to ourselves to learn about sex.

Assumptions about sex when I was in the fifth grade: it is unlikely, but possible, that if you order an extra large super bell pepper pizza, it will be delivered on roller skates by an eighteen-year-old blond in short shorts and a tank top who will be happy to

provide oral sex before she is sodomized. It's unlikely, but possible, that there are pay per view competitions where two women go to opposite ends of a boxing ring and have a blowjob competition to see who can make the man ejaculate first. Sure, we knew characters like Cynthia Silk Throat and Tammy the Tongue were just bits from a movie, but what if? If there was, surely the Don Kings of the industry would always be on the lookout for men willing to provide the apparatus for these women to compete with.

Exposure to such things made chronic masturbation a necessity, so I set up a little chamber in my closet in the fifth grade. It was crude, but one of the only personal spaces I could find; I shared a bathroom with my mom and the lock didn't work. The closet was cozy—I had a soft cotton blanket sprawled on the floor—and I'd climb underneath my blazer and my parents' nonessential garments, pick a season from my Victoria's Secret catalog collection, depress three or four portions of intensive care lotion in my hand, and go to town. For the amount of time I spent in that closet, who knows what my parents must have thought. I haven't yet asked their opinion in my search for insight in this matter.

I didn't get my first kiss until a year later and— even though we were in, or at least on the fringes, of the popular crowd— Tom and I didn't get much attention from the ladies. We were nothing special to look at: two pudgy, pasty kids with almost-cool hand me down t-shirts from our brothers and French-rolls on the cuffs of our jeans. We both had buzz cuts, Tom's accented with long, skater bangs that he sometimes crimped, mine with a mouth full of steel correcting my gnarled smile, the result of an upside-down, backwards bicuspid.

But that we weren't paid much attention to didn't mean we didn't pine over the girls to no end. We got to the point of writing our favorite young ladies in our class anonymous love letters. Love letters? Probably those girls, even today, wouldn't consider any part of them romantic.

We used a typewriter to maintain anonymity, and our recently acquired expertise on talking sexy to women, vis-a-vis the XXX, to woo them. They were full of "I want to press your... and stick my... I want to shoot... grab handfuls of your hair... lots of foreplay before... want to eat..." And each letter ended, "Please don't show this to *anyone* because then I'll be too embarrassed to tell you who I am. Love always, your secret admirer."

We thought it was great, wrote to six or seven different girls, staying after the bell to stick the envelopes through the ventilation slots in their lockers. Twice, before class started and in our presence, blushing girls meekly handed letters over to Mrs. Fischer saying that their moms had asked that they show them to her. Mrs. Fischer read the letters while she wiped the sweat off her forehead and neck with a handkerchief, but she never made anything of them. Those letters might have been a bit explicit for her to deal with, a bit too visual for our innocent classmates.

Mrs. Fischer and I had a decent relationship—I think she liked me, despite my lack of motivation. Starting with the first month of the fifth grade, I decided that I wasn't going to do any homework. I didn't do a single assignment in any class. There was a chart on the wall of Mrs. Fischer's classroom that was supposed to help us monitor our missing assignments, and my column was empty. I got to the point of simply avoiding

that part of the room, throwing out garbage in the hallway instead of using the trash bin on the carpet just under that looming poster board.

Matt never worked on the love letters with Tom and me, but Matt and I had those barren columns in common. There were the only two completely empty slots in the class, and they were ours—even Joyce managed to get her vocabulary work and history sketches turned in.

It's easy to not do homework, but consistently avoiding homework responsibilities is work in itself. School systems have ways of dealing with underachievers, so Matt and I would compare strategies on deceiving our parents and teachers. We'd give each other the heads up phone calls when letters were sent home so that we could intercept them. We'd practice our somber, repentant responses for Mrs. Fischer: "Uh, yeah, Mrs. Fischer, they got that letter all right." Sigh. "Yeah, they got the other letters, too. They said this time, though, I'd better really shape up. Shape up or ship out." Sigh. "I'll get the work in as soon as it's finished; I'm grounded until I do."

And after school, instead of hitting the books like we'd promised Mrs. Fischer we'd do, Tom, Matt, and I would go over to Matt's house and feed our brains on *The Confessions of a Teenage Nymphomaniac* or *Hot and Saucy Pizza Girls*.

We devised ways to cheat on tests. Like on spelling quizzes we'd write the required list on a piece of paper, pressing our ball point pens down hard so that they embossed the sheet underneath it. We handcrafted elaborate crib sheets for math class and history tests. Sometimes we took notes down in light pencil on our enamel desktops, licking our fingers and smearing the evidence away as soon as we passed in our papers.

It did catch up with me though, the not doing homework, and one day my math teacher—unimpressed with my failure to achieve greater things after even a fourth letter home—called my mom and had her come to school for a three-party conference. I don't think my math teacher, to her credit, brought up the letters, and neither did Mrs. Fischer; I sat at home the following weekend and caught up on half a year's work in seventy-two hours. Matt never had his parents called in; maybe my ill fate had rattled his conscience, or maybe it was too difficult for them to take off from work.

But as much as Matt was a part of Tom and mine's lives, Tom and I never quite ceded our duo for a trio. Tom and I were TNT: ready to *explode!* (and yes, it's nauseating to say, more gut-wrenching to know we actually yelled it out from time to time). Matt felt left out sometimes—Tom and I made a point of ostracizing him daily.

One of the idiosyncrasies of Matt's and my relationship, for example, was that every day when we walked home from school, I pushed him into a patch of pricker bushes. I outright tackled him on some days, caught him off guard on others, but no matter the means or circumstance, he ended up writhing awkwardly in the core of the same thorny bush.

He'd seethe, no doubt about that. And Tom and our other friends would stand around laughing. He was defenseless against me. His older brother, Michael, was an inept oddball, whereas my older brother, Alex, was a dexterous and strong adversary. I learned a lot about distributing pain from Alex.

Alex taught me about charley horses: any leg-numbing blow to the thigh. He was merciless; sometimes he'd use his fist, which would hurt; other times he got fancy and used a technically difficult elbow jab, which was an effective, if not impressive,

maneuver; most often, though, he'd rear his leg back and explode his kneecap into the flesh of my thigh- the most painful, the most debilitating, and the sneakiest move in his arsenal.

Notwithstanding my own aversion to being the recipient of Charlie horses, I passed them out with wicked abandon, usually during gym class so that we could all—because of our gym shorts—watch for the signs of nascent bruises that would eventually blossom to the size of a softball, change the skin to deep blues and the color of spilled coffee on paper. I once gave Tom a monster Charlie horse ten minutes before our required half-mile physical education test, for which he has never forgiven me.

Again though, we'd get away with it. In the middle of a field where we were supposed to be playing super soccer, we'd circle around a guy who was rolling around on the ground gripping his thigh, tearing from pain and embarrassment, and the gym teacher wouldn't take notice. The creepy gym teacher would be telling raunchy, tasteless jokes to the girls in our class, oblivious and uninterested in our endeavors.

We'd booty-bop each other in gym class, too: pick an unsuspecting victim about twenty yards away and fall into an all out sprint. Stutter step as you approach, face the back of your victim as if he's a high jump pole, then leap into the air, twist your torso, and let your entire body weight fall from your butt onto their shoulder blade. If all goes as planned, the victim will crumble to the ground, have mild but instant injuries, and be short of breath. Cheers of reverence and adulation from different parts of the sports field will fall upon you.

Not everything Alex taught me was as innocuous though. He taught me claustrophobia, that feeling of helplessness that accompanies being pinned or confined

against your will, sometimes for long periods of time. I'd squirm and kick my legs to try and free myself from Alex's grip, but with those three years he had on me, he was always too big for me to contend with.

One time he and a friend were playing Atari in our family room, and I sat down on the floor to watch. I suppose their heated session of shuffle puck wasn't engrossing enough, because they turned their attention to me. As per the normal sequence of events, they pinned me down and roughed me up a bit. Then they got creative. They were thinking in terms of TV's inventive, never-at-a-loss icon Macgyver: What've we got? This old blanket, that couch, a television, the Atari, and a kid? They unfolded a thick, scratchy blanket, put me horizontally at one end—one of them pulled my legs straight while the other yanked my arms up over my head—and rolled me up like a tight cigar. They tore the cushions off the couch, tossed me onto the loose change and gum wrappers, piled the cushions back into place, sat on top of me, and idly resumed their game of shuffle puck with a screaming, hyperventilating kid underneath them.

I wasn't always a pushover though. I was a fighter, got scrappier after each torture session. Like after the couch incident; later that same day my brother was picking on me on the front lawn. I was pinned down—his knees on top of both my wrists and shoulders at once—and he was flicking my ears so that they stung. He was dripping a thick stream of mucus-infused saliva from his mouth towards my face and slurping it back up before it filled my eye socket. Incidentally, he's let it drop on a few occasions. Frustrated, I did the only thing I could—I opened my mouth, heaved my face at his crotch, and bit what I caught between my teeth for all I was worth.

He wailed, shrieked, screamed bloody murder, hopped off me, and ran around the yard like he was possessed. I was oddly satisfied. My mom, at the shrieks, ran out the front door to see what was the matter. She took my brother inside and made him show her the marks, I guess to see if he needed to go to the hospital. He didn't.

My parents scolded me. Alex was disgusted, kept asking me how I could conceive of doing something so horrific, how I could not understand the unspoken off-limits always respected during male to male combat. It was an awkward feeling, but I knew it'd be a little while before he did anything to me again. And it was. Not forever, but for a short time; at least, I suppose, until he was no longer reminded of my inner strength every time he peed.

As much as Alex beat the hell out of me, he was still my older brother and had brotherly duties. He protected me from a bully once, said he'd take care of him, and did. As fate would have it though, years later I made friends with that bully in high school; he died about a month after our re-acquaintance, when he was a senior in high school, during a drunken drag race gone horribly sour.

On another occasion, Halloween in the fifth grade, Tom and I—dressed as Bob and Doug McKenzie from the TV show SCTV and the movie *Strange Brew*—were confronted on the street by six older boys. These guys were dressed, very convincingly, as thugs: ski masks, baseball bats, dark shirts, lengths of iron chains, sawed off broomsticks with grip tape on the handles. They circled us and pulled us off the sidewalk into the walkway between two houses, and told us they wanted our heavy pillowcases full of candy. We whimpered and pleaded, like pussycats, but then one of the guys said,

“Hey, that’s Alex’s little brother. Hey, kid, we were just messing with you. We don’t really want your candy.”

Tom’s older brother, Franz, is the same age as Alex, but none of those guys recognized Tom as anyone’s younger sibling. Not that Alex would have necessarily been roughing up youngsters—other than me—for candy, but I guess he had a wider ring of friends than Franz, was less constricted. Franz had a different relationship with Tom, was in a much different place.

Rita died on Sunday at Evanston Hospital after a five-year battle with cancer. She is survived by her loving family: her husband, Eberhard, a German chemist who teaches at Northwestern University; her sons, Franz-a 7th grader at Haven Middle School, Thomas- a 4th grader at Orrington School; and her daughter, Catherine- a 1st grader at Orrington School. Services will be...

Tom’s family lived near Evanston Hospital, which has one of the best cancer treatment centers in the world—the place his mom died the year before. His house, to be exact, was directly across the street from the automobile entrance to the emergency room. One day during winter break from fifth grade, Tom and I decided to make a snow fort on his front lawn so we could throw snowballs at passing cars. The hospital entrance is on a busy street, which meant lots of moving targets; and because the emergency room was right there, cars would slow down and sometimes stop while they were turning in, and we’d nail them.

We made about a hundred ice balls and started flinging the things at every car that passed. It wasn’t the brightest plan, as our fort concealed nothing but our faces. But “TNT” had a blast with all the ducking down, the laughing, and the high fives. It was

great, until an oversized sedan that we'd pegged with almost a dozen ice balls stopped just after turning into the hospital's driveway. An old man in a ragged fox fur cap jumped out, stormed at us, stomped down our fort, and told us his wife was very sick and that we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. He asked whether the house we were in front of was ours? "Uh, no. We live a few blocks down and towards the lake." He mumbled something, then ran back across the street and gunned it towards the emergency room.

We ran off, and in case the old man came back to get us, we doubled back through the alley and hid out in the crawlspace under Tom's porch with their black lab, Shadow, picking through the hay bail insulation that made Shadow's home.

When we went into the house, Franz was watching television, and he was excited to hear the details as they poured out. Franz was very kind. Alex would never have been as anxious to know about our little accomplishments, but Franz, he was the supportive older brother; a few years later, he'd be the one to buy us beer until we got fake IDs.

Sometimes we'd hang out with Franz like he was one of us, and he never let on that he was embarrassed to be with guys three years younger. Franz was cool because he had nun chucks, a samurai sword, throwing darts, *Soldier of Fortune* catalogs, a collection of hatchets, b-b guns, and sixteen inch survival knives that he'd let us play with. He would demonstrate how to properly throw a ninja star at a target, which was often a picture of a supermodel taken from a fashion magazine that was stuck into a tree with a buck knife.

A live animal had a fifty-fifty chance of survival if it found its way into the backyard during a target practice. If the thing lived, it wouldn't have been because of a lack of effort.

Franz was the one who showed us the pleasures of riding our bikes through the Northwestern University campus. For some reason, many of the buildings on campus—the ugly ones that were postmodern at some time—were constructed with long, steep ramps instead of stairs: perfect for fearless preteens to rush down, fun for weaving in and out of daydreaming college students on, great for whipping around blind corners and nearly colliding with pedestrians at reckless speeds.

But it was peaceful there, too. The landfill extends the campus out into lake Michigan, and there's a bike path following the shore that we'd ride on when the weather was nice. Once, Tom, Franz, and I were taking a breather on the boulders that made the landfill's breakwater, looking out on the lake—sitting, as we always did, next to the rock with the painting of a naked, well-proportioned woman on it—and some older kids from school rode over and took Tom's and mine's bicycles. Tom and I looked immediately to Franz, and he had this helpless expression on his face. But he got on his bike and pedaled after them. Tom and I ran to catch up.

When we got to where Franz had caught up with the three guys, they were calling Franz a stupid, white mother fucker. The tension was foreign to me, and to Tom, too. Franz just kept asking for the bikes back, angry but scared. "Just give them their bikes, man. Just give them back." One of the guys unfolded the blade on a small Victronox pocketknife and said, "Take your fucking bikes, white boy." Then they got on their own bikes and rode off.

