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REPTILE HOUSE

A Thesis Presented

by

Rosalyn Hopkins McLean

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers
Department of English

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By

Rosalyn Hopkins McLean

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For Mac and Cindy

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ABSTRACT

REPTILE HOUSE

MAY 2011

ROSALYN HOPKINS MCLEAN, B.A., MOUNT HOLYOKE COLLEGE

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M.F.A., UNIVERISTY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Chris Bachelder

My thesis consists of a collection of ten stories.

Keywords: 1. 1900s-Carlsbad Caverns-Southwest- Fiction 2.Korean War, 1950's-General Enlisted-Fiction 3. Skin disease-Insanity- Science Fiction.

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The Amazing Discovery and Natural History of Carlsbad Caverns

That was Mike hanging in the brass chandelier. He was Tarzan with a crew cut and farm boy grin turned upside down, swinging. Hilarious. Mel could get Mike to do anything.

It was too tight and warm in the Bombardier. The women were laughing their heads off at Mike, mostly South of the Border girls, in their reds, blues, and pinks. They pointed pretty painted fingers up at Mike. They smiled with big teeth and red lips. The men were laughing their heads off too, clean, starched, tall and white, taller by a head than the local girls. The men were shipped in from their Chicagos, Maines, and Pasadenas to Fort Bliss to be trained up and ready, waiting to ship out. They dabbed their brows with handkerchiefs someone stitched for them on some back porch. Those who

had mislaid their hankies wiped sweat with the back of bare thick arms, or the tail of a damp shirt, or licked the upper lip and swallowed with a chaser, hot as Hades sure, but if a big black hand had flown in from downtown Hong Kong or Taiwan or Ching Chong to pry at the rafters with black hairy fingers, had pulled off the roof purlin by purlin, had let in some air, then things might have been different. Mike poured beer on the crowd. The crowd laughed and twirled. Mike twirled his trousers like a lasso. Mel blew a kiss at Mike and handed him up another, which Mike poured on the crowd, which laughed more and leaned, so on. The chandelier would hang there till 1987 when the place burned down. The girls would marry and have children with other men than these, and one of the children's children would fly to Mars on the first manned mission. It was a wonderful night. The rest of the town, the mothers, fathers, and children, were tucked in their beds and dreaming.

Mel was from McAllen so was used to the heat. A boy was walking in the crowd with a pretty pistol on a yellow velvet pillow, and was talking Espanol. He wore a sombrero. The pistol grip was mother-of-pearl, a beauty, made for a female or a duel, someone said the boy said that. On price there was no mistake and Mel ended up with the sombrero too. Someone called, "Enough hanky panky. Let's get back to Base." Someone else yelled, "Reveille's at six." One man whistled at his pals and the pals herded up. They laughed at something someone said. Mike swung down with one arm. He scratched his armpit and howled like a monkey might. "What a card," someone said as the men moved to the street. They rubbed their arms in the chill. The Border was like that, hot after dark till cold of a sudden. Someone called a cab.

In the street, Mike hopped into his pants. He zipped up, "where's my goddamn belt" but the belt was gone forever. It had been kicked under the bar by a girl's pink heel, and although a long handled broom almost grabbed it in 1971, it was never discovered by anyone ever, so burned up, even the brass buckle, with the rest in '87. Mike bunched his pants with one hand. He stood on the curb and cracked the seal of a bottle and drank. The sombrero was huge on Mel's head and Mike said, "I like that hat. I sure do like it," and others agreed, nodded. Time passed, a few minutes, a quarter hour, a cab came and took some men, another cab came, so on. The sombrero had red balls around the rim like a toy. They swung in unison and glowed when any car drove by. "Let me try it," said Mike. "Get back," said Mel, and he slapped his friend's hand, but nice. It was a trick of the eye, but the sombrero looked like a crown in the headlights. The city was dim and the crowd smoked on the street. Nearby the river flowed dry and someone said, "Does it ever rain?" "God forsaken desert," said else someone. The rooftops were flat and poor. Flags and clouds strayed in the small breeze, and drooped. The moon was up, but hidden. It haloed the corniced peak of El Banco. Three jets banked in a slot of sky. The men leaned on brick and saluted with bottles when the jets roared over then disappeared north, to home and hangar.

"Let me try it on," said Mike.

"You always want what I got," said Mel. "I've noticed your habit," but he let Mike try the hat. The crowd laughed at Mike. They passed a bottle between them then Mike set the hat back on Mel's head. Happiness is so small a thing, and they had it on the street for a while, just like that, happiness, till Mike stumbled into Mel, who had grabbed a girl in an orange dress just come out the door. They all three swayed together for a turn,

like waltzing, till Mel shoved the girl to an electric pole for a kiss. Her arms went crazy. She screeched something a cat might screech and the sombrero fell. The girl went running and it was Mike who made chase, clutching his pants, but she was faster than one might guess. The crowd was excited. They hooted and whistled at her big bottom swinging. "Will you listen to those shoes, " someone said. "Like hooves clomping, clickity, click clack!" someone said. Mel said, "Son of a bitch," with his face to the brick, his hands were up like praying since his nose was bleeding like crazy. The girl hurtled a small tree that lay in the street. Its roots were wrapped in burlap or some other cloth. She looked behind her at the height of the jump and someone said, "That tree must have fallen from a truck. " The crowd nodded. Someone said, "These locals are excellent gardeners."

When a cab turned the corner, Mel whistled and Mike ran back. A cab pulled up in front of the crowd, it was a yellow cab.

"My dad would have a cow over that tree," said Mike trotting up.

"I'll see that cow in the future," said Mel to the corner where the girl had turned. Mel and Mike slid in the backseat of the cab, Mike behind the cabbie. The nameplate on the dash said "Richard" but with no picture of anyone. It was just any ordinary cab, the kind you've seen a hundred times.

"To Fort Bliss amigo," said Mike to the cabbie. "Mucho denaro for you."

"Don't you have any heat in this rig?" said Mel. "I'm freezing."

"Heat's busted," said the cabbie, then the cab pulled from the curb and sped north.

"My dad will be milking soon," said Mike. The street was closing up. Men and girls walked in couples and threes. "My mother's a poor milker."

"Who'd want to milk a cow?" said Mel.

"It's more pleasant than you'd think," said Mike. "Restful and gives you time for thinking."

"Who'd want to milk a cow?" said Mel. He dabbed his nose on his cuff.

"You ok?" asked the cabbie. He was looking at Mel in the rear view mirror. He was just any cabbie, a local. "You need a hospital? I can take you there."

"My friend had a run in with a she wolf," said Mike.

"A rabid bovine," said Mel.

"Looks more like Joe Louis got him, " said the cabbie. "Or my mother-in-law."

"Ha ha ha, a joker," said Mike. He smacked the cabbie's shoulder. He drank from the bottle. He drank again.

"Take a left," Mel said. The cab swerved round the tree and turned. A block up, the girl in the orange dress stood under an awning. "Slow down," said Mel, and the cab slowed, but Mike jumped out still rolling. The girl sprinted down an alley and Mike did too. They disappeared at the end of it.

The cab waited in the street. It was an AM station playing a mariachi, which finished with a flourish of trumpets. The announcer said, "tomorrow will be hot" and another song started, a waltz this time. Awnings leaned down over and fire escapes wound up, dark and peaceful. Steps dropped away to wherever steps go. Another cab rolled by. The drivers signed to each other with hands and the high beams flashed. It was a green cab, unusual for the area. It would be wrecked in a head-on the day Kennedy was shot in Dallas, so neither the crash nor the associated funerals was much noted in the papers. But this night, the driver was on his way home. He would eat cold sausage with

mustard before going to sleep, hope for a big fare tomorrow, the water pump needed fixing. The green cab passed on. It was any dark street again.

"Who's that girl?" said the cabbie. "Why's he chasing that girl?"

"She's no one," said Mel. "Some bitch." Mel drank and blood from his nose smeared on the neck of the bottle but no one would ever see it smeared. It would smear from hands to other skin to cloth and spread, invisible inconsequential. A dog might have licked it, the hand and the injured face.

"Maybe I know that girl," said the cabbie. "We live near here."

"You don't know her," said Mel.

There was a brass frame hanging from the rear view mirror. "These are my kids in here," said the cabbie and touched the frame. "Richie, Consuelo, Kiki and Gloria, the baby. I tell them stories sometimes to make them sleep. Sometimes about kings or animals, like King Arthur and Lancelot, or General Grant, Alexander or Abraham Lincoln, big stories and how they should live in the future."

"How should they live in the future?" said Mel. He shifted the sombrero and drank.

"How to be good men and girls," said the cabbie.

"Good for you," said Mel. "Then all your kids will be good little men and girls."

"I tell them all about the desert sometimes too. I have ten books about this desert and the mountains and caves in it. We have the most stupendous caves out there in our desert."

"Well fine," said Mel.

"I have three books on it in the trunk," said the cabbie.

"That's just swell," said Mel. "A regular rolling library."

It was a dark street at that hour. The cabbie looked down the alley. "He won't hurt her," said the cabbie.

"Only if she deserves it," said Mel. "Only in that case." The headlights beamed down the street in two cones of light which flicked from high-beams to low beams with the cabbie's finger. High low, high low, and the street shifted and moved accordingly: the brick walls rose and fell, the trash bins were boulders then sawed down trees, then trash bins, so on. Holes and doorways blinked like hungry things.

"Might as well shut her down," said Mel. "Cut the lights." The sombrero dipped down over his face the old fashioned way, like napping at High Noon, some pueblo. But the cabbie did not shut down the engine or lights. The cabbie watched the empty alley. The red balls on the rim were black. They tipped up like the ride at the June fair, the kids would love that ride, the Ferris wheel, wave down from the top in June. The cabbie twisted the radio dial. The yellow cab hummed. A curtain pulled shut on a second story, the shadow of a stray dog darting out and back into shadow. They waited for Mike. A slow song sang with a chocolate voice.

My dears, there once lived a cowboy called Jim White. He's known and famous across the globe as the discoverer of the world's most colossal, most beautiful, most spectacular, most stupendous, and all around best caves. Now these caves he found happen to be right here in our very own desert. You can look out that window and see the mountains they're in on a clear day. The caves lie eight hundred feet down, a maze of three hundred caves at least, like gigantic bubbles in the solid rock. A few are big enough

to fit a town. Jim found the entrance to the caves one day while herding calves: a tunnel two hundred feet down in the blackest hole you ever saw. What did Jim do when he found a tunnel in a hole? Did he say, "I'm tired. I think I'll go back to the ranch for a nap"? Or did he say, "Well behold, there's a mighty big and interesting hole in the ground right there, but I have no ladder to reach it with"? Did he say, "Some other man can explore that hole, for I have no expertise in the matter"? No, Jim didn't say any of that. He went and built a ladder two hundred feet tall. Then he climbed right down in the hole on his new ladder, then three miles down and in the tunnel, which was like plumbing the belly of an immense stone snake. Sometimes Jim crawled on hands and knees. He had no friend beside him and only the small glow of his lamp to see by. His reward was the biggest cave anyone's ever seen, that's a man for you. Later, Jim brought a boy with him, a Mexican, a pony-tender and ranch hand, since the other cowboys were too scared to come. But Jim mostly explored the caves alone. He plumbed pits with no bottom and wandered chambers with no ceiling. He saw sights too strange and marvelous to speak of.

The year was 1901, more than fifty years ago. Sure, other cowboys had seen the big hole in the ground in their wanderings, but none bothered to look into it further. The Indians of this desert must have known, since they make every root and rock their business. But it is well known Indians are deadly afraid of the dark, so left the caves for others to claim and conquer. Who else knew the caves? Not the bees nor the birds, though they surely swooped down for a peek at the tunnel's mouth when the sun angled right. The bats knew, of course, who lived in the caves and the fishes swimming down in the black pools. But the bats and fishes are pure blind creatures. What does knowing mean for such as them? The bat hears the stone and flies. The fish feels water and swims.

But it goes to show one thing sure: the greatest grandest things on earth are nothing at all till some man comes along, points it out, and says: "Hey lookie here!" And that's squarely where Jim White stands in cavern history.