None of us said anything, just started riding home. Franz, though, began to sob, and then he became enraged. "Man, those fucking niggers." It was the first time I'd ever heard someone use the word nigger. He was grimacing, crying, shaking his head back

and forth, standing straight up on his pedals and riding hard. “Those fucking niggers, man. Those fucking niggers. Why the fuck do they have to do that?” Tom tried to say something encouraging and loving to his brother, but Franz was inconsolable. I was confused, and at the time I chalked Franz’s racism up to his German background—the asinine notion that all Germans still had some genetically unalterable Third Reich tendencies.

Franz sometimes hung out with Michael, Matt’s older brother. Michael is the misanthrope babysitters feared. We feared him too, but in a different way. We feared him for his strangeness. Michael hated his parents. He would walk around the house spitting on the carpet and cursing wildly as he rubbed in the wet spots with his heavy combat boots. He’d barge into our porn viewings, unwrap one of his dad’s condoms, blow it up like a balloon, then forcefully, though awkwardly rub it all over Matt’s face and mouth until one of the metal edges of Matt’s braces would pop it. He’d expound on the affairs of the government, call us faggots, sometimes he’d kick their dog, Kate, in the head, and other times he’d wiggle around on the carpet with her like they were lovers.

But Matt, and especially Michael, had it bad in that household. Their dad was a large man, with a huge, swollen belly, and he intimidated with his size, voice, and diction. He treated us like we weren’t kids.

Matt had a sleepover birthday party in the fifth grade. Tom and I were there, Michael invited Franz so he’d have a friend, and Matt made the gutsy move of inviting five or six boys from a slightly higher social echelon to join us. The party was fun, pizza and basketball, and as the night got later, we hyped ourselves up on Jolt Cola and Now & Laters to prepare for the eight hours of movies we’d rented. After *The Goonies* and

Revenge of the Nerds, at about midnight, we started flipping through the cable channels. Late night Cinemax was showing an interesting film. It was soft-core porn, lighter than the stuff we were used to, but still pretty good.

A naked man had lifted and was holding a naked woman up his arms—a kind of backwards piggyback ride—and they were doing it that way when Matt’s dad barged into the room. “Jesus Christ. All right, Matt, give me my goddamned videotape.” Ten pale faces shot back and forth between Matt and his dad.

“It’s not your tape, Dad. See? It’s not a tape.” Matt pressed eject on the VCR and the tape chamber popped up empty. “See Dad, it’s on TV.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.” And Matt’s dad left, slamming the door behind him, and leaving us to continue our research on typical sexual positions.

I’ll admit though, that what confused me the most at the time—what was the most disconcerting about the situation—was that Matt’s dad didn’t recognize that the movie wasn’t from his library. I would have known, right away, that it wasn’t; I knew almost every scene of every movie he owned.

Matt’s dad had an long cherry red ’68 Chevy convertible that he loved to drive us around in with the top down, that is, on the few occasions that he did. He took Matt, Michael, Tom, and me out to dinner in that car once in the fifth grade, and I knew from the beginning that the night was going to end badly, even before we left. We were all in the driveway, sitting in the car waiting for Michael, and his dad became impatient. He honked the horn repeatedly, obnoxiously. Then he yelled at the house, as loud as he could. “Michael! Get your fat fucking ass down here! You’ve had time to jerk off three times and take a shower! Now get the fuck in this car!”

Dinner was tense, but the food was good. We were at an expensive steak house. Conversation was stiff, and even then I knew there was something completely different about Matt's dad, the way he didn't ask Tom or me questions like other parents did, the way he swore at the table and degraded his sons in front of us. Michael stormed from his seat at the table twice, and his dad didn't let him finish his dinner.

When we got back from the restaurant, Michael immediately hopped on his bike and took off, and Tom, Matt, and I went up to the third floor to where Michael's and Matt's bedrooms were. As we often did, especially when we knew he wouldn't be back for some time, we began to snoop through Michael's stuff. Matt's dad yelled for Matt to go downstairs, and when he did, Tom and I found a *Penthouse* under a pile of Michael's dirty laundry.

It pleased us, held our attention, got us to mill around for ten minutes and drool like morons, anyway. But when we got to the centerfold, the pages had been plastered together with the dried remains of one of Michael's pleasure sessions. So Tom and I, knowing full well the brilliance and rarity of such a revolting item, decided to put it to use.

When Matt came back up, I got on the weightlifting bench and pretended that I was too weak to bench press the bar with no weights on it. I struggled, swore that the steel was too damn heavy. Just as I'd hoped, Matt started to taunt me.

“You can't lift that? You pussy.”

“Let's see you do it. You can't do it; this fucking thing is *heavy*.”

“Get out of the way.”

Matt started to bench press the bar, over and over, very quickly, laughing, smirking, reminding me what a weakling I was. But that's when I bent over him and put all my weight on the bar, on his chest, holding him firmly in place. Then Tom came in from the other room, flipped the magazine to the soiled centerfold, and rubbed it all over his face. Then the two of us bolted, lunged down the stairs, busted out the front door and ran all the way to Tom's house. As we twisted around the banister at the third floor landing, we could hear Matt piecing things together: "What the...? Huh? Oh, God!"

Matt's dad called Tom's house ten minutes later, and even though the receiver was to Tom's ear, I could still hear the strings of profanity and disgust being dealt our way. "What an asshole," Tom and I giggled after he hung up the phone. But we did still feel badly, for Matt.

There were really good people in my fifth grade class, too; they weren't all doing the things Tom and I were, I don't think. A girl, Rebecca, was one of them. She was kind, and pretty, and thoughtful, and always did her homework, and was smart, and wore pressed blouses with ruffles, and of course we resented the hell out of her. Rebecca and I also went to Sunday school together, and she was the one student who seemed to really believe.

We went on a school field trip in the fifth grade to Camp Timberlee—a Christian camp in the summer, mostly secular for our purposes—for a week of outdoor adventure and bonding.

Rebecca had cancer. At first it was just in her right foot, so they cut that off. Then it sprang up in her right thigh, so that went too, and she used crutches and wore a prosthetic appendage. By the time we were off to Camp Timberlee though, Rebecca had

stopped going to school. The cancer had spread down her left thigh, and she was just two arms and a torso rolling around in a wheelchair. Then it was spreading into her organs.

Even though Rebecca wasn't attending classes, she came on the trip anyway. Her mom drove her up separately, and when Rebecca joined us at lunch on the first day, she repeatedly told us about the prank she and her mom had pulled on the way up: they'd paid the toll for the car behind them at the tollbooth, and the driver of that car had been so shocked that they sped past Rebecca and her mom on the highway, waving and honking their horn.

Apparently, Rebecca was the kind of girl who dies of cancer when she's in the fifth grade.

It was raining on our fourth day at Camp Timberlee. A group of us were walking to dinner, and we were being smart asses. "Mudder Fudder" we were saying. "That guy's a mudder fudder! Mudder fudder, mudder fudder, mudder fudder!" Then I got bold and said, loud enough for the entire group to hear, "It's not mudder fudder, it's mother fucker, you mother fuckers!"

One of the bible beaters who'd facilitated our trust walk that afternoon came over to us. "Who said that?" I was feeling some mettle, proud that I'd said what others had been afraid to, so I answered quickly and directly. "I did." The man took me firmly by the collar and marched me to a bench. He sat me down, then sat himself next to me. There we were, sitting in the rain without coats or ponchos, and he began his speech, which I have no doubt he believed would change my life. His voice and demeanor suggested that his words would have that kind of effect.

“What you said back there, that’s a nasty thing to say. A really nasty, devilish thing.”

“I know.”

“Do you know what kind of creature says that kind of word? Do you?”

“No.”

“Rats.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Rats. Rats use that kind of language. And do you know where rats live?”

“Where?”

“Rats live in the sewer. Rats are dirty, dirty creatures, they live in the sewer, and they use that kind of language.”

“Oh.”

“Are you a rat?”

“No?”

“Do you want to be a rat? Do you want to live in the sewer?”

“No.”

“So are you going to ever use that kind of language again? Are you going to live like a rat?”

“No. I don’t want to be a rat.”

“That’s good. Very good.” Then he gave me a few pats on the back and sent me to the dining hall.

Seven words continuously resurfaced in my vocabulary over the next week, two of them more than the others: mudder, fudder, dirty, sewer, rat, mother, and fucker. I

doubt that that counselor had any idea that his thoughtful discourse would turn into an excuse to curse even more.

There was one week of school between Camp Timberlee and spring break. On the Wednesday of that week, Tom and I got into a nasty fight. I was jealous of Tom, at that time, because he was going with Matt's family to Sanibel Island for spring vacation, and I was stuck going to a family reunion in southeastern Indiana.

That Wednesday after school, Tom, Matt, and I were walking around our neighborhood bouncing a basketball and telling jokes with two girls—tomboys we'd grown up with, though they were on the verge of becoming gorgeous.

Somewhere along the way, I made a crack about Tom's penis: "What's up with that tic tac dick of yours, man?" Of course we all had tic tacs, relatively speaking, since our only exposure to the standard size of mature penises was through the donkey dong lens of *Stiff Competition* and *Learning to Ride—the Hard Way*.

So I threw out the insult, we laughed, the girls giggled and whispered to each other, and Tom picked up the basketball and flung it at me. He missed, and the ball sailed across the street and into some bushes. Matt yelled at Tom to go and get his basketball, and I made a few more comments about Tom's penis while he was gone. Then, while I swaggered and chuckled, the basketball was suddenly bouncing off the side of my face, and my eardrum started to buzz, moan, then squeal like a siren.

There was a brief round of catch the wild turkey, but I managed to snag the back of his shirt with some of my fingers. I stopped him, put one hand on his waist and the other on his shoulder, and threw him to the ground as hard as I could. I got on top of him, and just before I started pounding, I stopped. I gave him a speech instead, talked about

how I didn't want to hurt him because he was my friend, that friends don't do that to each other. With the super-fuel of my self-righteousness, I didn't punch him even once.

But while I hovered over Tom and delivered my soliloquy, he was cringing, holding his shoulder, crying. I had this bad feeling Tom was really hurt. It turned out I'd broken his collarbone, and he spent his week on Sanibel Island with a big white air cast strapped around his torso, his arm completely immobilized. He wasn't allowed to swim in the ocean, never mind those tan lines.

Meanwhile, I was in Indiana with my relatives. One night of that week, we were all in my grandparent's hotel room, the adults drinking and the kids doing very little. I was watching my grandmother as she sat on the queen bed's comforter, maudlin and smiling with her plastic cup of raspberry schnapps, so happy to be surrounded by her children and so many grandchildren.

My Uncle Ted, a geography professor at Northern Kentucky, came up to me that night and asked me about school. Uncle Ted was the kind of guy who wanted real answers, not the "fine" or "all right" that worked with some of the others. I was savvy enough to know that a vivid description of how I'd done zero homework for half a year wouldn't have gone over too well, so I said that I liked all my classes.

"And what subject do you like the most?"

I thought about it, and told him it was writing, which was true.

"How about you write something for me? Would you be willing to do that?"

I said sure, and he walked over to the bedside table, picked up a Four Winds pen and a Four Winds pad of paper, and handed them to me. I knelt down on the floor, used the bed as a desk, and started writing.

Freddy Krueger... his victim on a table... got a sharpening stone... knives on his gloves sparkled... scratched his name in the mirror... cut her up...blood on his sweater... sliced her to pieces... she screamed a lot... he liked his work.

“Well, Tom, this is a fairly unique style.” Then Uncle Ted laughed out loud. He walked over to my dad and showed the story to him. My dad laughed too, but I think he was embarrassed or concerned, and maybe he ought to have been both. All three of us decided it was best not to show Grandmother how I’d developed my writing up to that point.

When the school year ended—at about the same time Joyce McCoy was giving herself her first driving lesson—Tom, Matt, and I went on a YMCA camping trip together. We spent a week in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan hiking the North Country trail and canoeing the Big Two Hearted River.

What was so special about this trip was that we had an independence that we hadn’t known before. Sure, Ish and Walsh, our twenty-five year old counselors, were there to supervise, but they mentored more than disciplined. We finally had role models that were fun and cool, kind and realistic, physical but gentle, crass but dependable, shameless and honest, and completely accessible. The most important thing we took from that trip was that we were normal: our desires, dreams, faults, and peculiar interests weren’t strange. For a week, Tom, Matt, and I had loving older brothers, two of them. And we were good friends, weren’t thinking about anything but how damn nice it was just then.

Tom fell in love with that feeling the most; he fell for Ish and Walsh like they were some kind of narcotic.

Walsh had a weenie/marshmallow stick that he toted on his pack and in his canoe for the entire trip. At our last campfire, Walsh presented it to Tom as a kind of award for wrapping his canoe around a rock in one of the lazy rapids. Tom ran around the fire like a crazy man, and the heat of the flames seemed to harden an epoxy around his grin.

Part way back home to Evanston, our group merged with the main camp kids who'd stayed in Central Michigan at the main camp. Tom took his stick with him to his seat, for safekeeping, and I sat next to him, on the aisle. About ten minutes into the ride, the junior counselor working on our bus came back to check on things. When he saw the long stick resting between us, and before we could say anything, he grabbed it, and broke it in half, then into quarters. "Sorry guy, no sticks on the bus."

It would be impossible to duplicate the sound that came out of Tom's mouth—it was a cross between a pubescent choirboy doing vocal warm-ups and the noise a little girl would make if she was getting punched hard in the stomach. The counselor knew immediately that he'd done something awful, and I could see the regret, the shock, and the what-in-the-world-to-do-now? look on his face. Even so, Tom hated him, and I hated him, too.

To his credit, the counselor demonstrated how the stick was more useful now as a tool to poke people with two rows up on the bus. That softened the blow, but the swing had already connected.

"I'm sorry," the counselor said. "I had no idea. I'm really, really sorry."

Tom just stared out the window, didn't bother to wipe his cheeks of the steady flow from his eyes.

“It’s all right, man.” I said to Tom. “The stick may be broken, but that doesn’t change anything about our trip. It’s just a stick anyway, right?”

Tom shrugged his shoulders, but kept his head against the glass, his eyes watching the cornfields.

“It’ll be all right,” I repeated. “It’s just a stick, man.”

For the rest of the trip home, I thought about the tape Tom’s mom had made him. I imagined that his mom had anticipated the situations that Tom would need a mother’s love, and spoken into a microphone about them. Maybe, instead of a song list on the tape’s insert, Tom’s mom had written down which part of the tape to listen to at certain times in his life: minute seventeen, *a tip for your first date*; minute twenty-nine, *for when you get sick*; minute thirty, *advice for when you lose something dear to you*; minute thirty-nine, *something for when you get lonely*; minute forty-three, *the happy birthday song*.

I still have no idea what’s on that tape. I’ve always hoped it held, among other things, the secrets of the world and an answer to the question of life. I used to think of the tape as a physical replacement for a person, his mom reincarnated into clear plastic; that idea was as stupid as it was genuine.

I figure that at the very least, Tom has a recording of his mom’s voice saying she loves him more than he could know, and in some ways I don’t know how much more he’d really want. I really don’t know.

When the buses pulled into the YMCA’s parking lot in Evanston, our parents were there waiting. I was showered with hugs that made me feel young and smothered and loved. Matt got hugs too, and he looked relieved to be back. As for Tom, he held on

to his dad for a long time, crying into his dad's chest. We were still young boys, despite all we had or hadn't done and seen.

LIP BALM AND CORNROWS

The cornrower reached for a glittery elastic and said it might take a few days to settle, that redheads' scalps burn baby burn—thanks, Pop. She said they'd grow on me: the cornrows. Even so, my butt cheeks clenched, I mean of their own mind. Tipping an ear to my shoulder didn't improve matters, and Rhino—slouched in the next chair, slurping slushee dregs from a cup so large it needed a transport handle—grinned and said, “Lip balm.”

“*Lip* balm?”

“Lip balm.”

I am: Dirty Squeegee, Stinky Tailpipe, Ron, Ronickter, Rick, Hag bag, Latrine, Dookey, Crag, Dookey crag, and now, Lip balm.

“Dudes called Lip balm don't get any, man. Rhino? Man?”

“Cats named Lip balm never hit skins.”

The cornrower giggled, and my butt did *it* again, and Rhino, with the toe of his kick back Jordans with the lizard skin tongue, released his chair to the linoleum and said Missy was waiting—“Lip balms don't uh-huh, but Rhinos sure do, shake that tail feather.”

Rhino is my cousin, and he and Missy are on again off again going on five years. Honked long twice and the first metal garage scraped open at Missy's dad's recycling plant where she purports to order Styrofoam cups for the vending machine and ex-cons sort cardboard and colored glass. An oddly balding ex-con with a mid flight owl tattooed from top right widow's peak to left earlobe snaked his tongue at a cigarette filter—his eyes and the owl's just sinking to the junk bounce in Missy's trunk.

Missy heaved the door shut, then fell apart before her seat foam finished exhaling; and when she gave a God-awful snort at Rhino's "Lipbalm," I knew it was mine—stuck good, like a fat lady on a bean bag.

"Then what was it last week?" I said.

"Hot on Snoop. Jesus, Lip balm."

"Lip balm," Rhino confirmed.

Clockwork: we plopped on Rhino's couch, me straddling the macaroni stain that bears resemblance to some continent, Missy in the middle, then Rhino. Bong hits, and when Missy took hers she blew, not sucked, and the burning weed took off from her lap Roman candle style. She manages the same "Oops," same bong, same seat, same set of lungs, again and again. In the heat Rhino barked, "Git the fuck out," and I rolled my eyes because I knew, we knew, Missy's blowgunning was actually premeditated, routine foreplay.

And so she began about how she'd pleased owl-tattoo man behind the dumpster of empty milk jugs—four minutes in and already the fabrication that's my cue, so I pirouetted over the bong water marsh on the carpet and popped outside to have a smoke and wait for the testes tremor of Rhino's seven subwoofers that would indicate their bump-bump session, when I could resume macaroni stain and get down with some video games.

Twenty minutes and one nearly crumpled GTO later, I tossed the controller and dropped to hands and knees to scour the carpet marsh for Missy's bong projectiles. "Lip balm," I heard. Rhino was at the bedroom door, pasty-naked but for boxers, "You can

just take some weed, for Chris sake.” He came out, stinking, fell on the couch, and Missy, wearing a fitted sheet, fell beside him.

Bong hits and a show about a short fused dwarf whose tall-wife admitted infidelity in the form of prostitution. They were nasty—fists at thighs and toes to chest, a low soaring directors chair—and Rhino blurted, “Imagine that prostitute if Lip balm was the midget, and they had a bunch of babies?” Missy choked on her grape pop: add bog to carpet map. “And then they have these fire crotch kids with cornrows, all running around with little pink dog boners like tubes of lip balm. Lip balm.”

We—they—ha-ha-ed, then turned zombie, and when we’d stuffed the recesses of our grey matter with enough of the worse-offs, I asked Rhino if he was going to Minocqua for Easter. “Shit no, man. Are you?”

“Pop says I’ve got to drive him and Grams.”

“That drunk needs to drive his own damn mom.”

“Man, since I moved back in with him I don’t have a choice.”

“I’ve told you, move in here. I don’t give a shit.”

“I don’t have a job yet.”

“You’re full of shit, could get a good job anywhere, no problem. Or better, sell weed with me. We’ll start an enterprise—Rhino and Lip balm’s Dairyland Homegrown. You’ll be the brains behind it, me the CEO. I’ve thought about it.”

“You’re really not going to Minocqua?”

“Fuck no. It’s gonna to be brutal.”

And such seriousness, such clarity, when mind-cooked, reduced us to catatonics—ball scratching with butt ticks and daydreams of Cheeto bubble baths.

“Pop, I got a job.” Beer cans were scattered on the table and floor like a Christmas morning Lego set, but no tumblers. That was good.

“Jesus Almighty, look at that fucking hair.”

“I start Easter weekend.”

“That’s just fucking wonderful.” His tongue crept from his mouth, dangled on his chin, and his trembling right palm reached for a high five.

“So I can’t drive you and Grams up to Minocqua.”

The steam line knobs started twisting behind Pop’s ears. “The hell you can’t. You’re already goddamned committed to it.”

“But it’s my first day of work, on Good Friday.”

His ear wiggled, my butt clenched—God bless heredity.

“Where the hell are you working anyway?”

“Seven Eleven.”

“For some motherfucking towel heads? My God.” He slugged his beer back and heaved the can at the wall.

“They’re not towel heads, and I have to work.”

“Motherfucking towel heads don’t celebrate the resurrection. Switch with someone, you little faggot, tell them you’ll work the day the curry god died and came back to the living.”

“Can’t do it, Pop.”

He leapt up, snatched my shirt collar and pinned it to the tabletop. “Your mother is turning in her grave. You hear me? Turning in her grave.”

“You hate them anyway, why do you want to go?”

“We go. That’s that.”

“All right, Pop, I’ll go, I’ll drive.”

“Bet your ass you will.”

Pop let go of my shirt and gave a calculated two finger poke to my forehead—just enough so that I rolled backwards onto the floor.

Grams has dementia and Pop, me and Pop, and Rhino—through his dad who was, and no longer is—are the only other blood of hers still kicking. Uncle Gerald is Mom’s brother, and Uncle Gerald and his wife Aunt Priscilla (and their twin daughters) haven’t been able to sever us since kidney cancer pulled a granite slab over Mom. It’s charity, it’s goodwill, Lord, it’s family, but even I don’t understand the impulse of Uncle Gerald saying “Sure,” when Pop called up with the self-invite.

To be fair, some pink might still exist in Pop’s heart, cowering between lumps of valve buildup; it could be those people, that place, remind him; but visits to Minocqua give Pop such satisfaction, and that through anguish and sabotage—says the army reserves gave him that capacity.

We pulled up to Grams’ house and Pop snatched a pint from the glove compartment, took a swig, ahh-ed, then dumped it empty into the coffee thermos. He didn’t look at me, but it’d have been the what-you-gonna-do lip quiver. “Well? Get your Grams, for God’s sake. We’ve got tracks to make.”

Grams was clearly vulnerable to the awe of my cornrows, but was jazzed at some interaction, eyes beady, dilating. Her wrinkles begged to know if strawberry hair braids were things she ought or needn't recognize.

"Grams, it's me, Tony."

"Dear, of course, I know."

I gave Grams a hug, which always confused her like a stranger was handing her the keys to a four wheeled Christmas present. Grams has been around people like Pop too long.

"Grams, have you got your hearing aid?"

"It's in my suitcase."

"Are you sure?"

"Just grab my bag, dear, and let's get moving."

I opened the back door for Grams and there was Pop with the seat reclined all the way. He said, "Hi Ma, I put the seat back so we can catch up."

Grams said, "What?"

"The seat, I've got it back," he drank his coffee, "So we can talk."

"That's nice."

I pulled away from the curb while Pop was nipping, and he managed a brown continent on his shirtfront.

"For fucking Chris sake! Where'd you learn to drive? Ma, you believe this kid? Whipping this motorized casket around like a lunatic."

"Sure, sure."

Pop looked at me. "She can't hear shit without that thing. And don't kill us."

I turned on the radio and Pop proceeded to suck down everything in his thermos, then closed his eyes. Grams was fidgeting in her ear, and I was stuck on sabotages from the earlier years. Barely on the tollway and Pop would already be scheming: “Tony, you’ve got to use all the soaps, especially if they’re shaped like a clam. Dump shampoo down the drain, and when you piss turn all the lights on, fan too, flush the whole time, at least four flushes, turn the sink to full blast hot, and leave with everything still on.

“You eat something and don’t like it, in the trash it goes, even a whole sandwich—just make another. You like something, stuff yourself. And if you’re playing in the wine cellar, think of your Pop’s birthday, something that looks real old, a red.”

“Your dad is just kidding, honey. Be good while we’re there, okay?”

“Your mom is full of it, son. Listen to you father.” And always it ended with Mom planting her smackers on Pop’s cheek.

I helped Grams with her bag, gave her my forearm as a walker, but at the stoop Tabitha, one of the recently-teenaged twins, yanked the suitcase from my fingers, a gesture assuring that my cornrows, if nothing else, were on trial.

Pop’s eyes were barely open, but he edged through the front door with his chin raised, b-lined—waving hello—to the liquor cabinet and sent a long waterfall of Johnnie Blue into a pint glass. For some reason, with or without Mom, they never hid the good stuff, and Pop—we—aren’t slick.

Pop soured his lips and yelled, “Great to be with family.” Aunt Priscilla gave a not-so-sly not-so-amused eyebrow to Uncle Gerald who gave her the shoulders. Pop

walked over to the marble island in the kitchen—the kitchen that’s supposed to look like it’s in France—and unfolded a striped towel covering a basket. “Mmm, poppy seed.” Slowly, Pop pulled muffins out, picked off their caps and stuffed them in his mouth, and plop went the wrapped bases into the compactor. Pop always opened events with a bang, even when Mom was around.

Grams asked me to help her to her room. She was first floor, the secret garden—every room has some kind of awful theme. The walls are painted with arches and ivy, and there’s a cast iron trundle with leafy bedposts; bronzed clogs, a steel bucket, and a short spade are soldered together and to the foot of the bed. “Oh, this is nice,” Grams said as if she’d never once set up camp there.

“Are you going to be all right, Grams?”

She patted my shoulder, “You’re such a good grandson. And so handsome.”

Since I’ve been old enough not to swallow what not to swallow, my aunt and uncle have reserved the playpen for Mom and Pop, or Pop, and I get the Chicago Bears room: Willie Gault lampshade, angry Matt Suey leaping out of the wall, and a perpetually-lit Walter Payton jersey. Pop always wished the worst on that room, had grand plans for it as a Packers fan, but I never graduated beyond the annual cookie between the mattress and box spring.

Four minutes after grace, Pop had his plate inhaled and was starting in on Aunt Priscilla, who was just finishing cutting the second twin’s ham portion. “Those kids are

too damn old to be cutting their food. Goochie, goochie, goo,” Pop said. He drained his wine and waved his fork at me to pass him the bottle.

“Please don’t start,” Aunt Priscilla said.

“It’s the problem with this generation; your kids are milk-sour spoiled, and my kid comes home with nigger braids talking about working at Seven Eleven. Christ Almighty.”

“We don’t use that language in this house.”

“Where’s my Johnnie, for God’s sake?”

“The n word, not in this house, not ever.”

“Then what do you call those things? Black braids? African American braids? Negroid braids?”

“They’re cornrows, Pop. Cornrows.” The butt cheeks heave-ho, heave-hoed.

Pop got up from the table, pint glass in hand, and moved around to my side with measured steps. He fingered one of my braids, said, “So this is a cornrow?” We all knew Pop well enough, but a stranger might’ve assumed genuine interest.

My peripheral from the sweet potato focus saw the twins’ eyes, and Grams smiling. “At least my girlfriend likes them.” Clench. Good clench.

“What a load of shit.”

“She does, told me to get them, and I did. She thinks they’re hot.”

Backwards went my head, hard, twice, and then dangling in front of my face was a red braided hair extension. I grabbed it from his fist, and my legs pushed my chair back into Pop’s stomach, a continent of Johnnie Blue on my back—the waste should have pleased Pop. Turning around, I saw in Pop something small and foreign—not entirely

displeasure. My fingernails were pressing into my palm, and I'd have socked Pop if Grams hadn't pulled the needle from the record. "Hey," she yelled. And then she continued in her normal voice, "I've got a story, a family story. Did I ever tell you that I used to be a beautician in St. Louis? Went to salon school and everything. This was during the depression, you know. Tough times, especially in St. Louis. Did you know that?"

That got me out of the funk, but Pop was still absorbing the first phase. I turned towards Grams and watched her work a piece of ham with a knife and fork, spread mustard on it, and pass it through her lips. Then she wiped the corners of her mouth with a finger.

"Oh yes, I was a pretty good beautician. I give haircuts to my husband and both my sons, but I'm not styling hair professionally these days."

Pop wasn't listening, he was inspecting his upside down glass like it was a scratch ticket without instructions. As Grams went on and Pop wandered to the liquor cabinet, I sat with my back getting cold wondering how in the hell we—Grams and Pop, me and Pop, us and them, Rhino and Missy—all wound up with each other.