Jim White never looked for fame and fortune. He appeared any regular man. Jim White was born on a ranch, but no one's heard of it. He was riding the range before he turned eight and his horse was his best pal. He wore a sombrero since it served him best: a freckled man since birth, a gringo, but good anyway, his heart was clean. Jim White ate rice and beans with any man, and beef when there was some. He liked cattle and cactus, firesides, and tall tales with happy endings. He was poor with writing but managed a letter to Mother once a week her life through. Nor was he one for praying or dreaming up what God might carve if He set His hands to limestone. But once such divine sights invade a cowboy's small parched brain, they cannot be rooted out except by death or terrible infirmity. Sleep now, my darlings.

Another waltz played on the AM. A light flickered in a high window down the street, then off. Mike trotted from down the alley. He slid in the cab and slammed the back door. He smiled. "Drive on, Ricardo."

"Who's that girl?" said the cabbie to Mike.

In a few blocks Mike said, "That nose is a geyser."

The cab drove past the theater with the marquee lights out. At the cathedral a cat sat at the crack in the big doors. The cabbie said, "I got married there," and pointed at the doors. "Funerals, baptisms. Everything is there." The bell tower reached up, but no one

looked. “I got married there right before they shipped me to France, like you boys are going, my wife, she worries about everything. You boys married?”

“What outfit?” said Mike.

“The 4th infantry,” said the cabbie. “Where you boys from?”

“Omaha Beach?” said Mike.

“Utah Beach,” said the cabbie.

“Utah Beach my ass,” said Mel. “Damn it’s cold.”

“My dad was in France in the First War,” said Mike. “I’d give my eye teeth for Utah Beach.” The town sunk down. The houses were snug on the street like a tribe, low and dark behind stone walls: a pile of rocks, a pile of sand, a pile of tires covered with sand and rocks and glass in splinters and shards. Mike said, “They say the Channel was red a mile out to sea.”

“I couldn’t say the color of the water,” said the cabbie.

“They say it was a bridge of legs and backs,” said Mike. “You a fair swimmer?”

“I swam to shore. I got this scar.” The cabbie showed the side of his neck under the stiff collar. “My wife, she had our first while I was gone.”

“That’s something,” said Mike. “That neck is really something. What I wouldn’t give.”

“My youngest just lost her front tooth in a fall. Time flies. Now my oldest kid's teeth need fixing.” The cabbie rubbed his fingers together like money. Mike and Mel passed the bottle between them. Mike offered the bottle to the cabbie, who shook his head no, and Mike drank again, Mel drank again. The dash glowed green and the town thinned. The cab rolled up a low hill.

"He could have nicked his neck shaving," said Mel. "There's a thousand ways to nick a neck." The cab crested the hill. The river lay far below, just a black line. Town lights sparked along it like dirty gems extinguished fast by the huge black land. "Does it ever flood?" said Mike. "It floods," said the cabbie. "It's a thousand miles at least." Mountains banged out ragged from place to place and the cab rolled down the north side of the hill. Mel looked at the soft place behind the cabbie's ear. "He could have read up on Utah Beach in any book."

"You hear that, Ricardo?" said Mike. "Says you read up on Utah Beach in a book."

"Sure. I read it in a book," said the cabbie. "You boys know. I was never in Normandy, never was in Paris, my barber nicked my neck a good one, better tell my wife where I was all that time. You boys are smart as whips."

"Don't let him get your goat," said Mike. "He adores getting men's goats."

"Sure," said the cabbie.

"How many kids you got?" said Mike.

"Two boys and two girls," said the cabbie.

"And some's got crooked teeth," said Mel. "A shame."

"People hate people with crooked teeth," said Mike. "It's a sad fact of nature."

"My girl tripped on the foot of the table, the tooth came right out," said the cabbie. "Of course there was blood, any girl would have cried. I found the tooth, cleaned it, the roots of a baby's tooth are exactly like a screw. You know that? I never did. So I set that tooth back in her head like new. Didn't know if I could, it was just last week."

Mel said, "Crooked teeth, crooked soul." He drank.

The land rose again, fell again, rose again. The dogs barked from chain to chain in the yards behind the walls from house to house. The edge of desert came in patches between the last house, the last parked car, and last liquor store with lights out, and said "come back soon, ya'll." The sombrero tipped up against the back glass and blotted the town. The music played out strong and joyful till miles of sand killed the trumpets.

In the beginning, Jim White thought it was a volcanic eruption. The calves he'd been driving agreed, or the end of the world, either way they fled to high ground at the sight of the black swirling spew. Jim's horse shied, bucked and pranced, but he was the very best sort of horse, and Jim tied his shirt across his eyes for comfort, roped him to a bush, which soothed him. Jim crawled on hands and knees to the edge of the hole where the cloud poured forth. Of course, there was no smoke or lava, no devils or angels either, since it was not the end of the world at all, just millions and millions of bats. Jim could not believe his eyes. The bats swarmed and banked around him, they made him weak and strong at the exact same time. They fanned his face with ten million soft wings. His sombrero fell and the bats tipped and turned around it, so pretty it was! They flew out and out as if the earth was stuffed full of bats, not with rocks and gold and lava as some people think. Jim thought, "there's no end to these bats," but still Jim waited, there's an end to all things, a cowboy learns this much. When the bats were done and gone, the hole they left was black as a solid wall. Jim dropped a stone down and listened. The day passed by stones dropped and hours. The calves came back lonely and stood with the horse and they all chewed weeds. Jim built a fire. He flung a flaming arm of cactus, which arced down like a comet. It landed far below. It burned as bright as it could, but in

all that dark, it barely drew out the bats' doorway. That night at the bunkhouse, Jim said not one word about his find. He talked of cows and branding and listened to cowboy jokes. He let his horse lick the plate clean as always, then bunked in, but didn't get a wink. How could he, pondering as he was what size of home those millions share? Next day, Jim gathered an ax, some wire, and a bit of rope. He filled the kerosene lamp to overflowing. He packed his kit and he departed on his horse.

Once, Jim found a dead man in his cave. The man was a skeleton sleeping in a crotch of rock like a bed. The size of him was twice as big and tall as any man Jim had ever seen, though the skull was exactly of normal size. At first sight, Jim thought he'd found some breed of giants, Red Men from the Plain who lived in the caves, then died. But when Jim touched the big man's arm, every bone but the skull crumbled to dust. He figured later it was chemistry: limestone and water dripping, bloated the bones, and nothing whatever to do with giants. Jim carried the skull out the cave like a treasure. He lent it to a doctor in Carlsbad to examine, who lent it to a doctor in Cloudcroft, who lent it to a doctor in Weed. In this way the skull was lost. A shame too, as that skull would have been the prize of Jim's famous cave museum.

The road outside town was a two-lane and smooth. It was built for buggies with spokes and horses, long before Fort Bliss, then improved. It aimed where three searchlights swiveled together, green red and green, dizzy and earnest. The cab buzzed north between the spines of mountains left and right. Birds blew up across the headlights from time to time, but ten thousand others sat under weeds. Dust devils eddied up, spun

up, and disappeared unseen. A snake s'd off concrete at the cab's first vibrations, was long gone before the cab whizzed past, having joined her fifty thousand twins. The sand spat the glass like winter, a trillion trillion grains per fistful, blinded the cab for instants, shoved it across the road. The moon slit the sky, it silvered the mountains and cactus which saluted the road in millions disorder.

Mel said, "I'm not tired in the least. I could drive out all night."

The framed picture swung from the rear view mirror, smooth like a pendulum. The cabbie's finger stilled the frame: Kiki in front holding Gloria in his lap, they grinned out at their father with Connie behind, the tall sister turned to Richie, who was taller, she saying something to him just as shutter opened. The frame was black, of course and the cabbie squinted into black to see just one shoulder or knee or the white of an eye. Then he let the frame swing free. The cabbie tried the radio again but the static sounded like sand and he twisted it off. He rolled down the window, sand blew in, and he rolled the window up.

"They'd string us up as AWOL if we drove out all night," said Mike. "I can take or leave desert."

The cab flew on like a bee or jet.

"Reveille's at six," said Mike. He leaned up. "It must be coming on four. I want some shuteye. What time is it?" If there was a clock on the front dash it was dead. The green dials glowed and greened the cabbie's face. The needle shivered over 65 miles per hour. The gas needle was below half, plenty for an up and back to Base. The box for heat was at the cabbie's brown creased knee and cold. Mike sang:

Daisy, Daisy give me your answer do.

> I'm half crazy over the love of you.
> It won't be a stylish marriage. I can't afford a carriage.
> But you'll look sweet, upon the seat, of a bicycle built for two.

"Shut that clap trap," said Mel.

"You shut it, I like that tune. What time is it?" said Mike. He drank. "Reveille's at six."

"Sing it on your wedding day," said Mel. "You like that song, Ricardo?'

"This desert, way back, was an inland sea," said the cabbie. "Was once completely under water. I know all about this desert."

"Open your eyes," said Mel, who licked his lips. His nose was dry but smell of blood had lingered for miles. "Open your god damned eyes."

The cabbie said, "Those mountains behind Base, they're old coral reefs built up by clams, urchins and such. Think of how many urchins. There's caves in the ground famous the world over. Big enough to fit a town." His fingers found the switch for heat and he flicked it on and off. The needle hovered over 68 miles per hour.

"Last month I found a starfish by the latrine," said Mike. "I sent it home to my folks."

The cabbie said, "They're the most beautiful caves you ever saw, gold and pearl swirled in the rock. They were made after the sea dried up. I tell my kids, 'Squint your eyes. A giant squid is at our heels in race! Whales and sharks are winding round like one of Ike's submarines, peaceful like lambs, eels and fishes missiling around, jelly fish, pink, orange, and green, waving their arms and legs, that would be fine.' I'd say, 'Wouldn't it be fine?'"

"You got kids?" said Mike. "I'd like some kids."

"Give me that bottle," said Mel.

"I got four kids," said the cabbie. "I know all the cave stories by heart. They say, 'Papa, tell again about the caves and the bats and the big man!' and I say, 'Alright then, I'll tell it again when your heads are on the pillows.'"

"I don't care for caves," said Mel and looked at his watch, which was too dark to see. "It's cold. Let's get some heat." The cabbie flicked the switch on and off.

"This certainly explains the starfish," said Mike.

"Your starfish makes a hill of beans," said Mel and drank. "What does he know? Nothing." A mile passed. The Base was a halo sprawled low behind the searchlights. "I could use some heat."

"The heat's been busted for a week," said the cabbie. A mile passed. The needle stood over 72 then 75 miles per hour. "Was that girl ok?" said the cabbie. "I've got two little girls myself."

"I already told you," said Mel. "It's a simple question of justice."

"Try the heat again," said Mike.

"God damn it," said Mel. "There's no heat. Ricardo already said."

The cabbie tried the switch again and the heat came on, blasted warm for a mile, then shut off again. "God damn it," said Mel.

"What's eating you?" said Mike. Another mile passed by, cactus waved in the cool wet blue. "My dad lost a finger in France. I do also know that. There's many things I know."

"He could have lost it chopping cabbage," said Mel.

"But he didn't lose it chopping cabbage," said Mike.

"What do you know about chopped off fingers? " said Mel. "Were you there when he chopped off his God damn finger? Did you see the blood? What do you know? What do I know, what does he know about anything: seas, deserts, girls or mermaids. Hills of beans, mountains of beans, that's all."

Mike drank, Mel drank. The bottle sloshed. A mile passed. The searchlights fanned the stars. The brown mountains north disappeared behind the growing searchlights. A jet could spot Base from one hundred miles with those searchlight waving and dancing, green red green, "come here, this way, come here to land." The needle swung right, 84, 85 miles per hour, leaned into 86 and quivered there.

"Faster," said Mike.

"It's fast," said the cabbie and the Mike kicked the seat and the cabbie jumped.

"Faster," said Mike.