The meal was awash—the twins could only manage another five minutes of dinner table turbulence before bursting into sissy yelps; Pop had staked claim to the leather sofa, shoes on, feet up, and was fishing ice cubes from his glass, sucking the scotch off and spitting them back in clean; Uncle Gerald was helping Grams to her room for an encouraged seven o'clock lights out; and I took the space to head outdoors for a few hits and a cigarette.

The sun was sunk and I made a racket crunching sticks and last season's leaves on the trip from the front door to lakeside around back. The mercury had dipped too and it smelled of snow. At the gazebo-gone-pagoda, I sat on the head of a cement dragon, packed my one hitter, lit, inhaled, held it, held it, and let the calm crawl through me. Ten minutes and however many millions of brain cells later, what Rhino dubbed 'curious-hity' gave me the urge to spy on Pop through the window.

Pop was still on the couch, unchanged except he'd replaced ice cube dipping with a scotch-sucking cigar. He was giving off a sedated, post-handcrank vibe, but his nose was twitching. And me, cool: both my cheeks were sagging.

Uncle Gerald and co. were powwowing in the kitchen, no doubt scheming our release, without parole. It seemed Mom was finally being put to rest, and I couldn't blame them; it was mutual, and I didn't want Pop either. Grams was all right by me, but she came factory loaded.

I had another smoke, crept back around the house, and just as snowflakes began to fill the dark, I snatched a crummy Gilligan hat from the gardening shed, pulled it low, and reentered the house with the front door dink-dink-dinking ajar.

"You see?" Pop yelled, "It was just nigger braids out there smoking dope." Aunt Priscilla's neck disappeared and she blubber-lipped. "Nobody's trying to look at my mom getting naked. Jesus, boy, were you snooping on Grams?"

Grams was in her eggshell robe, collar flipped to her ears, arms pulling in on herself. Pop was waving his drink and the fat cigar in all directions, and I started towards the stairs to my room.

Uncle Gerald called, “That was you outside, right? Will you please explain to your grandmother that there aren’t prowlers or peeping Toms around?”

Grams was shook up, no doubt about that. I don’t know why but I walked towards them and laid my head on the island top, my face just a foot or so from Grams’. “Grams,” I said, “It was just me out there, and I wasn’t looking at you, I swear.”

“It wasn’t you, dear. But someone is out there. Someone was watching me.”

Aunt Priscilla stood behind Grams, “There is no way anyone is out there. She’s lost it, and now she’ll never get to sleep—she’ll be waiting for me to make coffee before the sun comes up.”

Uncle Gerald said, “Priscilla, not in front of her.”

“She can’t hear anything,” Aunt Priscilla said, “she doesn’t have her hearing aid in,” and she began to wave her arms. “A brass band could be blowing Dixie and she wouldn’t know it.”

“Right on both counts,” Pop said, “Deaf as a hubcap and she’ll be pacing for her Sanka with the roosters.” Pop opened the refrigerator and poked around. “This shrimp salad any good?”

“That’s a bit old, I should have tossed it already.”

“Shit, why didn’t you say so? I saw Gerald picking at this smoked salmon earlier—thought you got away with it, huh tubby? That’ll do. And don’t get up, I’ll help myself.”

Aunt Priscilla was standing with her arm around Grams and said, “It’s high time you put your mom in assisted living. It’s clearly time.”

“That’s a waste of money,” Pop said, “She does just fine on her own.”

My face on the marble felt right, so it stayed. Grams' shoulder was trembling, and she was looking at me. I whispered, "Grams, I'll protect you if someone's out there." I wasn't expecting a response, but she put her hand on my cornrows and smiled. Something about love almost escaped my lips, and then my business savvy clicked: if Rhino sold the weed, what if I could sell human closeness?

Grams twisted a cornrow in her fingers and low-voiced, "I was quite the beautician some years ago. You believe that?"

The spotlight from the jersey case in my room gave veins to my eyelids. Because of that and a begging stomach thanks to dinner-destroyed, I got out of bed, found my socks and headed to the kitchen. The radiators were pumping and weeping downstairs—*crank the heat*, a staple of Pop's repertoire. And even though it was only eleven o'clock, everyone was either tucked in and/or truly dedicated to avoiding contact. I whipped the refrigerator door open, and the shrimp salad was front and center. I peeled the lid and sniffed: damn me if that plastic tub wasn't holding one of God's little gifts. So I stood there and shook the shrimp salad into my mouth like it was a chocolate malt, and while doing so I decided Aunt Priscilla had put the kibosh on it for Pop as a reaction to an internal struggle. With a bottle of stout, I alternated gorging on liquid and solid. Finished the beer and opened another, and then I heard a noise from the couch—apparently Pop had been catnapping there, but now his head was poking up over the couch back and facing my direction.

“Smell the booze, Pop?” I said. Pop twisted his fist in his eye, reached for his empty glass, then got up and staggered towards me.

“Didju pussh the cookies in the mashress?”

“Jesus, Pop.”

“Didju put the goddamn cookies in the mashress? Gotta keep these fuckers on the toes, on the toes.” Pop was standing, but his torso went splat on the islandtop. “Get me a drink, wouldja?” He rattled his glass, his eyes were slits.

I poured Pop a full glass of vodka because fuck him. He managed a gulp, and said, “Juss what I needed.” I opened the refrigerator again and took out the ham platter and a beer. “Ass right, boy, eat that shit up.” I peeled a thick piece of fat off the hambone and helicoptered it at Pop; he watched it land on his bare forearm, but looked away disinterested. “This goddamned drink neez olives. Goss olives in there?”

I flicked more ham fat at Pop until a chunk hit bottom in his vodka. “There’s your olive, Pop,” and he couldn’t take his eyes off his glass, even when it was tipped towards his mouth.

“Why do we come here, Pop?” I said.

“Thisus no olive, whassis? A sea monkey?”

“They hate us.”

“Cookies in the mattress.”

“They don’t even like Grams.”

“Course they do, iss all a cookies in the mattress.”

“Is it mom?”

“Those fucking nigger brays kill me.”

“This is a joke, Pop. You know that?”

“Mind your business. And cookies, goddamned cookies.” Pop heaved and started opening cabinets, mumbling “Cookies, goddamned cookies.” Pancake mix and foil tubes and chicken stock fell to Pop’s feet.

I twisted the top off another beer. “Hell yes, I’ll have another,” Pop said. His head was between shelves, and I filled his glass with vodka.

“Hey Pop, chugging contest.”

“Goddamned cookies.”

“Really, Pop. Chugging contest—faggot versus nigger braids.”

Pop’s head freed a shelf. “Wouldn’t Mom be proud. And here’s the goddamned ginger snaps.”

“Come on, faggot, chugging contest.”

Pop leaned the box of ginger snaps into my chest and stuck his glass in front of my nose. “Take your cookies, faggot.”

“Drink your drink, Pop,” I said. “Chugging contest.”

Pop shook his head, then put the vodka to his mouth and drained it. I pulled the ginger snaps from Pop’s hand, opened the box, and slowly ate while Pop tried to maintain.

Pop was snarling and lip-smacking moisture into his mouth; I finished the ginger snaps watching. I dropped the box on the floor and stepped over to Pop. With two pointed fingers on Pop’s temple, I pushed, but Pop was deceptively dense. So I opened my hand, placed my palm on Pop’s neck, and used my shoulder to slam Pop to the floor, thud; his elbow dented a can of corn chowder, and he squirmed in the sundries like he was settling

on a beach towel. But Pop got comfortable, was soon snoring with a box of rigatoni cradled in his arms and a bag of flour between his thighs.

I walked upstairs, popped the football jersey's light bulb with the mouth of my beer bottle and fell into my bed.

When I woke up bad dudes were having a party in my stomach. I had gas to pass, but on doing so, I became aware that there were major problems. Wobbly knees got me to the bathroom, a room made only of mirror and cobalt porcelain, and it became clear that my body was significantly out of sorts; I could barely keep my chin off my chest. Hell's dump was in me and wanted out. Alternating between bouts of sitting and kneeling—when my eyes weren't shut tight in agony, I was forced to look at my reflection.

It was nearly out of body, checking out the lump in the mirror. But the image was so grotesque that not looking was impossible. And the cornrows near my ears, they really got it with the gingersnap-shrimp mash.

Sitting on tiles in the shower for those hours of intestinal somersaults, realizing that I'd never had a full perspective of a drained body sitting naked on the floor, I couldn't shake how dumb my cornrows were—ugly red hair and ugly white scalp. Every part of my body revolted me, except maybe the back of my neck, which I'd never before seen properly. It was like a woman's.

The sun wasn't up yet when I forced myself to the kitchen for re-hydration, liquid I prayed would exit weenie-only. Grams was fully dressed, standing next to the coffee maker staring at the littered floor, which was minus Pop. "Oh dear," she was saying. Grams turned around when she heard me clobbering from step to step. When I was close enough for her to get a good look at my face, she oh deared again.

"I'm sick, Grams."

"You don't look so good." She put her hand on my forehead.

"Food poisoning, I think. Shrimp salad." I parked my butt on a stool.

"We need ginger ale," Grams said, and she opened the refrigerator. I put my arms on the island-top and dropped my forehead into them.

There were footsteps, and when I turned around Pop was there carrying an armful of bed linens. He didn't stop, but continued down the stairs to the basement. Grams hadn't turned around, so I said, "Pop is a piece of work, huh Grams?"

She didn't answer and brought me ginger ale in a glass. "Pop is a real piece of work," I repeated.

Grams patted my shoulder. "That's nice, dear," was all I got, but I *know* she heard me. She walked behind me and put both of her hands on my head. "You're such a handsome boy, even with these braids. I used to be a beautician. Did I ever tell you that?"

"Yeah Grams, I know, during the depression."

"Those were tough times, back then in St. Louis. And I was young, married your father when I was just seventeen, not young then, not so young, but young enough. And I was pretty good at doing hair, imagine that?" Grams took an elastic off a cornrow and

gently unbraided the extension, combed the free strands with her fingers, then repeated.

“Your father and I were in love and having fun, what fun.”

Pop came up from the basement, still carrying his sheets; all down the hallway he was opening doors, peeking in, and then closing them quietly. The washer was in the basement under canvas, but I said nothing.

He came back to the kitchen and let the soiled sheets fall from his hands onto the nonperishables covering the floor. “Ma,” he said, “Pack your bags. We’re out of here.”

“That’s nice dear,” Grams said.

“Pop, I’ve been sick all night, can’t drive.”

“I’ll get us home, just get your ass in the car.”

When we walked outside Pop used his bare hands to wipe the snow off the windshield, and I climbed into the back seat with Grams. I got horizontal with my head in Grams’ lap. Pop started her up, and we swerved and skidded our way out the driveway and towards the interstate; Grams kept talking about Grams as she continued to unbraid my cornrows; and me—I was just glad Pop was miserable, that and I was incredibly thirsty.

Laying belly-down on Rhino’s macaroni stain—face denting seat cushion stinking of bong agua—my mind ding dong fuzz thumped to Rhino’s woofers. Rhino was good shit, had draped his sleeping bag over me and plopped cubes in my root beer. By the hour, the entire Minocqua fiesta was inexplicably fizzling into space, though a certain number of particles reassembled themselves into six snapshots. Those turned over on the inside like a flip book.

Then, “The Balm want to get high?”

Me: grunt, raise eyebrow, nod chin.

Rhino and Missy sat on the couch edge with me-horizontal cradled between their lumbar and the couch back. Missy lit the bong for me and pulled out the carb so my head could stay pillow-flat. Nobody talked. No THC RPGs. And once ga-ga, Missy took Rhino’s hand and led him to the bump-bump chamber—freaking unprecedented. And I, well, my sleeping bag grew tiny massaging fingers, and it was me as a log floating down a slow moving river.

TREBLE HOOKS

Scene: Thanksgiving with the family; Grandpa in the living room with grandchildren.

I hear pint-sized whippers swimming in couch cushions; cereal-milk dries on my wool crotch; tasseled pillows bounce off my head with frequency. The whippers are screaming about a rhubarb tart and sidestroke—“Pick an apple, put it in the basket, Grandpa.” These ears can listen when the damn things want to. The whippers don’t know turkey and don’t know flue knob from cinder as far as I can tell, but they avoid the heat flicker. Instinct? Are anythings interrelated?

Whippers will know. That shawl is covering my legs and the television coughs with balloons and I can barely see a goddamned thing. I drape this shawl over my shoulders, shake hips and blouse it. Crumbs like hubcaps, shiver, an airborne something blows past my nose: the whippers don’t know what I purport, what I purport. Whippers will acquiesce, by God. Enough with inflating. Where are my clubs?

Action: Grandpa finds golf clubs, intends to hit links next to son’s home.

I plead, not just to pilled plaid, Eighteen at Kingsbarns, the goddamned greenest holes eyes ever seen. Sea cliffs sinking to raging, world class. Sandalhead, Sandalhead, that crook, once, twice! Twice, for the love of Jesus, twice he bogied a par four. I take these gems. We don’t part. For Chris sake, they take me, these classics. All the whippers on the lot—gaze these clubs. They know turkey. None of you know. Not a single cork-headed one of you.

“Woody Woodpecker is up next.”

Heavier. Heavier? The horsehide shoulder strap, worn damn near to tar-texture, it squeaks. No, it grunts, grunts: I’m with you, Lotus. Let’s have at it if your slimy tendons

will cease wobbling, if that atrophied backside won't topple you flailing-turtle, tan side up. Who am I to back down? Hell's bells—one can't find absolutes, to be sure.

Okay lemons, I need a whipper to shag, to dig, to shag. I can see the whipper table's set for whippers, and why in Hates would I sit down if I've got a shagging whipper and my clubs? By God the season's already crammed in the fuselage and halfway to Tokyo. The whipper will eat, of course, of course, the whipper will eat. The whipper will shag and eat.

I pick the runt of the litter. I can't hear, no, hear not the shriek that I pick the runt because she'll struggle less. Sweet Jesus, it's application, more time for application. Yes, a function. The princess will thank me in a few, some few. She will, she will.

Turkey, I yell. You'll goddamned well know turkey before this day's through.