The foot quivered on the pedal. The legs in a pair of regular brown pants quivered, since fear enters through the ears, eyes, and nose, any orifice, but accumulates and settles itself in the limbs and extremities: 87 miles per hour can seem slow to some, but consider the jet would fly over soon and land without incident on the runway beyond the gatehouse. What is 88 miles per hours to a hawk over sand? That pilot would sleep all day and take a shower at 4. He'd lose his father's wristwatch in the mess in three days. This pilot would ship out in three weeks with the others and crash years later on a private outing involving a single engine, a goose, and a glacier, a mixture of winter sky and spinning blue ice.

"I know I was born too," said Mike. "I know plenty. I was born. Here I am. You were born. And he was born." Mike pointed the bottle at the cabbie. "There's a moon up

there, I can see it, way out far. Someone will fly there sometime, pitch a tent, and eat cheese."

"Ha ha ha," laughed Mel.

Forty-four seconds passed, a fast mile, the needle sat at 89. The dial was emerald green, or grass green, or seagreen? The cabbie's knuckles and wrists were green.

"Sure you were born, yes, but who's your daddy?" said Mel, sitting up like he was having fun.

"You need religion thinking that," said Mike.

"Luckily, you and your friend Ricardo here are in the exact same boat," said Mel. "You can grieve your women troubles together."

"He's not my friend," said Mike.

"Your pop was a long time in France. Ricardo was a long time away at Utah Beach," said Mel. "Things can get very lonely back at the casa?"

"Utah Beach is something else altogether," said Mike.

"Women are frail," said Mel.

"I'm the spitting image of my pop," said Mike. "I got that picture by my bunk."

"You got an uncle?" said Mel. "I bet you're the spitting image of your uncle too."

"My uncle lives in Milwaukee," said Mike.

"So many cows to be milked," said Mel. "The truck needs tending. A man is needed for many things."

"Why you son of a bitch!" yelled Mike, and a scuffle broke out in the backseat between the friends. Arms and legs kicked and swung and thumped the doors and seat. The grunting and groaning was in earnest at first, then Mel yelled, "God damn lighten

up!" When the pistol flashed and cracked, the laughing got only louder, "Crazy son of a bitch, ha ha ha!" A new wind screamed through the fresh hole in the roof.

The cab slowed to 22, tried to sway to the shoulder, but Mel said "keep going" and the cab drove on. The foot pressed and ached. Richie had black hair and black eyes. Consuelo, black hair black eyes, Kiki, black black same. Gloria, round and brown and a new front tooth, Gloria Gloria, the children often lifted their heads in the night, turned their pillows without waking at all, which seemed a miracle of unconsciousness.

"We could be dead in a month anyway," Mel said. "Face down in tree roots we can't even pronounce the name of, Ping Pong Bing Bong, eh, Ricardo? We ship out in a week."

"You're a sour puss sometimes," said Mike. "You can really ruin my fun."

"We'll be laying there in the mud. A pack of squint-eyed little yellow men will sneak up quiet behind, quick and nimble through the jungle leaves, and put a pistol to your soft baby temple. Right there." Mel tapped the cabbie's temple with his pinky finger. The cabbie pulled his head away with a jerk. The needle got blurry at perhaps 91. The sand was blue, the black sky was blue.

"I heard that's so, quick little squint-eyed yellow men by the millions," said Mike and drank. "I'd like to shoot something tonight."

Mel said, "If he doesn't shoot you on the spot in the mud, he'll take you back to his hole in the ground and tie your hands. Bind your eyes. Spin you round and laugh his yellow head off before he shoots you, or guts you, or worse."

"What could be worse than gutting alive?" said Mike.

"There's plenty worse than gutting," said Mel. "These squint-eyes have been at it 5000 years. It's an art form they practice."

"I wouldn't let him," said Mike. "I'd kill him first."

"How'd you kill him first?" said Mel. "He's got you at gun point."

"I'd have my knife," said Mike. "It's tucked in my boot and I'll slit his yellow belly up the middle like a calf."

"That might do it," said Mel. "Now you're thinking."

"Pull his insides out and leave them for the dogs," said Mike.

"And the birds," said Mel. "Picking each last bit of him. Swallowing some and bring the rest home to the hungry mouths at the nest."

"I hate him, that's what," said Mike. Five deer leapt in a set along the right shoulder, dashed across in the headlights, and stopped in a set on the left shoulder. "Quick give me that pistol," and Mike. "I'll get some practice right now." He rolled down the window and shot three times.

"Don't use them up," yelled Mel "we might need them for later." He tried to snatch the pistol, but Mike held it up and away for himself. "Suit yourself," said Mel.

"I think I got one," said Mike. "I think I did."

"Those deer will live to be 62," said Mel. "You haven't done nothing tonight."

The cabbie took the brass picture frame from the mirror and slid it in his pocket. The hand held in the pocket for a mile, then two miles. The searchlight swung greater and greater, taking everything up and took the whole sky. Below, the gatehouse to Fort Bliss shone as a small gold gleam ten miles off on a hill. The searchlights. Four miles passed quickly. The gatehouse grew bigger and brighter, a yellow seed, a kernel. "I love this night," said Mel. "I vote for driving out as far as we can go."

"Tarred and feathered," said Mike, and yawned. He rolled down the window, spit, rolled up, yawned again. He sniffed the barrel of the pistol. "Solitary confinement. Scrubbing the latrine for AWOL. I'm tired."

"We can hunt down some dolphins and squid. Mark down every variety of sand," said Mel. "I say let's drive out."

"Reveille's at six. We can't god damn drive out," said Mike.

"Of course we can drive out. Ricardo will drive us out. We are free men, aren't we?"

The cabbie sweated in the chill. His hands on the wheel were slender hands, like a piano player's hands or a girl's. 95 miles per hour was copper green…96…97…98.6… a brain will cook at 108, but this chassis was built for speed, 180 miles per hour at the end of the green dial where the needle could lie down and rest some.

"My dad's into the chickens by now. Chickens were always my job. I bet the tractor's cranky." Mike yawned again.

"He'll hire a hand," said Mel.

"A hand's not the same," said Mike. "He's old."

The cabbie's foot pressed. The cab rocketed toward Base. The gatehouse gleam grew on a hill, but north south east west was nothing but sand. Across those mountains there is no dirt or clay in the ground, no forest, no fields. The earth is a ball of sand to the middle, and heavy. There are no cities with cobblestone or brick or cement cracking. There is no rain, since the sky is sand, no pond or puddle, sand cliffs drop to sand seas. This is no lake with vines and fishes, or river with trees on the banks which from time to time fall and plunge in the stream to be washed down three thousand miles till snagged on the bottom, the roots looped in the roots of some other tree that fell fifty years, or five

hundred years, before. The two never lay in the mud, tangled and linked, rotting as one, since there is no such thing as mud, there is no drowning at all, the pair will not reach up to rip the bellies of small frail boats. Because there's no boat in the desert, of course. There is no oak anywhere to build one, with roots as wide as the shoulder of a pig, or iron for an anchor, or acorn. There is no house with a sink and soap, no bed at all with a wife who wakes at the sniffle leaning in the doorway. There are only lizards and beetles, sand and aboriginal thinking. The cabbie wiped his brow on the sleeve of his coat.

"I love this night," said Mel. "It's our desert tonight."

The gatehouse would be an A-frame. The A-frame would have a black and white gate next to it. The black and white gate would swing up and down by way of a crank. A man would stand by the crank in a silvery head. The cab would slow at the turn, turn slow to the gatehouse, like a Sunday drive. The blinker would be set: right, right, right.

"I was born for this desert," said Mel. "I vote for driving out."

"My wife'll be worried if I don't get back," said the cabbie. "Be calling everyone looking for me, like all get out."

"My mother's a real worrier too," said Mike. "I vote for turning in."

The cab hugged the right shoulder, and blinked, our Father who art in Heaven. One mile yet to the gatehouse and the gleam of that gatehouse was strong, a beacon, the gleam pulled the cab to it. Thy Kingdom come Thy will be done, the cab sped on. The cactus everywhere were the low, many-armed breed with spiked hands, and the cabbie's hands shook on the steering wheel. The gatehouse would be an A-frame, a good solid A-frame. The soldier at the gatehouse would lean at the window, while the searchlights waved behind him like wings. He'd say, "I hope you boys had a fine time so late. You'll suffer for it come Reveille." He would smile as he said it, a kind man, a forgiving man,

deliver us, please deliver us, just a boy really, boys will be boys, his cheek pinks from sunburn and coldburn and his parents too, whose parents' parents' parents were of Viking stock, sword carriers, and any trace of pigment in his soldier's skin was from some slave girl from Greenland or Nova Scotia, some kind of trespass. They sent her to stow in the belly of the ship. The ship floated east and procreated hence: the soldier at the gatehouse would crank up the gate and the gate would rise. It would rise up and the cab would roll on, deliver them through. The caves are a constant 52 degrees. Jim's mother never saw his caves, since she was not one for the underground. She lived her whole life on floorboards. When Jim's mother lay dying, Jim left the caves to see her off. "Jim, my dear son," she said, "I want to look fine for My Maker, but this hair of mine is a real shame." The very next day Jim loaded his mother in his cart. He hitched his horse and toted her across the river to a beauty parlor of repute. She prayed on the way, out loud so passers could hear it. They bowed their heads too, the gravity of it. People stepped clear as he carried her in. Jim lay her head in the sink and the cowboy washed the black black hair, now grey forever and ever, Amen. Once Jim wrote of the caves, "Mother, the columns hoist the ceiling like Hercules! They are twisted and vined like a giant's arm, so big as to make the tallest redwood look puny! As for bats, it's true their faces are ugly to look at, but the bats do keep your son from lonely. I wish you could see them fly like angels through my silver stone forest, for surely it is the nearest to Heaven on Earth, Glory be! Gloria Gloria and Halleluiah too!" Once, Jim lay down by a pool and dreamed of a man in a cave.

"She'll be waking soon," said the cabbie. "My wife will send men looking."

"A worrier wears a man down, don't she just?" said Mike. "With my mother, it's chickens first and foremost. Then what's leached in the well: arsenic, lead, polio, scarlet fever. Lice and the sheets need changing and if the cans in the cellar went bad."

The cab slowed.

"She's a good woman," said the cabbie. "A good wife. The best wife."

"It's always in the water," said Mel. 'This sickness, the fever."

"I don't have a wife at all," said Mike.

Mel leaned his elbow next to the cabbie's ear. "Shut up," said Mel, "I want some quiet to cool my head." The land was perfectly flat. It tilted hard up and ramped toward the mountains and up at the sky, except there's no such thing as sky, it's only a word. The cab rolled on between sand and sky. Slow, slow, careful. The cab blinked red, metal striking metal, right right right at the A-frame half a mile ahead.

"I'd like a house with red curtains," said Mike.

"Dengue fever and hemorrhagic fever," said Mel, "They're the very same thing when you get them."

Mike said, "I'm tired of this night."

"Bleed out your ass, then die," said Mel.

The turn to the gatehouse had come. The road made an X in the desert with gatehouse, gate and a soldier. "We're not turning in," said Mel. "Tell him. We're not turning in just yet."

"Things aren't so foolish as you think," said the cabbie. The cab coasted and slowed to near to stopping. The sky hovered as usual. "Lock his door," said Mel, Mike slapped down the knob, the cab rolled slow into the X.

The soldier stationed at the gate was from Duluth. He'd seen the headlights coming for miles. Flat has new meaning in the desert, he'd thought Duluth was flat, Minnesota was flat, but no flat is flat till you've stood in the desert at night and seen headlights at fifteen miles. His mother had sewn his name in the back of his shorts. He had rubbed his backside and had watched the headlights come.

He had tucked his clipboard under his arm. He had slipped his pen in his shorts to warm the ink. He'd snugged on his helmet. He'd stepped into the cold and stamped his feet. He'd go far in the service. His mother said his father said that. He would ship in three weeks with two thousand souls and some other boy would stand graveyard at the gatehouse from Pittsburgh or Whitefish or New Rochelle. Once, long ago, the soldier had sat by a tree. He'd watched a squirrel on a branch and a bird, which flew and hovered. It was after that squirrel. The bird had swooped and pecked and the squirrel parried and slashed. There must have been something in the nest. The afternoon passed that way: the soldier picked his teeth with a twig, the sun dropped down, when soldier's hand found a stone of handy size, he flung it, "Quit that squabble, my darlings!" and the squirrel ducked and the bird flew up and away. They were back at it before long. The soldier took a nap in the roots of the tree. His helmet hid his face. His pillow was a big pink shell.

It was 4 miles per hour at the X but the needle dropped below 0 and sat there quiet.

"Tell him," said Mel. "Tell him before he turns." The cab stopped in the X. The soldier at the gatehouse saluted the cab and waved it in.

"Keep driving," said Mike. "We'll stick together." Mike held the pistol on the seatback pointed lazy at the cabbie's neck, an enormous pistol, silver, with a big black

hole for a mouth, a barrel so wide around it blotted the sombrero and it scraped on the roof the cab, “My children,” said the cabbie. “They are my moon and stars.”

“Moon and stars, moon and star,” said Mel.

“Like he said, ” said Mike, “We’re driving out.”

The cab revved through the X. It ran through north. The soldier at the gatehouse stepped back, tucked his clipboard and watched it go. The soldier at the gatehouse would make Major after two tours. He would marry a girl from Roswell who would lose her liver to a virus, though a cure was found the year after she died. Much later, their children were inoculated for Ebola before the Third War, so they never got it.

The cab rolled on the narrow rough road beyond Base. A car had not passed that way for 36 hours and fox and deer scattered in surprise from mile to mile. The mountains loomed unimpaired by searchlights. Mike held the pistol close to the cabbie’s temple when the cab slowed or weaved to the shoulder. “Steady on, Ricardo, steady on.”

“I’ll have a pack of kids someday,” said Mike in a while.

“Sure,” said Mel. “You’ll take them on field trips to visit those caves.”

“I don’t care for caves either,” said Mike. The cab rolled north and north. “He’s never going to like you,” said Mike to the cabbie. “He just can’t.”

The soldier at the gatehouse watched the taillights a long while. The right blinked right for miles after he walked back to the A-frame, which was warm and bright. A mouse ran across the floorboards at 04:00, he might bring the General’s cat. The moon made a new cloud silver and the soldier took a paper and wrote a letter that mentioned the cloud. The taillights rose and fell ten miles out, crested again in twenty, he yawned at one hundred miles, right right right, a jet floated down, the landing gear was tinted green red

green. In a hole, some tail covered its nose at the jet sound. A lizard licked her tongue with the air.

There was no turn at mile 109, but the tracks in the sand started there. The tracks cut east, fishtailed through succulents and creeping vines. They wound round the cactus which clawed at yellow paint. The tracks were plain as day in the last of moonlight till the wind ate them.

"My dad's in the field by now. He's fighting with that plow." "He'll get a dog." "What good's a dog?" "Dog's are fine." "Sure they're fine?"

Mike drank the last of the bottle and threw it out to the sand. "A nice home for some bug or mouse," Mike said. "They'll cook in that bottle by noon," said Mel. "Some friend you are." "Jungle men cook bugs and mice from the mud in a bottle," said Mike. The cactus gave way to the tires and grill. The cab lunged and weaved through sand.

Once, Jim White kicked over his lamp by a pool. That was darkness! The lamp rolled to the edge and rocked on the lip. Jim dropped to his knees, if there are such things as knees. He groped in his kit. The bats screeched in their usual way. Jim's fingers fumbled, the box burst open, and the matches chimed to China. This desert, way back, was an inland sea. Those mountains were coral reefs, with caves big enough to fit a town. The reef hugged the eastern shore, eel and sharks, the sponges and urchin had children who grew up and had children who died on the reef and it rose up fine and tall with all their corpses. Time passed, 50 million years, lava spit and lava cooled, great lizards slept on islands. One day, the sea dried up. The land filled with sand in a blink. The reef was gone. Time passed, 200 million years. Jim rubbed on his leg in the dark, the real dark, and a real leg with a real boot on the end of it. He got the boots once from the blacksmith since they did not fit the blacksmith right. This desert was an inland sea and

the girl tripped on the barrel. Of course there was blood, the girl had cried, any girl would have cried, he groped the ground and found the tooth by the first hoof, time passed, ten million years, and he dipped the tooth in the pail to clean it, the roots of the tooth were exactly like a screw. He held her head between his knees, one million years, and the reef busted out lean and sharp, those mountains there, brown and pretty, her belly round as a melon on account of breakfast, screwed that tooth back in her head. Deer and mice ate the grass, grew fat and died, a tree grew from the guts, the wind smoothed down the ridges and ribs and knocked over the tree. The mountains soaked in acid bath which hollowed the roots like Swiss cheese. Jim was hungry by the pool. He ate a leg of chicken roasted from his kit. His stomach growled. It unsettled the bats.

The cab cut east some miles. The moon set. The searchlights lay down. The cab halted nose up on a dune that looked exactly like a cresting wave. Mel got out and kicked the tires. Mike sang a marching tune, the stars faded to a slice of sun.

"Get out and dance," Mel said. "You're a happy man."

"Something with local flavor," said Mike, and clapped the drums. The cabbie stood by the dune.

"Stamp your feet, clap your hands," said Mel. "Like a wedding!'

"He's stubborn," said Mike.

"Make him spin." Soon after, Mike spun the cabbie.

"Tie his hands," and soon thereafter, Mike tore his shirt, wrapped the head in the right sleeve and the wrists with the left.

"Now, give him a kiss goodbye. We best get walking."

"I'll not," said Mike, but he touched the soft temple above the sleeve. "Sayonara amigo," he said.

"On your knees," said Mel. Mike pushed the cabbie down.

Way back, this desert lay at the bottom of the sea, ten million years, or some time, the reef rose and fell, the acid bath receded, and there in the end were caves! Rain and snow dripped and prettied them up: a column forms where drippings meet; the gypsum chandeliers are unsurpassed. When Jim threw the chicken's bone in the pool, the fishes circled to see it and taste. When his fingers found a match by his toe and struck light, Jim kissed his own hand. The fishes thought it was the moon. The caves are grander than the pyramids on the Nile, more lavish than a cathedral in Rome These caves are so big as to fit ten cities, with balconies and bridges of gold and pearl. The caves' ceilings, too, are something to look at. See there, fanged and curtained, towered and peacock-tailed, pocked, razored, fancied and filigreed over every silken wall. See here: every inch is buzzing nectar back to the loaves in leaven. There, the apple-pears bangles from a marble girl's arms. Behold and wonder: the stone bear licks great stone paws! There, the winged snails sleep in lace forever in mother's kitchen garden. Ten-foot turtles stampede, off to war, and with what speed, while their golden riders squint and aim for the spleen and pit of the tall sweet terrible sad, a truly dizzy place. The world is full of beauty! The world is full of beauty! I am down on my knees to tell you!

They spent one bullet on the cabbie. They spent one match and the rest of the shirt on the cab. The fire was pale and disappointing at the beginning of day. They emptied their boots and retied the laces. Mel licked his nose, which was blue and smeared and sore. They lingered. They warmed their hands as the frost dripped off every thorn. Time passed, an hour. The drops made a damp place in the sand that a flea would drink up in a

week. In one hundred years it would be a puddle of respectable size, in ten thousand years, a pool with a fish. In a 700,000 a modest lake, ten million and fifty-two, a smallish sea and the caves drowned.

"I wish I had my belt," said Mike. The boys got walking south. They would have followed the sun but some clouds had come in. They turned their backs to the mountains and followed some animal's trail. They looked for up for jets. "They must have been grounded." "Maybe they'll send dogs." "We'd hear if they sent dogs."

The cactus pointed the way. It was far to walk and they tired. Some bats flew up from nowhere, as if the bats could stand it no longer in nowhere. They turned east, maybe they were birds, they turned west. Far away a thing cried out. Sand beat on their faces. They turned north, then east again, behind a still ridge of rock. They walked south since the sun was high, the ridge rolled over and settled back down. The red balls on the rim glowed in the sun, joyful and good. They took turns with the sombrero.

Up north, a farmer planted his field seed by seed in black dirt. He saw no mountains at all. The tractor coughed and the farmer stopped on the third pass to lift the hood: the boy ought to have changed the oil. The black fly buzzed his ear as he tinkered. The farmer waved with his hat and slapped at his neck and when the tractor turned the fourth row, a rocket ship flew over. The farmer would live to ninety-two. The black fly would live three more days, but would crawl to his nest, happy, with the lump of farmer's neck in his thorax.

"Good morning," said the man in the trail. The man was neat and trim, but tall as two men with hands big as plates. His trumpet was gold and tied by rope to his belt. His skin was a red, but by nature or by sun, it was impossible to say.

"You better come with me," the big man said. "You boys look lost!"

"We have to get back. Can you help us home?"

"Of course, I'll lead you," said the big man. "But first, come to see a wondrous sight!" He lifted the trumpet and played his fingering.

They turned with the big man toward the mountains. He told all about his life: his gal back home who was fine; his last best meal which was sausage and beans stirred in one pot. He told about his late great horse and many other stories. "Such successes form a man's soul," he said. The stories did lighten the mood.

The boys walked on and on. They tired and rested sometimes. In this way, the day passed. A gull flew over. They looked back from time to time and smoke curled up as if they'd not walked a mile.

They suffered and shivered, but the big man did not break a sweat. Once, he offered a canteen and something that looked like bread. They did not sleep at night, but walked. Another day came and went, seeing double, like crabs, and a third day and a fourth. On the fifth day, the big man whistled in a pair of seahorses from the green pasture yonder: twelve feet at the shoulder, one dappled, one bay. They'd been nibbling clams. They were less than keen on the bridle, pawing the grass and tossing their heads. These were no gentle steeds! But the man was firm and they came to him. He called them deary and sweetheart, and my-precious-little-one to the bay. He petted their thick rough muzzles. He fed them sugar from his palm, which they licked clean with foot long tongues that curled and forked and roved his enormous forearm. In this way, the beasts were made tame for the journey.

Reptile House

Carl's wife lay back, sanitized stirrups biting at her heavy ankles. Ten centimeters. The steel edge under her spit out a baby. A pair of blue rubber gloves made the catch.

Carl's head had hovered between the suspended knees and witnessed the exit close up. A tunnel and black fist of hair. Then shoulders, tiny but slumped like an old man's, then the crooked little body came out thrashing, apparently wanting no part of this new light world. Carl could understand. The skinny legs slid out last, kicking hard with feet too small to take seriously. This baby was a messy smear, a victim of riot, when the good place turned inside out.

The face was imbedded with a pair of eyes that roved, a sort of nose screwed in the middle, and small mouth, but loud enough, like it belonged to a thing with a dial. A

cord coiled into the place where Carl's wife was. Carl didn't like his wife much anymore, but he didn't know it yet.

"Carl, cut the cord," she said.

"Cut the cord," he repeated, and set a hand on the knee.

Carl didn't want to cut the cord. He had done it for the others and this, he felt, was more than his share. The other kids were tucked in and away for a few days at her sister's spread in Winnetka, not far from his parents' old farm. His own modest house off Cicero, just southwest of downtown, was enticingly empty tonight, all five windows to the street, three on top and two on each side of the red door, would be dark and oblivious to Carl, for example, in a big empty bed, or babies, or the half moon rising through the grit and glow of the city, outlining the tallest of its buildings. Keep it dark. He hoped to get home tonight and sleep some, in all that still and lonesome.

The green nurse handed Carl the scissors and the scissors sliced through red and blue flesh. This done Carl stepped from between the legs and made way. Someone tied a small knot of independence.

"Carl, hold the baby."

Carl's arms took the baby, bounced it, pitied it, then gave it back. The tv bent down from the ceiling like a nun. A breathing machine, EKG on a cart, and devices Carl didn't know stood at ready for ON and OFF, breathe, don't breathe, live, don't live.

The doctor reached in and stitched Carl's wife with a black seam. The blue and green nurses huddled close as the thread pulled through. Sponges, syringes to blood and bruise. A wince and moan. When the baby first cried and everyone laughed.