Whipper, it's high time you scattered the blueberries in the pancake! Hear, an ear, soft cartilage a gas line to my accelerator. Twist for gas. Gas, not horn, not horn! Better handle my driver. Drivers keep the once-whippers at driver-length.

Deadbolt, whipper, looks and acts like a spigot. Time for some fresh air, and I need you on the ball.

Scene: Grandpa and granddaughter step outside, other children playing near pond.

Geese fly low, stutter step shingles, dodge chimneys, quack. A beak honks breezing by huffing redbrick—What is this, this that is this in a flash? I scratched my feather. Son of a gun. Yes, stratocumulus a low, collapsing ceiling, jarred molasses-dense. It's God awful dark. Lord knows I wish I could see the dark.

Breathe, whipper, it's the scent of decay, sweet like cellar scum. A leaf greens then yellows to crumble—can't help but feed the moss. Your nose, my nose, they sound no noise outside a coffin-shaped treasure chest full of what booty?

Take a whiff, whipper. Inhale, exhale, this time like you haven't got tuberculosis. We're on the dawn of winterdeath, no hibernation in this county, we're not talking frozen horny toads; it's kaput, sink, layer... Lordy, my calves teem.

One could roll ankles on these droppings—Jesus Almighty, picture that ornery foursome hopping on tibia peg legs. Mightn't have poured the cellar spitting distance to a water feature had I signed during a migration. Greens are hop a turd where's-a-windmill five months a year. Poor whipper, I see there's a loss and an absence, I get it that a fine and just warden wouldn't subject a chain gang to this pine-bound amateur.

I sense lineage in those whippers skipping flat stones at the pond—who delays destiny in this climate? Forget the cock robin. I appreciate the faction of whippers with industry. And so do or don't you, we, want in with stone-skipping? That wishy washy nose crinkle of your grandma's, mercy, mercy.

We don't need an almanac to know how whippers minnow-darting in November on our arrival bodes. My God, weepy disgraces must've taken belt sanders to those evil whippers' horns. A goose stoned close, but not to, that last quack. Not pretty, whipper, slip ostrich for the now. Or might a whipper grow ice skates partaking? It's out of kindness, but no, Ostrich, whipper, I've been reacquainted with veiny bunnies in my eyelids on some fourscore too many occasions, heard the shovelhead mercy-mauling the poor cottontails like slapping wet manure into table-ready kissing swans.

Was a whipper myself when I did in the sickly hoppers. Had I known, had it not been during trash duty following a real whipper education from an old timer—different school altogether, different planet, whipper—maybe wouldn't have taken a minute pleasure from it.

The six iron, whipper, it has seen the worst and won't add sleepless nights on account of this odd job.

“Is it dead?”

D train to doorknob, whipper, full steam to pillow fluff. Hell's bells—it's why horned-whippers hyena-giggled when they locked eyes with the sorry flapper. Most likely that honker would have nose dived before smothering baby oil on its thighs with a wingtip, but that's not up to whippers or once-whippers or horned-whippers to decide. Catch my drift? And don't start in on retribution, whipper, or carry the whose-bone-to-pick tune either. Oh, I'm onto it; pray, whipper, eyes, I know, apologize, that nose crinkle rubber balled back at you, mercy.

Action: Golf club takes swan out of misery.

Tick, stick, no fawns, we press on, poor goose. Mind you, it's not more or less than the nature of the nightmare. But we control our legs until they're dangling lengths of frozen OJ concentrate: let me sink once more before my own Three Mile collapse.

I know hair soft like yours, kissed your mother once a hundred times on her pink forehead. She nicked a hundred marks into a doughnut box with a blue pen, was facing me sitting in a grocery cart as she counted. I said no more after a hundred; she said no

less than a million. Fool's gold, whipper, that hundred when she begged for more. As though I'm responsible with brown sugar and two heads of red cabbage?

Scene: Grandpa and granddaughter move to front lawn.

Whipper. I steer the ear to freezing lawn and instruct: Dump, down. Tee, lawn, shag. Mind the wedge, you, mind the wedge. In, air, grey, in, quack, yes. It takes precision, whipper. Patience and checkered flags. You ever? Of course not; a whipper in this coop doesn't sacrifice. One day you'll try. That's the problem, our malfunction. And that's the peace we find, whipper. It's the peace in transcendence. Swing like a pendulum, solid contact. Almighty, I'm getting weak.

Do you feel the flutter, the convex of a whirlwind feathering eyebrows? Whipper, we're pressing on, by God, we're persevering.

"I want to go home."

Wind's tossing skirts somewhere, someplace on this plane. Whipper, wear pants. And when I say shag, I don't mean lollygag.

It's the age of denial, and sadness means nothing and everything. We're on the brink of something, whipper. Most likely nothing. It's all the whippers need tutorials. You're the fortunate, year of the monkey; I'll put the deed on it.

Whipper, I learned turkey somewhere between womb and eulogy. Was a worthless whipper to that date, to the day. Bam, it fell like a can of creamed beans on stained glass and made me heave.

Lord, where's the focus? I've an agenda, it's on a dolly rolling around somewhere. Should have stapled it with orange flags, shoved a beacon up its steaming channel. Lord, where are my bearings? Whipper, these are my foci, my foci.

Ice creeps center from shore, wouldn't suppose this engages? An impending surface, and I don't intend to lament a goose neck poking through with willow reeds. I crank the gas; a curb might have results. And whipper, try this club sack on for size—by God they've been feeding you. This boiled ham of a lumbar can barely manage that trial-bruised carrier. And careful, please, of the ankle rolling.

Whipper, park it. Give me that outer layer down monstrosity.

“It's brrrrr.”

Hell no, it's sure not hot.

Action: Grandpa takes coat off granddaughter and puts in the mud.

Six or seven? Putter-head spreads fibers and arms, two pounds the surface, seven scoops the mud, three wood smears it like crepe jelly. Better have at it with my own shawl, this isn't Kunming; peel it from me, little one. Whipper no doubt assumes too much—greater ambitions, by God, it's our likeness to light bulbs or blue or crab grass.

It's entertaining, wholesome, and I never handed a cent to a culinary institute because lofty clogs and hollow top hats and paring...

Action: Granddaughter's parents join the pair on the lawn. Grandpa uses golf club as defensive weapon.

You stay back, once-whippers! I won't flinch at a cracked bicuspid, heard the crunch a million times. This club has seen all that it can see, and it begs. The whipper's in class, and your tuitions bounced. Wedge, don't fail me now.

Today is the day whipper learns, people. The diploma's at the framers, argh, *whush*, beware, beware, it's a higher authority. And don't dare seek permissions on account of the weather. Rustle your fannies to grace and whipper'll be sucking wishbones before the gravy topples over.

My skin feels deplete of moisture, my fingers hail precipitation. Wouldn't that be a kick in the pants? Forsake the whipper, she knows not her trial. She's admirable, loathsome, downy hanging in her bangs, downy stuck on my nose impairing my highly-impaired vision. Lord, skewer these smooth brown eggs I call eyes and roast them on a spit. The air's a filter, whipper. Have you ever seen anything like this? By God, I've seen it seven hundred times in this exact light, and always that tree or lamppost or burrowed rabbit is crying with the clouds.

Do you hear, whipper, that a wedge practically defying gravity is quieter in a snowstorm? Weeping gets no one anywhere, whipper; the weakest weep like they're juggling medicine balls with their bare feet. I once saw a woman, whipper, solemn as a hydrant, sitting in the street with a tiny rink of frozen urine between her feet. She was as thin as a coat hanger, whipper, her skin grayer than slate. She didn't have a jacket, whipper, but a brown sack around her shoulders that stunk of bologna and scallions.

I once saw a man, whipper, who had sand lodged in his skin—forehead, nose, chin, cheeks—all from sleeping facedown on the beach. He didn't have a home, whipper, and the beach was as good a bed as any. I watched him pluck a bottle, sand hanging from

his head, out the bottom of a rusty drum, and he drained with satisfaction the thimble-full of grape pop. He held that bottle, upside down, mouth to lips, didn't breathe, whipper, I swear, for an eternity, stuck the glass in his breast pocket, and yawned.

A child, whipper, playing with shards of broken mirror on a sidewalk, smelled worse than spoiled buttermilk and asked me for a dollar. I wanted to hug her, press her shoulders and swivel her body into the ground, tassel her hair, stick her back in a tummy till it was time. I gave her a corner of fudge and she sat on the curb picking at it like a squirrel with a walnut shell.

I've worried in this lifetime. I haven't provided, and I chew red meat seventeen ways a week. I've blubbered like the sissies with medicine balls. Whipper, does asphalt ever blush? May I pay the usher after seating? Can crow beaks whistle? Jesus, a keel's in a hurricane.

I was once on a blimp over the breadbasket in early fall. Bumpy was the way, might as well have been bouncing down a shallow river in the back of a wooden oxcart. And by God, we were pulled by the lamest ass in the corral. The scene was something, whipper. I'd never touched a cloud, colder than hell up there. Wouldn't think it; what's taken for granted in this world is enough to turn innards to sawdust, sawdust to sprinkle on church steps in February. Whipper, can we retain? Earwax or axle grease?

Can I count on you whipper? What is the state of affairs?

Don't take pies in eyes or fear donkeys licking greyhounds. Woofers love without condition, commit without reason, upchuck without thinking. But aren't meant to be leashed, not leashed, we're tethered by gravity and scoundrels who live and die by postal

code references—I know. That’s where a toothbrush and a pinched cheek make such nice gifts. But late, too early for something, for that, where the devil is my shawl?

Don’t bother, whipper, I’m angling towards horizontal myself.

It’ll be a nightmare in sixty years—you’ll wake in the bleakness to a wailing-whipper. That’s today. Lord, oh Lord, give us activity in the gray matter. The snow and clouds are half cousins; I wanted sleep then, prayed for it now. It’s a goddamned mystery, the cerulean blue, kite, noose, indigo, scent, lawn, decay.

Action: Grandpa supine on the lawn.

Promise me you’ll worry, whipper. Not about the wrinkly hack sprawled on the wet concrete, no, not him. White will stick to the road like it piles on a fat brown tree branch. This whole place will be unrecognizable, wouldn’t know it from a lily pond or garbage dump. Christ, this place gets beautiful. We’re sharing it. Whipper, fetch my wedge; I’ve got once-whippers in the scope and Lord knows I can’t stagger erect, not even for effect.

Oh, how long a slug can delight in its own lubrications. A quadriplegic with nothing but Greco-roman sparring on the mind. Jesus, sink a steel treble through my forehead and soft triceps, drop the line so I hang with giant squid. Put anvils in my pockets, make me a tongue of chain mail, feed me granite sweet buns. I’ll squirm enough, shimmy to entice, by God I swear it.

Tell them I swear it, whipper.

WOW-WOW

Dear Mr. Sanka!

I've got really great news to tell you! Really, it's fantastic! I sort of couldn't believe it myself, but shit, man, it's true! Wow, I mean a wow-wow! Wow-wow-really-wow-wow! Man, it's like a wonka-kicka-picka-wow-wow! Wow! Yeah! Man!

Regards,

Larry

I don't *know* a Larry, nor a Lar, nor a Lawrence, once a Leif, but that was practically two wives ago in a dive outside Poughkeepsie. More to the point: I found this letter taped to my freaking refrigerator. Repeat: I know not Larry.

Troubling, and most disconcerting is that I'm just cowboy boots and tan lines when I'm in my dojo—which is near always. And if you're asking, yes, I've been known to scramble eggs or bump out push ups without my cowboy boots.

Jesus, had to be a Larry.

And this letter in my hand: me equals dojo equals sanctum sanctorum minus sanctum. I don't even shut the door when I take a dump, and we're talking seventy, eighty months here in *my* dojo, and now this Larry may have heard those toot-toots that sometimes, yes, remind me of forest fires and horseradish?

And thing is I nearly always flush—hell, don't pay squat for water, directly, or management tacks that on? Jesus, fish are *dying*—I'll never flush that thing before a healthy meniscus. I'm a freaking Samaritan, at least I would be if I wasn't suddenly

thinking and wishing terrible things on this *Larry*—specifically his relation to my dirt toilet.

But *Lar*, I know the sort, and once you get past his free-spirited approach to private property, he just might be the kind of guy you choose to have over to the dojo for bacon burgers and vodka. Larry's enthusiastic after all, in that touch-those-toes increase-your-metabolism get-in-on-the-pyramid-plan-while-you-still-can kind of way. I've the ability, incidentally, to sniff karma in the dojo—fart in the car style—and it's wafting the scent known in Paris as: *that ain't bad to rub elbows with, brother!*

Plan: contact Larry without encouraging questionable entry into the dojo. I wrote my own letter and taped the fucker to my front door.

To: Larry

From: Christopher Sanka

RE: Exciting News in the Dojo

Larry,

I can't say I'm not intrigued by your letter. But mind the rules of the dojo!

Make a point to knock and let's talk.

Sincerely,

Chris

But shit, I don't do sincerely, and it throes a loop. God bless or god damn the sincerity. Leaving sincerely will plop me C train to bonkers, so I do one of those moves

where I stand behind my dojo's front door, crack it open a few inches, and wiggle my hand through to nab the letter. But I can't feel the letter, so I poke my head around and there, standing fourteen inches from the dojo doorbell is a postal worker, Larry letter in hand.

And this postal worker has eyes that whisper: cat's out the bag and damned glad of it.

"State your business." We compensate *for all* at the dojo with militancy.

"Postal worker," she says.

"Not a Larry?"

"Are you in the buff?"

"Be off, I'm expecting important correspondence."

"Sweet boots."

"Dojo, lady. Mind the freaking dojo."

I shut the door and side window-snoop; the postal worker's fist is locked in her eye socket just turning and turning, and she drops the Larry letter to the ground and skips to the sidewalk. Hell. So I open the door, quick check the area, then dart out, snag the letter and am back inside before anything longer than a half-penny peep show.

Coffee is still hot at six, getting dark, and I'm sitting on the leather barkalounger—yup, feet out the boots and breathing. The dang letter is on my lap though, and what *does* one replace sincerely with? Regards? Fondly? XOX? Nothing? Yes, nothing.

And I'm deep in thought about this nothing when a tree branch cracks like from lightning, but it ain't raining, not unless a seven foot giant in a tree outside the dojo... not

unless you consider that rain. And he's high up there; it's a freaking oak if that paints a picture. And he's compromising things by refusing to release a glass bottle from his fist—legs and arms wrapped tight round a thick branch, body practically humping the bark from underneath, I mean he's *hanging*.