One thing: the florescent in the ceiling fixture had flickered to almost out. This bothered Carl. Another thing: the breathing machine box was off plumb on the wall and irritating. Carl was in construction. He worked in the showroom of a leading building supply outfit, his boss having flown him for training in fasteners – now the goto guy on this very subject. No excuse for sloppy work. Carl stared down the off angle.

"Carl, some water."

The plastic pitcher tipped and the water poured. "Straw?"

"Yes, a straw. You're a love, Carl." She tossed a kiss without looking. She was exhausted. She wore a baseball cap backwards on her disheveled head. She sipped on the straw while the baby sipped on her. Carl sipped on nothing. No one brought him water.

The baby was off for bath and immunizations. Carl's wife dabbed coco butter on her wide brown nipples. Carl turned his back with the Tribune and folded into the crossword. There was nothing wrong with her at all. A mother. Wide hips, a smile and a mind. "Heart of gold" was what people said, but these were just three words.

She had half-finished the puzzle in pen back when she still could concentrate, sometime between two centimeters and three. The puzzle was called "Creatures of our World" and now Carl used a pencil. The empties, across and down, seemed glad to have his latest scratchings, starting with four letters down for "A dog without pedigree." Carl wrote M U T T in the boxes. She moaned in the bed, turned and moaned again. It was contagious because Carl moaned too. Sick, edgy, out of sorts. Carl.

"Carl!" she said.

"Yes, dear."

"Carl."

He went back to his puzzle.

"Disney's orphan deer," but she had beat him to it: B A M B I five down in the bottom right.

If Carl could have been anything it would have been a long haul truck driver. He would have gone by Jack for the snappy consonants and driven this Great Land in his shiny eighteen-wheeler. Driving fast and long miles with red eyes and a thermos filled. He'd have lived in that cab, slept in the space behind the seat with a propane cook stove and a satellite tv. He'd have dosed to the CB chatter while rainstorms and snowstorms blasted the windshield, Manifest Destiny served up with coffee and pie from girls with slim ankles and pink aprons. He would have dropped in at the house off Cicero from time to time for a little two-on-two with the boys, report cards, and hand over the paycheck.

An orange nurse came in with a clipboard and plumped his wife's pillow. "How are we, sweety? Big night." His wife smiled, signed a few papers, and the orange nurse left.

A beat up pigeon presided on the brick sill out the window. He liked it at first as it paced and pecked at nothing. It seemed pleasant and interested. It tapped the glass with its dirty beak from time to time. Carl thought it looked pregnant but it was the wrong time of year. Just getting a lot to eat, lucky bird, born at the right place at the right time.

From the sill the pigeon could see a room with a man and crossword. A lady with brown nipples, rubbing them in circles, and looking at the doorway as if waiting for someone. A perfectly clean and empty trash can by the door under the light switch which

was a small fixture, about the height of an infant's foot. The doorway opened and welcomed out. A hallway beyond was wide, cool and serene, leading to an elevator bay somewhere round the corner with a button pointing down to the foyer, where a reception desk was tended at this hour by a sleepy man with a handlebar mustache and a winter coat since the revolving glass doorway went round and round forever like a child's toy, perpetually offering the Outside to any taker, fresh air without end, and beyond this, if the bird turned and looked over the edge, was the shoveled walk to the parking lot, hooded street lamps spraying light over all including the edge of a street beyond, a street to other streets, a clutter of streets which by and by rambled to a cloverleaf entrance ramp, round and round up and merging left to eight sprawling lanes and seventy miles per hour even in the middle, and many miles before it cinched down to six lanes, then four, till maybe in Iowa or Nebraska, there was a simple ramp off right and down to two lanes, with the double-dash for passing, yellow, a sloping shoulder to the perpetual ditch, and west to Elsewhere.

Carl's finger pulled a string and the blind rolled down. A pigeon can be eradicated that easily.

"Carl."

"Yes, love."

She needed to pee and he walked her elbow to the bath. She was five feet four inches, 135 lbs. light brown hair. That's what her driver's license said about her. Mrs. to the neighbor kids, mom to her own and Carl, since her other name got stuck in his jaw sometime between the first and second child. A set of creases was forming round both their mouths.

"Carl, did you call daddy?"

"Not yet," said Carl. "It's too late. He'll be in bed."

"Of course you'll call."

The pay phone down in the hall had a seat and a folding door that closed. The quarters dropped and the finger dialed. Pull yourself together.

If he ever got a chance he would go to Catalina Island. He would be an old-fashioned man there, tall, stout, round as a rock, and reliable. Big hands and a big mouth. It was a beautiful place, he'd heard, just close enough to the continent that you could still see it, know it's there, but still give civilization the finger. Like paradise with orange trees, lemons and pomegranates everywhere you look. He read in a book there was a town where people pedaled one-speed bikes up and down the little roads to get milk and eggs from friendly neighbors and smell the flowers and apples day and night. Carl later learned there were cars and trucks on Catalina, ferries to the mainland, and phones to anywhere else too. So that book was out of date and wrong. He had never eaten a pomegranate except once in Sunday school.

His wife took something for pain below. Carl took something for pain in his head. He sat in a chair at the window, looking. At a crash down the hall, the blue nurse ran and Carl thought of crashes, the empty house, the level in his gas tank. The little white car. The baby slept, then woke, then slept. He grabbed the puzzle off the floor.

Five down. "Humped and never thirsty."

C A M E L. He wondered what the word would look like in Arabic or some language and place that did not have camels at all. It would not fit the white boxes. That was near certainty.

Once, before Carl had married, Carl's boss was on the showroom floor. He had seen Carl many times, but asked Carl's name anyway. "Carl," said Carl.

And the boss said, "Seems like someone was just mentioning something about you."

"Good or bad?" Carl asked excited.

"Very good. Whatever it was, I can't remember, but you are the very best at it."

Carl never heard.

"So hot in here," the wife's voice said. "Should we open the window?"

"Too cold for the baby," he said. Carl was cold, though he was never cold, a warm blooded man. A cold snap. Snap out of it.

So cold, so sick, so out of sorts. At the showroom, he was cheerful and easy, the go to guy for sticky situations and unhappy returns, the people with the warped beams, mismatched colors, the ratchet sets with missing ratchets. But now Carl wanted to zip out of his skin. On the bedside table was a bunch of daisies in a plastic cup tipped over and he could not set them right. Their heads leaned on a phone book three inches thick full of strangers and over a stack of seven identical postcards of the Sears Tower, already stamped and addressed to friends and family. "WATER BROKE AT WATER TOWER PLACE!! CRAZY! HERE WE GO AGAIN!!!! XXX OOO!!!!" The same message was printed on each.

Carl clicked the box for the tv. and an old ball game came one. October 1963, and three guys were talking with no volume and the players wore old-fashioned uniforms that Carl almost remembered. When Carl was young he wanted to fly an airplane or be a forest ranger. He might have been a scientist like the one who discovered the 366th day,

an Arab with an abacus and a stick for making marks in the desert sand, living in a stone room. A tray of wine and bread glided though a slot at sundown. Batter up, same as now. There's the pitch, a line drive to second, thrown out at first for a double play which retired the side. Like any modern team. The channel jumped. The La Brea Tar Pits are asphalt seeps smack in Los Angeles and one of the only archeological sights in the world where predator fossils outnumber the prey. They were like black swimming pools, these pits. Carl had always planned to get a backyard built-in pool for the kids. For swimming. Above ground would do. Maybe if the bonus came in. The channel jumped a helicopter over the Great Wall of China, coiling down, all those stones set by some poor man, like an old animal lounging on the land green and pretty. The channel jumped back to baseball, pop fly to center but Carl did not see what became of it because the tv clicked off.

"Should we open the window?" from the bed.

"Too cold for the baby," from the tv.

Yesterday Carl had stood in line a busy downtown post office and bought the book of postcard stamps at her bidding. Writing her cards in the waiting room, though, she had rejected these stamps he'd chosen. She'd taken his Forever Stamps instead, his pretty stamps with the Liberty Bell on them, F O R E V E R printed in vertical next to the bell. Carl had never heard of them, but the clerk at the big counter was hawking them hard, giving his pitch to every patron in line: "The Perpetual Stamp. First Class guaranteed at forty-one cents from this day forward and forever. Hell or high water. Never expires, never declines in value, even if letter rate goes to million bucks. Great investment. How many books do you want?"

Carl had stood at the clerk's big counter thinking of Fate and Perpetuity: the Sears Tower, house paint and report cards. He was tired. He was hungry. When they had met many years ago, he'd said he liked the "gravity of her character," but he did not remember this feeling or what he had meant.

Flat line. Highway. An eighteen-wheeler could hold a lot of peanut butter, jugs of water, pilot crackers and rationing. Carl had bought three books of the special stamps.

His stomach growled and the pigeon scuffing. His wife and the baby slept. Eight across for "The sea's diva." He scribbled S T A R F I S H and thought of Catalina Island, of the tide pools and urchins beckoning with delicate green arms. Once Carl left his wallet at work and had gone back in to find it after hours. The wallet was safe in the break room, but the day's cash deposit sat unattended in its dirty canvas bag by the till. A heavy bag too, since Friday was a big day at the showroom. That and a gallon of best red enamel came home with Carl that night. Barn Red, it was called and high gloss. A new floor manager was fired soon after.

Six across: "Rodents in the Bard's title." Carl thought, erased, then wrote S H R E W S in boxes at the center of the puzzle. Good thing it was pencil. The words H Y D R A and E W E S made sense now and appeared.

Four down : "Places to keep animals." Carl's pencil wrote Z O O S, a word with a strange look, but so many words have that. W I F E, for example, or C A R L or L E A P. Look at them. Just lines and dashes cutting and crossing each other and promising sense. But phone lines made sense. Tunnels, conveyer belts. The double yellow, straight as an arrow across the desert in Arizona, made sense.

G O T O

Some time ago in the Reptile House at the zoo Carl watched a twelve-foot python opened its big detachable jaws and swallow the other snake in the cage, its only companion. Black snake eats brown snake. Big snake eats little snake. Carl stood behind the glass eating peanuts from a bag. Two snakes became one as people flashed pictures, went running, and whispered with quick tongues in the echoing dark. His wife had stayed in the Big Cat House and had not seen the eating. The kids were at the dolphin show with the sitter. Had the snake made some sign before the deed? Some goodbye or explanation with those lidless eyes? Carl wanted to know, tried to remember. He'd witnessed it all.

To the guys at work he described how the final snake had two tails for a while, one pointing each direction, the gaping mouth in the middle, the brown tail flapping then still. Gulped shorter and shorter till gone. This was odd to see.

The zookeepers had said of the incident: "Unnatural, unprecedented, as far as we know." But Carl had doubted that. This was a PR statement if he ever heard one. But there are things zookeepers do not like to admit.

The pigeon tapped behind the blind and Carl thought how the snake would show that bird a time. His wife was not interested in reptiles. She did not like what Carl liked. Carl did not like what she liked either. Or other things too, so surprising with so little warning. He raised the blind and said this to the pigeon. His wife and baby slept far away, across the room, behind his back.

In the Snake House, two windows down from the double snake in the cage, a nest of eggs had been hatching. The little things had tumbled in knots, striking and hissing, but it had been hard to take them seriously, till this.

Now the walls bleeped and who-ed at him. Carl was hungrier. The two, his wife and baby, were a vague white bundle on the bed. At their elbows on a tray was an apple she'd bitten into at eight centimeters and abandoned, with lipstick and tooth marks in the green flesh, now in the sweet beginnings of rot. Apples are so good. Apples are historic and scientific in the morning on Catalina. There were no snakes on Catalina. Too far from shore.

He walked the apple to the trashcan. He stood in the door. He thought of going. There would be no traffic at this hour. Home fast, in the middle lane, going sixty-five to the turn at Cicero and leaving the tallest of the city behind. The windows would be dark, not ignoring dark, or oblivious dark, just sleeping dark, five of them, three on top and two in each side of the red front door, like a big glassy family. The frozen lawn would roll out flat for him and his legs would walk him home. And don't switch on the light. Keep it dark till tomorrow.

His wife stirred. "Maybe open the window."

"There's a pigeon out there."

"Don't be ridiculous, Carl."

When the window opened, the pigeon flew off. The green nurse came and took a pulse.

"You should go," said his wife. "We're alright without you."

"I'll be going," he said.

Carl put on his coat and found his keys. He grabbed the postcards and stamps. The elevator carried him down, the postcards slithered down the slot near reception, the revolving glass doors shoved him out to fresh air.

His keys clinkling in the parking lot and the little car waited. A satellite beelined the blackness, bent toward the horizon. Like it was planning something big.

G R A V I T Y. Carl raised a hand up at it.

The parking lot, the side street, on-ramp, eight lanes, sixty-five miles per hour. The four-door whizzed away by the Lake, over the river, zigged and zagged by wharfs, beacons blinking, stone lions and white capped waves, missiled through the tunnels of towers, and past ball parks put to bed. Finally he zoomed under the massive central post office that squatted over the entire eight lanes like a big brick mother. Then the open road.

When Carl was a boy, the neighboring farm boarded horses. There was one young horse who was so tame they didn't tie him up or keep him in the paddock. The people just let the horse stand in the driveway or walk in the yard because he never went far from the house. He was too scared. But once on a full moon night, Carl had been walking the road, thinking of his future. At the neighbor's house, this horse came into view. It stood alone, a white shadow in that moon, and maybe not a real animal at all. Carl was startled at first, then recognized the horse and kept walking. This horse started to follow. Twenty feet back, then fifteen, then ten and Carl started getting scared. This horse had never been so far from the house before. And what if it was not the same horse, but a different horse of a different temperament? Or a different creature altogether? Young Carl found a tree and climbed up into it. The horse stood at the trunk till dawn and went home.

Carl's little white four-door whooshed past the Cicero exit. The fringe off the dirty berm swirled up like a laugh. Walls, corners and rooftops stacked high and low,

marched on neat and trim. The billboards shouted and flashed: an umbrella, a mustache, a bottle of rum, as big as trees. Near the airport a cord of jets lashed fifty miles out over the Lake, heading past places like Kansas City or Maui, past landing strips and volcanoes and a telescopes. A jet with landing gear slung low, roared over the highway, and the little car flinched, swerved left, then righted itself to the middle lane.

Beyond the airport the city thinned and dimmed, private and pleasing. The billboards grew faint and quiet. The walls, corners and rooftops purpled and settled away lower and lower to the ground. The night split open. The car sped on.

The little car slowed for a bank of toll booths spanning the road that Carl did not remember. As the window rolled down and fingers fumbled for change, a pair of tall white lights, growing bigger approaching fast, sprayed the rear window. The eighteen-wheeler purred to a standstill behind the little white car though all the other lanes, left and right, yawned entirely vacant. Its chrome face nuzzled in, steamed, licked closer till the grill grinned red in the taillights. It growled low at idle and the tollbooth shook as the quarters flew from Carl's hand, the nickel and two dimes too, and were gulped down. The white lights blinked to high-beams blue. The gate snapped up, a green light said G O, and the little car went. The high beams winked a salutation as the car flew away around a next long curve.

In the dark, the white dashes dashed west and the little car threaded between them. It was not long before the high beams came again bearing down fast from behind the long curve. Steady now, easy now. In the rear view mirror, the truck stalked closer, crept and reached, till, grasping, the little car was snared in a whizzing ball of light. Closer, closer, closer, the truck eased to looming within yards, within feet, inches of, and

all was blue: the gripping hands, the trembling wheel, the shadow of the head on the dash. The dashes leapt on, the car, and the light, till at 84, something kissed the car's rear bumper, tenderly, and the shadow shook.

89… 92… 95.

Shortly, the others came too. They passed two from the left, one from the right, shiny black eighteen-wheelers, swirling rims and red rivets, without a single marking on their faces or flanks and no identifying plate or registration at the rear. The first of them slid from left into the lead, while the others sidled up even and cinched at the little car's sides, leaving no crack for daylight when daylight came. 97 shuddered through steel and rubber and Carl's mouth said something to no one in particular.

So it went for miles. The white slowed, the black slowed. The black surged, the white surged too. Nudge, bump, flinch, shove. Chrome fright roar bite knuckle knees teeth please faster stop faster please.

Boxed in.

The five lifted off at the border. If Carl's mouth made a noise, from a pink place in his lungs, it was a very small noise. They made good time in the dark, over the land and Lake that, by this time of night, was knocked over and licked up. To the rim and beyond it.

Yellow Dock

On Sunday, which was sunny, Laura went digging medicinal roots with her housemate, Mira, so Mira could make a tincture for her liver. They went to Laura's friend Isaac's for the digging because Isaac has a big field and acres of weeds and needed a visit. They dug curly dock (which looks like a small carrot) and yellow dock (which they never found) and dandelion (the roots look like a bunch of tiny carrots). They had shovels and used their fingers to find the roots in the clumps. The earthworms went crazy till they put them back in the ground. They pressed the places where the clumps went with their boots so no one but the worms would know. Laura pushed Isaac out in his wheelchair to watch the digging. Laura parked him in the driveway. Isaac had back surgery and hip surgery in the last three months. He has one leg shorter than the other from before the surgery but that's another story. In the hospital, after the hip, Isaac thought his bed was floating on the ceiling. Laura had to tell him, No Isaac, you are not floating on the ceiling. You have to trust me on this one. Isaac's 83 and for a while he had a big crush on Laura. Now he thinks of Laura in a more paternal way. He wore his mirrored sunglasses and a light jacket to watch the digging of the roots. He yelled instructions and waved his hands toward the field. The cross-the-street neighbors came

over and congratulated Isaac for making it outside, getting some sun, but maybe it was just for still being alive. Laura waved goodbye at Isaac as they left in Mira's car.

On the way home they nibbled curly dock in the car. Laura sat in the backseat that felt private and nice. Curly dock is peppery, just like carrots only hot. Her mouth tingled which is just one sign of being not dead, there are many. Laura pinched her leg which is another, her leg skin was so white after winter. They did not try the dandelions in the car. After eating the curly dock and driving, they stopped by a creek to try for yellow dock one more time, since yellow dock is hard to give up on. The tincture will be made with brandy. It will take six weeks to achieve potency. Mira said when it's ready she'll take some with every meal to clear up problems. She told Isaac about it and Isaac wants some tincture when it's ready too. She promised him some. They said it will make him 20 again and he's all for that. Searching for yellow dock by the creek, Laura saw skunk cabbage and hellebore which is poison and a garter snake which is not. The snake was yellow and green, slender and surprised her. It hid behind a tree near a lily. The lily was dark green. Mira said, I love that kind of lily by the snake. Laura said, What kind of lily is that anyway? The snake watched their every move, but Mira wouldn't tell the answer. You should look it up, Mira said. People don't care enough about plants, she said, that's what's wrong with the world. They drove home.

At home, Laura did her laundry and hung it on the deck rail. She sat on the deck, which is more like a bridge, and the hem of her striped skirt flapped in her hair that tickled. Laura read a book in sunglasses found folded up on a path last spring, or the spring before, between a tree root and some dog shit. They are Laura's sunglasses now. The book was in South America with some love and death and the breeze was warm on

the deck, like the beach in Argentina. Laura ate some fish, some cheese, then drank tea. Laura sat in the sun on her deck, she just lay there. She watched clouds and some birds. Laura napped with the skirt on her face to avoid burn. She watched clouds and birds again till she saw a bed floating up to the clouds that caught her attention. It had the handrail and dinner tray and everything. The saline drip was anchored to the leg by some contraption and plastic tubes were hanging off the bed skirts. Someone had cut them with a knife or sharp scissors. The bedpan was easy to spot from Laura's vantage. The bed rose up and up as a unit. The flight was smooth and nice. Sun flashed off the steel legs and buttons on the side that make heads and legs rise up or lay down depending on requirements. Then this tricky maneuver of counterclockwise rotation at variable acceleration in the overall trajectory but these engineers these days are pros. The saline barely sloshed. The bed rose up up through the clouds, up and turning, up and turning and Laura thought she could see his hands waving out the side of the bed, enticing crescendo. Laura covered the sun with her hand to block the glare. Laura waved and said, I hope you had a decent lunch.

Later, Laura piled the dry laundry in a pile. She moved sticks around in the yard for the next bonfire, though not sure when it would be, one day or another. The new plants were pushing up amongst the bushes and sticks. They were green in various shades, but totally anonymous. Laura licked her lips, then bent and introduced herself. Hello. How are you? The new shoots were so shy compared to her. Laura's bare legs got scratched up by sticks, very little blood but bright red, which is a sure sign of spring.

Cliff Ordeal

Mr. Ted Wilson stood in the branches. His legs made an upper case A in the tree, one track shoe on the largest small branch and the other on a middling knot on the cliff wall. The sun was coming up. Mr. Ted Wilson stood perfectly still. Ted Wilson gripped a jut of rock overhead from the cliff first for balance, granite or limestone, who could say which, except for experts, and how could it matter, and second, yes, to take some weight off the largest small branch. Any engineer would have advised it. This tree was far too small for a full-grown man.

He gripped the jut of rock with the longest fingers only. The smaller fingers, the pinkies and third fingers wagged free, then tucked, then wagged, the fingertips were blue. A shorter man, even slightly shorter than Ted Wilson, would never have reached this jut of rock, Ted thought. Standing on his toes, the shorter man would have been obliged to hold the cliff, which was very smooth, a challenge for fingers, or cantilevered off vertical in the smaller small branches, thin and soft skinned and bent over the creek far below,

perches for birds. This smaller man's posture would be a lower case n or h depending. The muscles would burn and contract, doubled in among the surprising thick leaves of this surprising cliff. Any lower case letter would be harder to spot from the old bridge or the road than an upper case A, Ted concluded. The smaller man could not hold the position, the n or h, the creek swirled. Ted was sorry for the smaller man.

It had been a miserable night. Cold, hungry, his head bled, and the cliff had turned cold after the hot day and radiated cold. Ted had shivered and tried to be still. He called "Hello!" and "Help!" and his mother's name. He sang *Twinkle Twinkle*. He wouldn't worry. Ted Wilson had asked for the wind to stay down last night and it did, then asked for morning, then morning came, that was now.

"Help! Help! Help!" to treetops and the bridge. ""Help! Help! Help!" he called.

An engineer would have calmed him. He'd have sat on a boulder below in a windbreaker. He'd have reassembled Ted Wilson's phone that was scattered in the rocks. He'd have called up to the tree. "Hold to the rock! The tree can't be trusted! I've had precipice training!"

"When will they come!" Ted Wilson would call down to this friendly new friend. "I'm getting tired! It's been 12 hours since I fell! I think I have injuries! I'm exhausted!"

"As soon as they miss you! Don't worry! Panic is your only enemy now!"

This engineer was obviously right. The small tree was still in shadow. Mr. Ted Wilson waited calmly for day, the sun that rose off the east rim of the world.

Mr. Ted Wilson was very tall and visible anywhere, the engineer would have pointed out, a huge advantage. His tracksuit was blue with orange stripes down the legs and arms, unmistakable, from his alma mater. It still fit him perfectly. June Allison had

said so on several occasions in the office weekends for a Monday deadline. “As late as needed,” she had said, “whenever you need me.” And there she always was, waiting at the outer desk, Saturday morning with a muffin and coffee as he liked it, she had her own key, the mate to the key on the chain in his tracksuit pocket. It weighed him down. He loved its jingle.

Ted held the jut of rock overhead with both hands, as the engineer would have said. The quarter hours passed. Sometimes, he hung with one hand only if his nose needed scratching, for example, or his belly, which was wet and damp under his tracksuit as if bugs were walking and the free hand slid under the shirt and smeared the bugs away. Or to wave at a car crossing the old bridge, or to sneeze, the wrist at the nose to hold the head steady, the small tree shook with sneezes. Or to wave down a van or truck, or any driver, there were so few cars on this stretch at this hour. Sometimes Ted touched the cliff with the elbow. Or the forearm. This cliff was soft and creamy, average in color and smoothness and only moderately sized for this region of North America where enormous cliffs and huge ledges were the absolute norm. 150 feet, a guess. Cliffs dropped off around every seeming corner, Ted thought, like flies or a mouse infestation. Americans lost track. They walked right off, it could happen to anyone.