Entertainment—indeed, the dojo doth provide.

I just sit, man, and watch this giant perspiring, and then he aligns the bottle with his mouth; in some kind of momentary clarity he drinks, then, slowly, slowly, this lump loses his grip and his arms got nothing and those legs are working overtime and he's a dangling wasps nest, but no legs can hold that kind of density, and he's falling, lightning crack, lightning crack, thud. Crinkled.

He's down, but then it hits, adrenaline—whatever—and the guy's up and sprinting straight at me, straight at the glass sliding door between us. And he's still got that bottle! Freaking charging, tatanka in heat—shit, buffalo charging, man—and my eyes get wide. His long hair is whooshed behind him from the speed, then fwap! Face first into the plate glass blind-woodpecker style—greasy forehead smear and everything. And shit, man, I'm stuck to my leather seat and he just drops. Fuck-in-weird, man! But God bless the dojo and her many surprises!

He's unconscious, lifeless perhaps, so I slip on my boots—don't bother with nonessentials—and slide the door open to check on him. His barrel chest is moving.

“Larry?” I ask, but I get nothing.

Then he starts to stir.

“Is it you, Larry?”

“Oye.”

“Larry yes or Larry no?”

“Ice. I need some fucking ice.”

“Man, what was that locomotive business?”

“Arrgh, me head!”

“Ice, ice, okay, don’t go postal on me, brother.”

I’m out of cubes, except for the ones with frozen mint leaves in them—been staring at those fuckers for over a year. I fudge around in the sink trying to get them mintless, but what’s a wacko care if his cold pack is scented? I toss two rye heels on the counter, shake the cubes into the empty bread bag, and when I turn around the guy—shazam!—is nowhere to be seen! And the sliding door is still open. Trouble: from where the sliding door is connects to the living room which connects to the kitchen that connects to, well, point being that this maybe-Larry has access to the entire dojo.

My hand snags the bread knife, which is the only blade I use, cause fuck the thing is versatile, naugahyde or sour dough, though not yet tested on man flesh, other than a fingertip, which it, incidentally, shred through like a pile of whipped topping And in my left hand is the rye bag of ice, a medieval type thing with the weight and feel of a tube sock full of broken vacant lot. I light-fwap it on my thigh, and sure, it’ll chip an incisor as efficiently as it’d bob in a hip mojito.

So donning cowboy boots, a knife, and the ice, I was a force as I crouched from room to room in search of the disappeared barrel chester.

This is not your everyday dojo activity. Being afraid to use the point of a bread knife to poke a suspicious lump in your unmade bed is no afternoon pig roast; if you’ve

never opened a freezer door and expected man-hands at your throat, some winged beast with authority wishes kind things on you.

I pressed on, did a calculated sweep of the dojo and it came up empty—not lost time exactly though, as I did find over two bucks in loose change, which I dropped down the top of my left boot for safekeeping, didn't want to compromise my knife and bag grips with a fist full of nickels, of course, though the heel did feel funny and I had to shake my foot in the air for an even distribution of coins throughout the boot, which I did in the dojo bathroom with the door locked, cause I was feeling a tad vulnerable. And something dawned on me in the bathroom while doing my coin redistribution dance: discipline cannot be compromised in the dojo. I'm not bitching about two extra bucks worth of change in my boot, no sir, but what I'm saying is that somehow those two dollars represent a lack of dojo order. It's about asking, How in the world did my life get to a point where I could just neglect a certain amount of coinage and let it collect in unlikely corners of the dojo? Treasure forgotten, just like that.

It was heavy material, and thank you Jesus those questions came towards the end of the dojo inspection. But then, shit! What if the crazy dude snuck out while I was in the dojo bedroom and then came back in while I was kicking pennies and dimes towards my steel toe in the dojo bathroom? Is there never a break in the dojo rigmarole? So I repeated the search, found yours truly as the single dojo occupant, locked all the doors and windows, shut every blind, turned on every lamp, and dumped the ice cubes into a pitcher which became the base for a gnarly batch of mojitos I used to ease myself into a sleepy, contemplative state, which was almost, though not quite, too sleepy and too

contemplative a state to arrange and rearrange the coins I poured from my boot onto the coffee table.

As the mojitos disappeared I considered the dojo state of affairs, and I could not convince myself that I was alone. It troubled me like a wasp dilemma: everybody knows that when you've got a wasp in your dojo you open all the doors and windows and turn out all the lights, and the fucker will buzz on by and leave you alone forever. But here I was with all the lights on and an airtight seal in the dojo.

A wasp doesn't want to hurt you, he's just flying around looking for lilacs—he only stings if provoked. Have I provoked, and what in the hell *are* my lilacs?

Wasps live in wasp nests with lots of wasp buddies, and they attack if you mess with their home.

Me, I've been running solo in the dojo for a while.

I knocked through more mojitos than I care to mention and woke up in the morning with an aching, brother. The dojo was still and bright, its contents had accumulated a fresh layer of fine dust, me on sofa included. The dojo understood, and I cleaned up and headed out the dojo side door to get the day cranking.

Whoever said American cars run like lemons never had the pleasure of driving my grandmother's Buick. Okay, the thing does leave kisses of 10W40 on the asphalt from time to time, but the space in the back seat rivals that of a cheap-o camper—the cheap-o jab more a reflection on the camper than the Buick, obviously. What I'm saying is that if you needed to—I'm talking like in a minor crisis, and if you slept kind of curled up, which is what I do anyway—you could pull three, four straight weeks in the back of the Buick, maybe longer. And, man, that thought is a real comfort.

But more importantly, the Buick delivers me, used to take me where I'd execute my shopping philosophy. I'm in the past tense not because I don't appreciate these megastores where you can have your nails polished, buy a gross of generic diapers, and get two slices of pepperoni for the price of one, it's just that everything is deliverable nowadays. And if the system ain't broke? These Sikh guys have a business set up where you can even get, delivered to your doorstep, up to six different kinds of daiquiri mixers, if you're into that kind of thing, which I'm not, just saying.

And, okay, granted, the Buick's gas tank has been and remains hollow, with an echo. But, people, contrary to what you might be thinking, this automobile is essential to the dojo routine. And I know I said the Buick is roomy, and it is, but as per my current entrepreneurial venture—buying scented candles and dried sunflowers at wholesale and selling them online in gift baskets—well, the Buick has become a *temporary* warehouse, a dojo annex, just until I find the right basket supplier. Not that I don't have any baskets at all, but you'd never guess that the online basket market, and I'm only talking the high-end products here, you'd never guess it's run by total screwballs who know zilch about good business. Anyway, so the Buick has boxes to the ceiling and about two feet of Styrofoam peanuts lining the floor, and I'm out there digging around looking for a certain four bags of honeydew pillar candles but find nothing but a wad of ABC chewing gum and these licorice jar candles that mysteriously appear in every bag I get my hand into, so to hell with it, so it *be* licorice. We're mostly hypothesizing today. But a point. Yes, en route. All this, well, and so you can imagine the shape of the trunk? It's in shambles, ready to pop the lock—man, I'm constantly ass-humping the trunk just to get it shut! And so then you *can* imagine what it's like when after I've swallowed the fact that the

honeydew pillars have evaporated, and I'm loaded down, both arms, with licorice jars in bags, and am using just about every nugget of dexterity in me to get the key in the freaking Buick's keyhole so I can lock up the rest of my investments, and I hear a moaning coming from inside the trunk! People noise! And then a low thud, thud. Then no moan, but, "Aarghh."

Half the licorice jar candles were instant casualties when my scaredy-cat right arm catapulted two of the four bags over the Buick hood and into the street. I dropped the other bags, on purpose, at my feet.

"Argh!" Thud, thud.

I was being cautious, which is reasonable, and also why I stood there and tried to whistle—so any onlookers wouldn't think anything was out of the ordinary. I can't explain it, man, that's just what I did, at least at first. I know what you're thinking: dude sees you hurl your bag of candles over the hood of your Buick and you think whistling will change things? Point taken, duly noted.

But doesn't mean I didn't still have a human in my trunk, and I'm sorry, but I kept whistling anyway. And then the human in the trunk starts whistling too, fancy shit at that, like trying to harmonize or something. Jesus. So I stop whistling and knock two tiny knocks on the trunk. I get two knocks back. Two more and two back. Cornball admission: I knocked, shave-and-a-haircut, and got, two-bits.

"Larry?" I say—wish I'd been louder, more commanding.

"Git me outta dis trunk!" Knock, knock!

"What are you doing in there?"

"I can't breathe! And me allergies! To pollen!"

Hell. “Man, you don’t even know how long it takes for me to get this thing shut!”

“Help! Please!”

As a man of responsibility I can’t deny a call for help, so I insert the key and the trunk pops open: there, totally squishing my dried sunflowers, is a young man in a navy blazer with an envelope taped to his forehead, Chris written across it. Dude couldn’t have been over twenty-two—looked kind of like a softer, pre-businessman Larry.

“What are you doing in my trunk?”

He shrugged. I helped him from the trunk, got him to his feet, and he poked his face out, craning what he had of a neck towards me.

“You mean take it off your forehead?”

He nodded, shaking the envelope.

There’s something strange about untaping a letter from another man’s forehead. I felt kind of tender towards the guy, like I tried to be gentle with the parts that were stuck to his blond hair. When the letter was off, I couldn’t help but think what a fine dentist I would have made had it not been for a failed root canal on my left bicuspid during the formative years.

He watched, even perked up a bit, as I opened the letter and read:

Dear Mr. Sanka!

Shoe tie! House fly! Brassiere! Now hear! This! Horse and Buggy, my man, when the rest of the world is Alfa Romeo! But, friend! The train is leaving the station! Only a short time remains! Yes! Indeed! And we already bought your freaking ticket! How’s that

that for cooperation?!?! Karma-warma-alarma-shawerma! Is anyone hungry?!?! That's me raising my hand! Hungry for success!

Regards,

Larry

“Are you Larry?” Dude didn't respond, which got me POed, even if it *was* something I might do myself. “You know how to get in touch with Larry?” He shrugged. “Well, you mind telling me how you got in the trunk of my Buick with a letter taped to your forehead?”

Not a damn thing.

“And that ogre who fell out of the tree, do you know that guy?”

He raised the shoulders again, then looked at the letter in my hand.

“Is that Larry? Dang, I knew that was Larry. Why'd he run off like that? And what was he doing up in that tree?”

Dude just stood there like a dummy. I didn't get mad though; I've been dealing with the likes of this pair for longer than I know. Truth is I much prefer the younger guy to the oversized orangutan in the oak. Not that I have anything against Larry, like I said, I know the sort.

“BB n' V!” I shouted right at the kid's face. “Bacon burgers and vodka!”

Well, dude must not have had the pleasure of that combination yet, because, damn! He took off faster than pasties in the champagne room! And me and my reaction? I'm a fool and admit it, when I act a fool, and it was a fool who started clearing space in the Buick to drive after him, at least I started to until better sense popped that light bulb.

Disturbed, alarmed, peeved, yes—bet your sweet ass. Add on top the next forty minutes, which I spent making once-licorice jar candles into stumpy licorice pillar candles, and we're talking heavy cursing in the dojo, though she don't mind. When I had two dozen of the stinky licorice fuckers de-uglified, I set up an assembly line on a row of chairs.

So yuck it up, I've got a little bit of a grandma thing going on when I prepare these—yes, I wear boots, and I hook a basket through my left arm and go from chair to chair. First I line it with orange tissue, then put in a candle, two dried sunflowers, sprinkle on some glitter—and, to inform the shitheads, yes, a dude can evenly distribute glitter with his fingertips and still be whole-dude—and then I wrap the thing up in a large sheet of canary cellophane. The final step, well, last in the prep stage, is a bow around the bunched up cellophane at the top. And know what? The things look pretty darn nice, good enough to really start pushing them on the web.

But what options are there? Spam or something? How often does an email appear asking at random if you happen to sell cute little sunflower and scented candle gift baskets? And I'm a bit conflicted about this, as there's no cash allotted for advertising; I'm conflicted for the duration of processing two dozen gift baskets, which is about par for a day; conflicted while I pour vodka into a tub full of ice; and still conflicted—though I'm starting to even out—when the red hamburger patty is lowered into a pool of bubbling bacon grease. I know myself, though: I wouldn't be so deep into the BB n' V if it didn't do it for me.

I take pride in my cooking. You've got to cook the bacon first, see, so the grease permeates the burger. We sizzle with authority in the dojo, sizzle with authority *and*

caution—only so high a cowboy boot top goes, you know? And did I mention that my first wife was a freaking vegetarian?—talk about ripe poop. That woman never understood the basic fundamentals.

Yes, and it's an all out binge when the BB n'V hits the lips; only thing comparable to the satisfaction found in bacon burger consumption is the inevitable post-BB n'V drunken toot-toot session: just tottering back and forth on the can, like a kindergartener, except we read *The Economist* during such dojo activity. And it's exactly what I'm in the process of doing, when out the bottom of *The Economist* and into my naked lap—and I'm not talking a change of address or gift subscription card, people—but another Larry-letter, which puckers me up in a jiffy. I bowleg to the bathroom door and lock myself in—then, shit, check in the shower, and thank God. I resume my seat and read the letter.

Dear Mr. Sanka!

The clouds of opportunity are bursting! Ditch the umbrella! Open that mouth and suck! Dink! Dinka-donka-dink! Eeeeeek! Sound the alarm! Strike that! Keep it under wraps! No rain for everybody! Dink! Donk! Wow! Shovels and wheelbarrows! Cause and dog paws! Eeeeeeeek!!!!

Regards,

Larry

I am up, man, charging: rhino on crank! I see another letter taped to the dojo mirror and don't even bother! I'm moving too fast—that's the red alert I'm at! And I start

ripping canary cellophane and tearing at these lousy fucking gift baskets like a Greenpeace-dude with ten thousand gasping dolphins in a tuna net.

When they're all torn to pieces, I open the dojo sliding door and stand, in my cowboy boots, facing outside. "Larry!" I yell. "Larry! What is this about not mixing business and pleasure? Whoever thought that up had a fat cow pie between their ears! I'm not talking world domination here! You're not picking up any of those vibes?! Are you?! Shit, Larry, that's for the *fat kitties*! I'm just trying to get mine, brother!"

YELLOW BRICK ON MARKET STREET

It had been raining all day, an early October dumping on the Hampshire Valley of Massachusetts. I'd been at my desk next to my apartment's two windows for several hours listening to the evening traffic build when I heard the familiar sound of a shopping cart bumping over sidewalk cracks: it's my downstairs neighbor Bonnie with a load of cans. The noise of the cart grew, then crossed to the opposite side the street; Bonnie must've picked up some cardboard along the way, which she'd deposit in the neighbor's recycling bin.

I wondered about her present frame of mind as she dropped off the cardboard—Bonnie is unbalanced, often explosive. Then I heard her coming back towards our building, as indicated by the loud clanks of her cart being maneuvered over the edge of the curb. Then shouting, "Run me over, I don't fucking care!" Apparently, Bonnie was in a decent mood—cognizant, terse, straightforward, not taking any shit from a high strung motorist. It made me feel good that Bonnie was okay. She'd been on a rampage lately, as vulnerable and helpless as I'd seen her in the two and a half years I've known her.

One of the reasons she was agitated that day was that she had just paid her rent—which the new management increased a little over sixty percent—and, as she'd told me, repeatedly, in both calm and enraged states, Bonnie was going to have to work some magic to stay in the apartment she had lived in the past ten years.

Our former landlord, Paul, had a soft spot for Bonnie. She worked off a large portion of her rent by maintaining our building's and another's cosmetics: vacuuming hallways, sweeping driveways, chipping ice out of doorways and off the sidewalks, clearing the muck buildup in drainage pipes and out of sewers.

It was one of the only jobs she could get, but not for lack of trying. When I first moved in, she'd been filling out an application, as she told me, at the same high-end Italian fast food restaurant for months, daily, because they kept a help wanted sign posted. "They've got that goddamned sign up, don't I have the right? I pay taxes like anyone else." She attempted to work all over the town of Northampton, but her demeanor, her presence, and probably her reputation made it a perennial impossibility.

She wears a striped denim engineer's cap, has a slightly hunched back and a large belly, and her face—if you didn't know how to read it—would seem to have fastened itself into a permanent scowl. She has bulbous growths of flesh poking through her thin, graying hair, and her hands are always dirty. She appears to have seen a lot.

Bonnie has fits, of which she's conscious. They can happen anywhere at any time. They seem to be triggered by outside influences, however small they may appear to an outsider. A car not stopping for a pedestrian might do it. A whiff of the name George W. Bush is sometimes enough, or a misplaced set of keys, a beer bottle broken while sorting, maybe even an unexpected glare off the windshield of a parked car. I only know what I'm privy to, and that's a gradual buildup that's mostly internal. A calm conversation going sour as indicated not by the altered content of discourse but by the raising fever apparent in her voice, by the narrowing of the face, by a flush of rosacea across her weathered cheeks.

When I'm with her during an onset, I duck out after flimsy, failed attempts to console her—but most of the time I'm just part of an unsolicited audience. When the weather is nice she'll yell outside; during the winter the shouting is more likely to come from beneath my floorboards. Yet there is no calculating, she blows her top when the top

needs popping. It charges through my third story windows, wakes me up at four in the morning, catches me especially off guard when it manifests while I'm walking through the center of town. I've developed an ear for it, and a sorrow, maybe even a darkened heart from the repeated shrieks: "I don't want to live! I don't want to live! I can't fucking take it! Kill me! I want to die! I want to fucking die! God, fucking kill me! I can't take, I just can't take it."

Despite Bonnie's presence, she is not our town's token pity case, not even close. Northampton has long ties with the mentally disabled. The Northampton Lunatic Hospital—later renamed the Northampton State Hospital—was here for a hundred and fifty years; because of this facility, Northampton, Massachusetts has long been home to large numbers of people that, because of their varying levels of mental health, exist in an amorphous grey area, occupy a space somewhere between overall community acceptance and the lonely places left at the fringes of society.

When it opened in 1858, the Northampton State Hospital had a co-op type design: the hospital owned several hundred acres of land, which patients would cultivate; patients worked as janitors and cooks, in the laundry and in the field; they helped maintain both patient and staff quarters. And because this kind of arrangement lent itself to a sustainability at the institution that would have otherwise been impossible solely on government funding, the hospital became a place where many patients, regardless of the economic status of their families, came to live and eventually thrive.

The demise of the hospital began in the late 1950s because of a nationwide process called deinstitutionalization. Deinstitutionalization—the release of institutionalized mental patients into the community—was the result of a number of

different factors, including: growing skepticism concerning the overall concept of mental illness, innovations with anxiety-reducing drugs like Thorazine, increased faith in community-based treatments, and horrifying cases of abuse and mistreatment exposed in the mass media. Because of deinstitutionalization, the numbers at the Northampton State Hospital declined, and by 1961 the discharge rate at the hospital exceeded the admission rate, a statistic that would never change.

What is interesting about deinstitutionalization, particularly in relation to Northampton, is that many of the Northampton State Hospital patients, those that were deemed fit enough, were released into town to begin lives on their own. In tandem, social service organizations were founded in Northampton, and during the 1970s and 80s hundreds of patients were discharged from the hospital and sent back into the community.

In a general sense, this means that for almost fifty years there was a slow and steady trickle of the mentally disabled establishing new lives in Northampton—not in the bucolic confines of the hospital grounds, but in the city center—a process that continued until 1992 when the Northampton State Hospital doors were closed, permanently.

One might think this high population of the mentally disabled would have a negative effect Northampton's real estate, and it did, was a factor for a while. A former Northampton State Hospital therapist told me that for many years Northampton was infamous for being a town "full of college students and mental patients"—which is true on both counts. It's the home of the private and posh Smith College, as well as in close proximity to four other colleges and universities. Yet it is now much more than that; Northampton is changing. It may still have only 30,000 residents, but they're a vocal bunch—decidedly active, predominantly left-wing, trendy and, yes, growing in affluence.

It's the kind of place that has held peace rallies on Main Street every weekend since Bush declared the war on terrorism; Northampton has one of the highest lesbian populations per capita in the country; for this 30,000 people there are a nauseating number of sushi joints—take your pick from over two dozen; indeed, there are more restaurants in Northampton per capita than in New York City. In a five minute walk down Main Street, you can sample caramel truffles at two different chocolate shops, buy a hip leather ipod case, and pick up a snazzy set of free-trade Indonesian napkin rings—though, of course, none of this would be complete without a nameless old-timer shrieking at the top of his lungs about a forgotten plastic bag blowing between slow-moving cars.

In Northampton, it is typical to encounter an individual who exhibits highly atypical behavior—a unique place where someone like Bonnie essentially *fits in*, while in another small town she'd likely be the subject of large-scale public scrutiny.

But now, the intermingling of Northampton's progressing economy and its longtime residents, like my neighbor Bonnie, is more delicate and underappreciated than ever. The once-balanced amount of attention devoted to these separate priorities seems to be in jeopardy—nothing new in America—and so one wonders about the options someone like Bonnie has in an evolving community, in a nation with ever-shifting agendas, such as ours.

In my attempt to contextualize Bonnie's situation, I googled some of the CDC's and Surgeon General's statistics—just over twenty-two percent of Americans suffer from a diagnosable mental disorder, seventy-nine billion dollars in total mental health related expenditures in the US last year—but those figures felt too broad to be of any help.

I wanted to get personal, so I spoke with Seth Dunn, the Director of Program Development at ServiceNet, one of the Hampshire Valley's leading social service providers; they are the primary source of therapy for over 300 patients in the area—situations ranging from alcoholism and drug addiction to the most severe and debilitating of mental disorders.

Seth is a thin, mild mannered, intelligent man in his fifties—the kind of guy a method actor might shadow for a few days. We met in Seth's office while he ate his lunch: toasted brie on a multigrain baguette.

At the time I spoke with Seth, I didn't know much about Bonnie's life. Of course I'd started fabricating her story nearly two and half years earlier, just minutes after the first time I was witness to her rage—but in reality I had only bits and pieces. For all I knew Bonnie had been a longtime resident of the Northampton State Hospital, or, and this seemed unlikely, she may have had no treatment at all.

When Seth and I began talking my primary concerns were decidedly local: Bonnie. I asked Seth whether the current system is working? “I think we do a pretty good job—I wouldn't remain in this field if I didn't feel that we make a difference in people's lives. Advocates can always say we should do more, different, better, but for an individual who is reasonably compliant and wants the help with a significant mental illness, generally there is help available.”

Compliancy resurfaced throughout the conversation as a key term in discussing hypothetical patients. Compliant: not a word that I'd use in reference to Bonnie. She hates to be feel tied down, resents her disability checks maybe as much as she depends on them. In conversation Bonnie once said that her mother told her she ought to be happy

that she gets a disability check, that she should be happy she doesn't have to work, to which Bonnie replied, "You think I just want to sit and watch everyone have fun, watch life go by sitting on my ass? Didn't you teach us, Mom, that we should make something of ourselves? Be somebody?"

I would later learn that Bonnie is not a 'compliant' ServiceNet patient, that she never had been. I think Seth knew this as we talked, though confidentiality barred him from saying so. Further, Seth kept returning to the subject of mentally ill individuals who do not seek help, which was likely by design.

"If someone like your neighbor lived independently in the community and managed to support herself and had no interest in working with an agency, she could do that. Many people need twenty-four hour treatment, and for these people there is a decent system in place. The issue for some others is that it requires them to be compliant—they have to agree to do it. But some people, if they're not harming themselves, and not harming anyone else: it's a free country. They can stand on Main Street and do whatever they want as long as they pay their rent, stay out of trouble, and don't break any laws. There are individuals like that and they don't want therapy."

"What about someone who has never been in the system? Are there a lot of people like that out there?"

"I'm sure there are a lot of people. We don't see everybody. There are people in prisons who don't get into the mental health system. There are people who die prematurely. There are people who live out lives of quiet desperation. They may have adjusted enough so that they have the ability to get it together and hold down a job somewhere, maybe working at a supermarket. They work the night shift, they stock

shelves, they don't have any friends: they live in the margins of life. So yeah, they never come to the mental health system because they manage to avoid it.”

“What can you tell me about Bonnie's outbursts? Is it the result of a chemical imbalance?”

“The conservative current thinking is that these are biologically based disorders, that the way the nervous system works based on brain chemistry is different for people who have a severe mental illness. So therefore the ability to process information is different. Have you ever had a really high fever where you even hallucinated? When you really knew you weren't normal? It's something like that. Everything feels different. So that's one theory.

“Other people say that while that's true, it doesn't explain the whole thing. That there may be traumatic events that a person experienced growing up that stressed them out and that it's a response to those things.

“It's a matrix of nature and nurture. There are all these conditions based on a biochemistry that affects how we perceive and how we process information. And it's kind of a continuum. You have people with biogenetic predispositions that in a very good, supportive, nurturing, and safe environment, they are able to cope better with their biogenetic process.”

On my way home from the ServiceNet building, I began to internalize different Bonnie-scenarios, tried to imagine what had been the critical junctures in her life and how they'd been dealt with. I didn't know those junctures, but I knew, at least in Bonnie's mind, that her mother—the dominant presence in her life—wasn't an entirely supportive figure. “A big, fat cow,” Bonnie once told me as she was showing me a raking

job she'd just finished between an off-Main Street law office and the train tracks. "My mom has always called me a big fat cow, said the other day that if I lost some weight I might be able to get a job. You know, Mom, I said to her, maybe if I got some positive reinforcement now and then."

The most direct route home from ServiceNet is via the train tracks for the freight train that runs through the middle of town—it carries timber and boxcars between Canada and various points south of Northampton and passes within a hundred feet of my building once or twice a day. When I'm home, I am affected by the train: the heavy screech of grinding metal is piercing, is unsettling, and the massive force of the giant machine rattles everything in my apartment, including me. And for no good reason I'm sometimes intrigued by the coffee waves produced in my mug, by the rattling of the mug on my desk, and watch them wiggle until they settle.

When I first moved into my building there were two things that made me feel like I was being dangled upside down by my ankle and shaken: one was the freight train, and the other was listening to Bonnie plead for death. I haven't gotten over the power of the train, but I've acquiesced Bonnie's outbursts to a certain extent. In some ways that fills me with guilt, and in others I'm glad I've been able to distance myself from her pain. I hardly notice anymore, have watched horror sprout on the faces of my houseguests before I'm even aware Bonnie is at it—they're always unnerved and have trouble understanding how I can just block it out. Sometimes they ask if I do anything to help her. "What?" I answer. "What can I do?"

I've developed into a heavy sleeper. When I can't deal with Bonnie, I leave the building by the exit she's least likely to be at. Very few people will engage Bonnie. I do, but considering how few outlets she has, I do not make myself available enough.

As is normal, when I got back from the ServiceNet offices I sat down at my desk—it didn't take more than a half hour before I heard Bonnie and her shopping cart bumping and rattling towards the building. That day though, my impulse was to run outside and unload a dump truck of questions on Bonnie, which of course remained just an impulse. I was uncomfortable directly asking Bonnie anything about her past, and I was far too removed from her family to approach them—we'd never even met—so that afternoon, while I sat at my desk, I called the only person I knew who could possibly have any real insight into Bonnie: my old landlord, Paul. I guessed that at the very least he'd have a few amusing anecdotes.

When I finally got in touch with him, Paul all but refused to speak over the phone. He'd begin a sentence, then stop, finally admitting, "There's way too much to say. I've been very close to Bonnie for over thirteen years. We need to sit down and talk about this."

In many ways Paul is as representative of the peculiar environment that is Northampton almost as much as Bonnie: Paul is fifty-nine, two weeks younger than Bonnie; he is extremely wealthy from real estate investments but also works as a speech therapist at a local elementary school; he used to own and manage a Northampton liquor store; within the next year he plans to leave Northampton indefinitely for a life in the Hawaiian Islands; he drives an old pickup truck, but wears a large diamond stud in his

left ear; Paul is openly gay, an informed liberal, and, as I would learn, he talks on the phone with Bonnie some forty to fifty times a week.

He met me at my building the following day on a miserably cold and rainy afternoon in early November. We walked around the corner to a recently-updated café to have a coffee, and as soon as we sat down, Paul talked almost nonstop for over an hour, with very little prompting on my part.