“I know it!” the engineer would have called up with a thermos. The scent of coffee would swirl up the rock face.

“I’m starving!” Ted would tell the man at breakfast time.

“I’m sure!” the man would say, surely embarrassed to eat and drink before a starving man but a man must eat and drink.

“I’m not embarrassed about this fall!” Ted would call down to engineer.

“Of course not! Cliffs and ledges keep people employed. The firemen thrive on

search and rescues, we love firemen, firemen should thrive!"

"Yes!" Ted would have called. "It's just geography colliding with carelessness! It's part of the economy!"

"Of course!" the engineer would have said and peeled his muffin.

Now that the new east sun was stronger and older by a few minutes, Ted shifted a foot.

The creek roared. It foamed between the legs of the A. Ted called out from time to time but thought to save his vocal cords.

It was a fine view, the narrow valley, the mountains, and all the summer's new green to the sea in the distance. Ted watched the confluence of the river and creek where the rainbows schooled for boats. The fishermen will always come.

Ted Wilson watched the old bridge for cars but it was still early, a Saturday, people were home with family and still in bed. Only six cars had passed during the night, five were kids driving too fast, hooting and headlights, and the last was a paddy wagon from the prison heading into Piper City.

Ted watched the path up the far side of the creek. It was just a small path which dropped down from the pullout at the far end of the old bridge. Walkers would park there, click their locks, leash their dogs, then zag through boulders and shrubs until opposite his tree. A passerby could not possibly miss him. Any passerby would do, an early dog walker, the fisherman wading out from the brush, or the fat lady with the ankle weights, but perhaps she was out of town. Ted tried to remember her name. Ted did not want to alarm her. A man in a small tree on a bare rock cliff is hardly expected.

A quarter hour passed. The net of trees atop the opposite cliffs had gone blue from purple and now green from blue.

Ted Wilson craned for a look at his own cliff edge for a birder or another walker gone wrong at the Y as he had done last evening. It was easy without a sign, no "CLIFF AHEAD!" in black on orange, no mention of any cliff at all, or a picture of a cliff, or picture of a person falling through the air arms and legs kicking mouth an upper case O from a line that meant a cliff into double wavy lines meaning water. The cliff had looked exactly like a clearing. Another walker might think the same up the wrong path from the Y, slapping back branches and jumping puddles. But there was no room for a second man. This tree had grown in the perfect location, ten feet down with branches like a mitt. Only shrubs and grasses for two hundred yards, some nameless flowers like buttons sewn on rock. He watched the confluence again for swimmers but of course there were none at that hour. He checked his watch, but Ted Wilson never wore a watch.

"Good Morning, June Allison, how are you? You look bright and shiny."

"I'm A-One, Mr. Wilson, as always, I had a great weekend."

"Wonderful, June Allison, I'm happy for you. You deserve to be great."

"But how are you, Mr. Wilson? This cliff is some spot."

"I'm fine, I'm fine, June Allison. I've handled worse things."

"What can I do? Call a search party?"

"Yes, call me a search party."

"It's the least I could do."

"Yes, it's the least you could do, June Allison, or keep me company."

The creek churned gravel, sand, and foam into roar and mist. The wind took the mist to Red Mountain, which still gleamed with old snow that melted in the sun and filled

the creek, the current was strong. But for this tree, they might never have found Ted's body, a fish would have found it or a whale. It would have washed down under the old bridge dumped in the river that turned south then west in a mile behind at the fire hall then to the bend where Piper City sat then turned fat and flat and fast ten miles downhill to salt water. The blue swath. Ted might have smelled it too, but that was impossible, his nose was running so. He wiped one nostril on his shoulder stripe.

"Why did the chicken cross the road?"

"I hate that joke, Mr. Wilson."

"Come on, June Allison, I'm stuck in this tree."

"No, I won't say it."

Mountain trees swept by like twigs to the sea. A body might snag in soggy branches with lost fishing poles, bobbers, single boots and thermos jugs still full and hot and buoyant, last season's rain hats and books and pencils, blurry and logy, all tugged toward deep open water, the urchins, and flesh eaters.

"Cut it out!" the engineer would have called up to Ted. "Think positive!"

"When are they coming!"

"They'll be here by ten!"

The wind was calm but would rise with heat, and the bugs would come out and the rainbows would rise up for the bugs. The fishermen would follow, though Ted had not read the most recent fish forecasts, they'd park on the shoulder out of view. They'd zip their life vests at their tailgates. The car doors would slam. "Hello! Hello! Please help me, please." They would walk up the path toward Ted's voice.

"What a big ugly bird!"

"I'll say, Lord!"

"A buzzard."

"Or the world's last Dodo!" Ted would call down joining in the hullabaloo. He'll be ribbed for life. In business dealings, at high school reunions, as usher in church, ribbed and ribbed but lemonade will come from lemons: the firm will film an ad with Ted in a tree, a clip of the headline after rescue, a fireman and chainsaw, a submarine, and a shark. The clients will swarm.

From the fishermen, a boy runs for help. He will be small and thin. He is the son of the son of the partner in Piper City's biggest firm, he will sprint up the path on his young buck legs, a scatterer of rabbits across the road and bridge, a driver of a dirt bike unleashed from the trailer, which coughs awake blue smoke, though the dirt bike is entirely illegal on pavement, a $100 fine, though the boy has no license yet, it will be years or never, a sudden accident might strike this boy at fifteen, a month before his birthday, a car crash or drowning in riptide, a fall off a cliff on an Eagle Scout outing with a flint in his pocket, the mother bent before the itsy-bitsy casket, though the fire chief could impound the little red dirt bike, or could arrest the sudden change of heart rate, or confiscate the gears and wheels which speed toward safety over clean blessed pavement, one mile to the fire hall, this still sweet nubbin, this boy: he'd get a slap on the wrist only. This boy is to become one hero of the famous Ted Wilson Rescue.

A rabbit was flattened on the bridge. Ted Wilson did not witness the hit and run. He'd been planning the day and daydreaming:

"Life had gotten humdrum anyway!" Mr. Ted Wilson decided he would call up to the search party. "Hunger then food, hunger then food, then sleeping, then working and working, and never a break from it! A cliff shakes things up!"

The fire chief would be the first face, the thumbs up, hands and knees in brush and brambles of his cliff edge. He'd wear a distinctive badge polished with wrinkles and a satellite phone closed in a briefcase. The rookies would follow. They'd mimic the thumb.

"People don't *live* anymore!" Ted decided he'd add. He'd call it out to opposite cliffs for echo and emphasis. "We don't take risks like our ancestors did, like the pioneers did, like the first Atlantic crossers!" The birds would fly up over volunteers and dogs with ladders and ropes. They'd dropped a canteen and a rope knotted at the end for a seat. A helmet would fall, splash down gone like a little yellow boat.

Ted would call up, "I took a wrong turn at the Y!"

"We guessed it!" they would call down.

"This cliff," Ted would call up, "looked exactly like a clearing!"

"Yes, we know, we could tell, it could happen to anyone!" The fire chief would press buttons on his handset to call in the cliff crew and the dive team from Icksberg just in case.

"Hang tight!" they'd call down and Ted would call up, "Will do!"

Ted would hold the canteen but not drink. "I'm so grateful! I'll surely up my contribution at the Fireman's Ball!"

Gratitude. Ted would sit somehow on the knot, the rookies who hand-over-hand Ted to the edge, would marvel at Ted's composure and plan to slap Ted's back. When his track shoelace loops a root, the chief's lieutenant will lean to free it. Another will hold the man's belt. These men are fearless.

"You are fearless!" Ted will call.

Once aloft on ***terra firma***, Ted will walk the canteen to a new tree twenty feet in,

hug the tree and drink for joy.

Time passed, morning, the hours and minutes. This sun slid higher, Ted's stomach growled. He scratched his nose. A leaf had tickled it. Or some mouse. They lived in the cliff edge in a maze of tunnels, though Ted could see only the front doors of thousands. The edge was riddled and bored, these mice must play their little-mousy-tricks on the big man's nose in the tree to pass the quarter hours which are much more substantial in mouse-time, hours or three hours. Then Ted forgot the mice for rookies. Since the rookies would strap Ted in a litter, padded, with handles at the foot and head, "One two three lift!" and float away down the wrong path to the Y to the right path, and turn, the fire chief at the head explaining the grid search and the Ted-scent and how sniffer-dogs had found it from a sock Beth had produced just that morning, and how the dogs had not been fed prior to rescue, a simple coincidence, the fire chief would add, the dogs trained with inaudible whistles of the hardy canine corps, tanned and smooth skinned and natural athletes every one but with the budget so tight, so many rescues, so many lost people, these dogs and this very corps are next to go, they're all in ***jeopardy***.

"In short, we need friends in city hall," the fire chief would hint.

"You have one in me," Ted would say and shake on it.

The road would be full of sirens. The fire chief and Ted would fish together in Ted's new speedboat. The chief would catch an octopus.

Ted scratched a mouse-trick.

"Beth called the fire hall. She's coming right out with the kids," the chief would say.

"Wonderful! I have sweet children," Ted would say.

“They send their love,” the chief would say. “Beth said to be sure I told you, you are so very lucky, Mr. Wilson.”

“Yes very lucky. I know it. Beth.”

“Beth’s a fine person,” the chief would say.

“Of course yes.”

“A credit to the community, all those boards and committees,” the chief would say.

“Yes, yes, yes, I agree one hundred percent,” Ted would say.

“Beth’s a great mother too,” the chief would say.

“Yes, she is,” Ted would say, “Beth’s a maternal genius.”

And the words would mix on the banks of Ted’s sandy earlobes: a garble of water, tentacles and inaudible whistles sloshing with silt and salt and sticky-lumps, a jumble of mouse-talk to the opposite cliffs.

“June Allison! June Allison!” Ted called to the cliffs. “Where are you!”

The birds flew up. Ted hugged his branch which shook and some rock fell and stones down the cliff, bounced, plunked and were swallowed. He scrambled back to his A.

At the ambulance the chief will recommend Ted to a local biographer and slide Ted Wilson in. Ted will drink and drink in his bed in the hospital where nurses will dab the hands with salve and wrap that head which will have stopped bleeding by then, surely. He will be awarded a Rotary Prize and will make a moving speech when accepting it. The kids will sit round the front table with the mayor with Beth and the mayor’s wife in matching corsages.

“Congratulations, Mr. Wilson.”

"Thank you, Mr. Mayor, I could never done it without the team." He would squeeze Beth's hand.

The book will come out in two years to the day. June Allison will not be mentioned, not even in the index, since she is no one to Ted Wilson, will be hardly remembered, and had nothing to do with this cliff ordeal.

At ten or nine or eleven, the cars became more frequent. It felt like lunchtime but it couldn't be lunchtime since they would arrive by lunchtime and had not arrived. A potato chip van drove by, then a four-door with a missing back bumper, then a cop car from the prison with a full backseat. Ted thought of the peanuts in his leg zip, but didn't dare.

The sun rose over the treetops behind his back. It lanced down the valley to stripe the trees and the river and roofs of Piper City in the windows to his kitchen table and across to the sea and across into ocean cracks and punctured the hulls of submarines with spotlights. His nose bled. He dabbed with a leaf. Ted's cap lifted off his head. Ted swiped the new wind. The cap coptered down and was carried off to the Mariannas Trench.

At the press conference in the fire hall they would offer cough drops. The podium would have no microphone but dust and spider sacks from the supply room. The rookies would clean it with rags. The chief would pull down the pull-down map. The chief would point with a pointer at the tree, which was just an X beside the tiny blue-winding creek on the big map. His friends and neighbors would have gathered with hot dishes and mitts. They'd heard on police scanners. They used paper plates only.

"Good Morning, June Allison, how are you?"

"I'm A-One, Mr. Wilson, and you though? This tree is a new one."

“You said that before.”

“I’m trying to be friendly.”

“You didn’t make the press conference.”

“It’s a long flight, I was there in spirit by the extinguisher recharge station.”

“I could feel you in the back.”