“Does Bonnie go to therapy?”

“She would never go to therapy.”

“So she’s not on disability for mental health reasons?”

“She’s actually on disability because she broke her hip twice.”

“But there is a problem, right? Has she ever done anything about it?”

“I don’t know if it’s ever really been diagnosed, partly because, if she were, well, definitely fifty years ago, her circumstances would be very different. Maybe fifty years ago she’d be in the Northampton State Hospital. But otherwise, she has never been hospitalized for any reason other than her broken hip.”

“So she’s not on meds?”

“Nope.”

“Do you think they’d help?”

“I do think that if she were on meds it would change things. When I’ve tried talking with her about meds, she’s extremely resistant. It gets her angry. And it doesn’t take much. It happens immediately, ‘Bonnie, have you...’ ‘Get off that train, Paul. I’m not doing that, all those goddamned doctors.’ And the way the medical world is now, her

family can't really get her on meds. Which is a good thing, but in this case it's a bad thing."

"And no therapy?"

"She would never, for any reason other than a personal interaction, like with a friend, meet with a therapist. It's just not what she does. As notorious as she is, she really cherishes her anonymity and her privacy, and though she starts screaming in the middle of the street, it's that imbalance of, well? If you didn't want people to notice you, why would you stand out in the middle of the street screaming? Those two things, she doesn't synthesize them; those two things don't mean the same things as they would to you or me. She is very independent, but she's more than independent—she really believes that individuals should be able to do whatever they want. Certainly not an anarchist. But you know, things like, 'You have no right to tell me I can't have shit piled up to my ceiling.'"

I knew what Paul was talking about—shit piled up to her ceiling, I mean. I've been in Bonnie's apartment, though only once. It was just after she'd broken her hip and she needed help carrying kitty litter up the stairs. Three fifty pound bags of kitty litter for her beloved cat, Margo.

Inside her place, I put the kitty litter next to several other bags of kitty litter—all together, when I'd plopped the new bags down with the old, there were over four hundred pounds of kitty litter in her apartment. That was a bit shocking, but not shocking relative to the boxes and piles and bags and loose items that were, literally, stacked to the ceiling, and in such quantity that there were only shoulder width passages to maneuver through what was otherwise a large apartment.

Bonnie's mother visits her regularly and I seem to remember seeing her come out of Bonnie's apartment once or twice, though most of the time she's just sitting in the parking lot waiting in the car with the motor running. And, I know full well that in Bonnie's apartment, there is no convenient direction to turn your head, no possible way to ignore the extreme clutter. I asked Paul if he thought Bonnie's family knew that Bonnie was most likely mentally ill. "I think they are in denial around her, but they know it. So it's a funny kind of a thing. Mentally ill? Well, Bonnie told me something when this building changed hands that I've never heard her say to me before. Her rent used to be cheap, and it went up a lot. The rent increase was a big deal, and she told her mother that the rent was going to go up. She told her mother that she didn't know what she was going to do, gave her the same story she gives us all the time. But her mom pays her rent. And if the rent was eighteen hundred dollars, her mom would still be paying it. That figure, I pulled it out of the air, but you know what I mean? And Bonnie reported that to me—she doesn't ordinarily report those personal little things that people tell each other. And I can just imagine her mom saying it, like, 'It doesn't really matter, Bonnie, I don't care how much your new landlord is going to charge you, because you are never going to live at my house.' Not that Bonnie would want to, but you know."

"Where is Bonnie from?"

"She's from Springfield. She lived in New Hampshire at the beach, went to Florida, where she had her baby, came back to live with her mother for a few years, and just ended up in Northampton because she wanted to live in an urban area outside Springfield."

"What about Bonnie's daughter?" I asked.

“Bonnie’s daughter is named Becky,” Paul said, “And is thirty-seven years old; neither Bonnie nor Becky is in contact with the father. Becky is married but without children—doesn’t intend to have any, yet she works in social services with a specialization in childcare. Bonnie and her daughter probably see each other four times a year to go out to dinner, but I have a feeling that they talk on the phone more often. Not as often as Bonnie and I do—Bonnie and I talk about six to seven times a day. I’m serious. And that’s seven days a week. So you do the math. Yeah, we talk a lot. Well, mostly she talks. And mostly I listen. But then she’ll start complaining about the system or whatever, and I’ll tell her if she’s going to say that I’m going to hang up on her. But Becky, Becky is a regular person, and she’s successful, owns her own condominium in West Springfield.”

Bonnie once gave me another insight into her relationship with Becky, or maybe more with her mother. I was standing outside our building talking with Bonnie while she swept the sidewalk in front of a bookstore with stubby broom—she swept at the same frantic pace of her speech, talking nonstop for several minutes. “My mom always has some spin on everything. And I say, Well, what the hell do I have to show for myself? Nothing. Absolutely nothing. And she says, What about Becky? And my mom forgets that she wanted me to give up Becky for adoption. You know, the first thing I saw when I came out of anesthesia after Becky was born was a rabbi who asked, ‘Are you going to keep it?’ I didn’t even know if it was a boy or girl. What if I had? You know doctors, all those drugs—who knows what I could have done? What if I had?”

Bonnie is thoughtful, giving, kind. Weekly, she sends food and clothing she collects to different shelters in the area. She gives hundreds of aluminum can tabs to the

Ronald McDonald House in order to raise funds for sick children. She recycles other people's cardboard, not because she gets money, but because she thinks it's the right thing to do.

Sometimes though, Bonnie's kindness, or how I'm exposed to it, feels a little backwards. Once, on a night after I'd taken her to drop off some cans and refused to let her buy me a six pack in return, there was a knock on my door at about one in the morning. I was on the phone with my girlfriend, and, admittedly, dealing with Bonnie at that time was about dead last on my to-do list, so I answered the door in my boxers, phone to my ear and pointed towards her. Bonnie blurted out, "The dumpster is full."

"Okay, thanks," I said.

"So give me your garbage and I'll take it around the block to drop it off."

"I don't have any garbage right now."

"Oh, for Chris sake, get off the phone and give me your garbage."

"I don't have any, and I don't feel like dealing with it right now."

"I don't want you putting it next to the dumpster because then I'll have to clean it up. Now get off the goddamned phone and get your garbage."

"No, Bonnie. It's fine. I won't put anything in the dumpster."

I waited four days to take out the garbage, and when I finally did, Bonnie was at the back door, as if waiting. "Dumpster is full," she said.

"I can smash it in, just let me try."

"Oh, for Chris sake, just put it in my cart, would you? I'll take it around the corner."

"Fine. Thanks, Bonnie."

Another time, I took Bonnie to the redemption center, and as we were getting into the car to come home, she said there was somewhere else she wanted to go. She told me where, but the name meant nothing to me. “I’ll show you how to get there, just get in.”

We drove about fifteen minutes north out of town—stopping at a Dunkin’ Donuts to pick up a medium Hazelnut coffee—until we got to a nursing home: the place Bonnie stayed as she recovered from her second broken hip. She asked me to come in with her, and as we made the rounds, saying hello to different staff members and patients, Bonnie introduced me—“This is my upstairs neighbor.” We ended up in one particular room; two women lived there, one strapped upright in a wheelchair, the other slumped over in another. Bonnie gave the coffee to the latter, then reached down into her left sock where she keeps her coin purse full of cash. For several minutes, while the three of us watched her, she thumbed through the bills, taking some out, putting some back in, the same ones over and over, then counted out forty dollars—twenty each. “Here’s an early Christmas present,” she said. The ladies asked that Bonnie put the dough in their drawers for them, because it wasn’t safe to leave cash out. They said thank you, we said goodbye, and Bonnie and I got in the car and drove home.

Towards the end of my conversation with Paul I began to feel guilty. I’ve never done very much for Bonnie, only little things where I’m able to maintain a distance: I left a chocolate bunny on her door one Easter, without a note; I used the excuse of a loud party to buy her flowers once, which I left at her door without knocking; I talk to her more than most others, I suppose, but it seems that whenever I get to a comfortable point and feel like some kind of rapport or trust has been established, Bonnie will scare the hell out of me with an up close outburst that feels personal, even though I know it’s not.

Maybe it's my job, as her friend, to just work past that part of her personality. But I know that she feels that timidity too, a reluctance to give in: it took her over two years to call me by my name.

I suppose that we all have different roles in this town, though I'm not sure mine is really very clear. What didn't help my moral dilemma was the shift in Paul's tone as he prepared to tell me the following.

"Every Tuesday for about ten years now—I don't know when it started, or when it's going to end (laughs)—we get together for dinner. We have a routine. Between five and five thirty, I pick Bonnie up and we go to the survival center [a food bank], and then we drop off cans. Okay, then we go to my house. It used to just be Bonnie and me, because my partner had to work Tuesdays, but now it's the three of us. And we sit around and she has a few drinks, we all do, and then we all eat, and I bring her home around eight-thirty or nine. And, actually, I have to say, we don't get sloshed or anything, but, you know, a couple of drinks, so the edge is taken off, for everybody. When we're done with dinner she'll say, 'Oh, I had a really good time tonight.' Says, 'That was a lot of fun.' And that's all she says. And she's very polite, as odd as her social skills are.

"But on the ride home, we'll be discussing, who knows, politics, or an electric bill, or she's just yakking away at me, which she does, and then right in the middle of it, she'll say, 'Oh, I had a really good time tonight. It was fun. I really like talking with you guys.' She says this to me in a way that is different than the way she says anything else to me. It's different. It's, you'd have to be there, and have to know her, to see that, or to feel it. But I do. The tone of the voice and everything really shifts to a different place, and

then it's gone. That is very rewarding to me, because believe me, it's all, well... but I don't mind doing it. I don't know why I don't mind doing it, but I don't mind.

“It is sort of funny, that one little thing. That's all, and it's the delivery: the delivery more than anything else. I mean, because, I give her things, like I've given her bottles, and she says something like, ‘Thank you. Great. Now I have more bottles,’ but it's a whole different kind of thing.”

I don't know if there is anyone other than Paul, including those in her family, who gets to see that part of Bonnie. I've never seen it. But since talking with Paul, I look for it, to an extent, or at least keep in mind the potential for it, though my expectations aren't high.

I looked for it tonight. It's nearing December, a Saturday, the midpoint of a weekend entirely devoted to finishing this essay.

I'd been working all afternoon, and as I was taking out the trash, Bonnie asked me to bring her to drop off cans. Right then was an inconvenient time, but as usual, I gave in pretty easily.

“Just give me five minutes to get my own cans, and we'll go over.”

“Okay,” she mumbled.

On the drive, Bonnie talked about housing, said she'd recently visited a friend at the low income Salvo House facility—a potential option for Bonnie.

“You know,” she said, “That place smells like shit. And they don't even smell it. It's like, whachamacallit? It's like if you go into a smoker's house, they don't even smell how bad it is, but you sure do. It really smells like shit.”

We got to the redemption center and she shifted the conversation to Russia. My girlfriend was born in Russia, whom Bonnie has met, and I work in Russia for a month each summer, so Bonnie often uses those two things as departure points for conversation.

“Do they have social services in Russia? Low income housing? How’s it work? I’m only asking because you’ve been there, that’s all.”

I went into a lengthy explanation about how my girlfriend had been translating interviews with St. Petersburg panhandlers for William Vollman, gave some specifics about how the father of a certain Russian family had done Chernobyl cleanup and was now unemployed, destitute, hairless, and basically a neglected and helpless refugee in his own country—that his three grown daughters literally knock on walls in search of portals to an alternate dimension. “In his case, no,” I said, “He gets no government aid whatsoever.”

I wasn’t sure I’d maintained Bonnie’s attention as I talked, as we stood there popping the tabs off aluminum cans, but when I was done, she made a noise of recognition.

We finished up, and as they counted up her cans, Bonnie got very excited. “I bet it’s ten dollars,” she said. “At least ten dollars.” It was eleven.

I hadn’t, up to that point, understood why in the hell those cans needed to be returned at six o’clock on a Saturday night, why it couldn’t wait another day. But it clicked when the guy at the register handed her the cash, and she smiled: it’s Saturday night and Bonnie wants some fun money. She goes out—I’ve seen her before, at all sorts of different places. Usually she’s sitting by herself at the end of a bar, some fancy drink in front of her, or just a beer. She may be talking with the barkeep, or just sitting quietly,

which is the most common scenario: sitting quietly for long periods of time just soaking things in.

Eleven bucks isn't exactly a wild night on the town, but it's plenty for tonight. She, like anyone, feels better with a little something in her pocket. And sometimes, even if she doesn't have anything but a dollar or two, she'll still go out—it'll be a night of tap water though, the cash is saved for a tip, always a tip.

We left the redemption center, and when we got back to the apartment building, Bonnie said thank you. I headed up the back stairs, and then I heard, "You don't want anything for taking me, do you?"

"No," I said, "It's no big deal."

She was quiet for a moment, then yelled up, "Well, okay. Thank you."

It wasn't the kind of thank you Paul described to me at the coffee shop—wasn't an expression of gratitude that reflected an extraordinary moment of clarity. No, not even close.

But somehow I'm convinced there was a version, an indirect manifestation, of that altered state Paul talked about, and it has to do with that eleven dollars. I like to think Bonnie gets a taste of that feeling while she's at the bar.

I picture her at one of Northampton's last remaining dives, the one she frequents most often: The Beer Can Museum. It's still early, so there aren't many people there yet. She is sitting alone with a strawberry daiquiri in front of her—a splurge, but why the hell not, she might think. Bonnie looks cute, hands in her lap bending in towards the long straw to get some daiquiri, and all around her things are normal: a television flashing college football highlights; a jukebox playing music, though it hasn't been turned up yet;

the barkeep eying Bonnie's drink once in a while to see if she needs a new one; and there may even be a few stragglers from the afternoon crowd, red in the face, but still providing a steady din of laughter.

And Bonnie sits there and gets to think and feel whatever she may.

That's how I like to think of it, of Bonnie, my downstairs neighbor, in a good place.

If you ever get there, The Beer Can Museum, that's Bonnie at the bar, she lives in my building; it is yellow brick and on Market Street in Northampton; the state is Massachusetts; we're at latitude forty-two point one nine three degrees north and longitude seventy-two point three seven four degrees west.