The minister would be there too, Beth’s mother and father, near the podium, his parents were dead, but his siblings would gather as a group of faces, the dead ones and live ones, then his own mother and father would show up late, in the back, Beth and the kids at the table upfront.

“Good Morning, June Allison, how was the weekend, did you see your fat lady at gym?”

“Don’t say that, Mr. Wilson, I’m as fat as she is.”

“You must look like a whale in Japan.”

“So now you’ve turned nasty?”

“Truth hurts. What’s her name?”

“That fat lady? It slips my mind.”

“Don’t go.”

“I’m leaving.”

The rookies would feed him orange popsicles. Pizza would be plentiful from the enormous and overloaded fire hall freezer. Two on every table. Parents would shush the kids. The reporters would ask the spelling of Ted Wilson’s name. They would snap pictures and describe his condition. The fire chief will order a warning sign erected at the wrong turn at the Y. The rookies will rush to the rookie truck. At the Y they will pound the posts with sledgehammers and picks, hang the sign with cotter pins since cotter pins

will be handy and overstocked in the fire hall supply room. Bolts will be installed only later.

"Try again, Mr. Wilson."

"Ok. Good Morning, June Allison, how was your weekend?"

"It was wonderful, Mr. Wilson, church was divine, our minister's expansive, thanks for asking. My friends call me JJ."

"That's repulsive, June Allison, your name is beautiful."

"Get hold of yourself, Mr. Wilson."

Ted Wilson pissed at ten or nine, or perhaps eleven, or two. He filled one track shoe. The tracksuit dripped off the inner seams.

The sun rose and rose as it does. The mice got working. They sprayed dirt in fine grains on Ted's leaves and he brushed them off as he could. A plane flew over and made a line that faded. A black hatchback stopped at the pullout.

Ted called "Hello!" then he yelled "Hello! Hello!" at the man and the birds banked noisily north toward Red Mountain. The man stood at the guardrail. Ted waved an arm. The man did not see. The man was arguing with his mother, Ted could tell, hand to his ear with twisted-mother lips and the angry mother-slam to the roof with the fist, she'd got the last word, Ted felt for this man who turned the key with mother-only-wrath, floored it south, gone and lost, a low point. A rabbit skipped up the path, stopped, then peeled off into ferns, just happy or terrified, impossible to know in rabbits.

"Knock, knock."

"No no."

"Knock, knock, June Allison, it's a good one."

"No, Mr. Wilson, I mean it."

Matching motorcycles speed by. A truck with a silver tank of milk. A truck with tires, a truck with cars, shiny and new, from the outside world, Detroit, or Korea or Tokyo.

"That's a normally very busy bridge," June Allison would have said to the reporters at the press conference, if asked. "I bet twenty cars per hour. And the pullout was always so well advertised. While we lived in the area, this pullout was so popular for families and fishing. Marty and I brought the kids for fishing and camping I bet twice a year."

"Not one more word about Marty. I can't take it."

"It's not the same with Marty and you."

"You eat breakfast with him. You share a toothbrush."

"I don't eat breakfast."

The creek rose three millimeters and roared three millimeters louder at ten or ten fifteen or ten thirty-two depending on the time zone. In Topeka it was dark getting darker as the sun touched the farthest leaf on Ted Wilson's tree and the skin on his wrists above the cuffs. An old two-door, puffing blue, crossed the old bridge, a pickup, then a semi-trailer with no cargo. If it were Monday, not Saturday, they would have missed Ted at the office already. The search party would gather at the courthouse by noon. They'd find Ted by dinner. The press conference would start by 8 pm sharp with the folding chairs where Engine Number Two should park. However, if it was Monday and June Allison was still in Ted's employ, if she had not moved to Japan with her husband and children, if she had not up and packed every belonging not sold at the garage sale (Ted bought the speed boat and Beth bought the bunk beds and the mixer set with American

plugs), if she still occupied the outer desk just outside his office door, as a month ago, still tidied his things, still listened to his worries and concerns, if she had not absented herself in this appalling way, then Ted's search party would have come even sooner, earlier than dinner even, but for June Allison's Japan adventure, they'd find Ted in the tree cliff by absolute lunchtime.

Somewhere the tide changed. The jellyfish schooled to the submarine and went in, ten thousand the size of a nickel. They killed a diver through his survival suit. They latched on and ate him in the spotlights.

The tree shook. The wind picked up.

"June Allison."

"What?"

"Nothing."

"What?"

June Allison would have found him by lunchtime. Here's how: June Allison would have arrived at the outer desk at 7 am. She'd hello the janitor and the corner assistant who was always early due to a sick child. June Allison the friendly, June Allison the competent, June Allison the beautiful, round-faced and firm-skinned in a North American boulder sort of way. June Allison the sensitive, June Allison the quick of glance, June Allison the ***instinctual***. June Allison would have checked his doorknob. Then buzzed him knowing a long-shot, no light under the door and getting no answer, and having lost her keys she would pick the lock or break down the door and ***find Ted Wilson***. Inquiries and calls by his desk. They would find him by lunchtime.

At lunchtime, up the wrong path from the Y, as they approached his cliff behind the frantic bark of dogs, the fire chief would compliment her intuition, stride for stride, as

well as her fit condition, her stamina, but especially the binoculars round her neck, "the astounding clarity of the lenses," the chief would have noted, which Ted had wrapped up in silver paper one office Christmas as soon as he learned of June Allison's new interest in bird watching. "I like the little ones best," she had said. He had bought her a field guide too, a good and famous one, he did not recall the name, the cover was a cardinal. The Number One would block the northbound lane. Traffic would stop at the ends of the old bridge and line up to the ocean, maps flapping on the hoods till weighed down by well-wishers with rocks, and the rookies would run with the litter again. Lunch strapped down in the headrest taped and waterproofed, marked with markers meaning Swiss and ham and tuna salad and three cheese with tomato made in Wisconsin, not in Japan, not fast asleep with her husband well past midnight.

"But Marty's an engineer. Some fixed-wing jet in Osaka. Japan is his dream."

"He doesn't deserve you."

"I would never leave you otherwise."

Once, he sat in a car outside her house, a rental for incognito. Once he waited for the lights to turn out, and called but one of the kids answered who passed it to another and Ted hung up. Once Ted watched her kids out the door in the morning, looking for resemblance, once he got hold of her keys and made a copy. He found the condoms in the bathroom trash, a low point, once he sent flowers from Marty, "My darling, I'm so sorry." She did not come to work on Monday. She wore extra makeup. She was sullen.

"Good Morning, June Allison."

"I said Good Morning, June Allison."

"I said 'Good Morning,' to you June Allison."

A house perched above on a mountain creek is a beautiful Home. Heaven, Paradise, Heaven. People save and scrimp their whole lives for a chance like this. They move in with their belongings only when old and stiff and can't enjoy it. How sad how sad how sad!

At eleven came a convoy, or noon or one. It slowed to cross and crossed the old bridge one at a time. Great yellow earthmovers piggybacked in chains on the beds of the trucks from some finished highway. They rumbled behind the pilot car, which said "Oversized Load" on the roof for oncoming traffic, though there was none for minutes for the orange flags and the blinking hazards.

Ted waved at the driver who smoked out the window and at the loader, two graders, the belly-dump, dirty and dried, etc, dozens of dozers in back-to-back pairs, a cavalry of elephantine mice, tail to trunk floating across the ocean, the Queen Mary, the Hindenburg before the fire, such thoughts. The tires must be $3,000 per spare. The biggest tires were taller than a man is tall, taller than a tall man, or taller than Ted with a second Ted on his shoulders, or a girl on his shoulders. Once, June Allison had stood on Ted's shoulders. They'd gone out for a talk in the alley. They'd locked in both sets of keys. She had climbed onto Ted via a trashcan. Her feet were warm, damp and blissful to his collarbones.

"Can you see up my skirt?"

"I can see up your skirt."

The convoy concluded. The chase car said, "DO NOT PASS," with more orange flags with no cars to read it, hallelujah, a van drove over. It hauled an old rowboat hardly worth hauling, perhaps inherited by that driver, or sold for parts, or a fire hall

demonstration on burning boats in rivers, or for ocean practice by the rookies in dinghies. The boat said, "The Good Luck May" in gold cursive and Ted called out "The Good Luck May!" It was something new with good sounds for cross-country travel, "The Good Luck May!" across *terra firma* across blue oceans, blue islands, blue snorkel masks with blue lunch baskets.

"Lunchtime is the rumble of the stomach!" the engineer advised from below on a boulder with an apple. "It's science!" His hair was a mess from the wind. "Knock, Knock!"

"Who's there!"

"Rumble!"

"Rumble who!"

"Rumble mumble lunchtime bumble! They'll be here by lunchtime!"

"Another!"

"Knock, knock!"

"Who's there!"

"Sandwich!"

"Sandwich who!"

"Sandwiched between a rock and a hard place!"

"Another!"

"Knock, knock!"

"Who's there!"

Morning passed peacefully.

Noon is the easiest time of day to calculate. It depends only on time of year,

cloud cover, and latitude.

"You should float for a while," she said.

"Men don't float, women float," he said.

"That's a wives tale, Mr. Wilson."

"I'm starving," he said.

"Trees eat constantly when the sun's shining, I had sushi."

"I'm losing my strength."

"Sharks never sleep at all, did you know that, Mr. Wilson? I read that in the Honolulu airport."

"When are you coming home?"

"Knock, knock, Mr. Wilson, I'm home."

"Shall we kiss?"

"Fine, I'll meet you in the copy room."

They kissed in the tree and Ted's lips cracked. They kissed the tree. Their arms entangled like branches and tired. Their fingers blued against the jut of rock and the cliff to the knuckles despite the growing heat.

Ted lowered one arm and shook it, then the other the same, again, then again then again. When his arms felt better after this routine, he resumed with the jut.

Ted thought of hooks, belts and innertubes. He thought of family, his parents and siblings, Beth and the kids. It was perfectly natural to do so, and not disloyal. Three kids crossed the old bridge on bikes. They wore helmets and pedaled hard. The dog walkers came, there were few, they kept to the bridge, the red and tan, the black, and the merle. Perhaps there was a dog show in Piper City, or farther off, Icksville, or Klondike, some walkers talked on phones, to themselves, to the dogs while Ted Wilson called out to

them.

Ted Wilson would have phoned the fat lady. Ted had seen the fat lady on her phone at the back of Piper City meetings on trash hikes and potholes too. He tried to picture her name tag, hr number on the liquid crystal screen. She seemed civic minded, in favor of rescues and emergency staff. June Allison knew the fat lady from the women's only gym though Ted would never have called June Allison fat, but large-souled, compassionate for Mr. Ted Wilson, eager to fill herself with Ted across his desk behind the door with the knob at the small of the back, which was hardly small, in the alley on the rooftop by the exhaust vent just how he liked it.

"What kind a tree would grow on a cliff?" Ted Wilson would have asked Monday morning to June Allison. Birch, willow, alder were names he knew but Ted Wilson was not a tree person. A successful businessman and former athlete, but this tree was successful looking too, how it wrenched out a crack and elbowed vertical. June Allison's amazed eyes would widen. Her amazed hands would cover her amazed mouth, my God: How did this tree anchor? How did this tree cling and hold in wind rain and rockslide? Did its roots root round stones and more stones and roots of other trees with all the advantages of flatness? Flights from Japan were once double-decker. The stewardesses were oriental and slim as willow with high-buttoned collars and hot wash towels. June Allison would wind back the hand each hour east. The trees in Japan are weak and small, small and cold and flat like all those small flat faces.

"Good Afternoon, June Allison, how was lunch?"

"A-One, Mr. Wilson, lunch was divine. How's your cliff ordeal going?"

"A tree on a cliff is a life changing event."

"I can only imagine."

"I worried for the branches and the smaller twigs. Some damage is not reparable."

"So true. Do be careful."

Long distance. Her voice would be scratchy on his private line.

"Good Afternoon, June Allison, how's Japan?"

"Hello, Mr. Wilson, it's morning here."

"Well then, Good Morning, June Allison."

"Well how's your scrape? The cliff ordeal."

"I will pay more attention to trees in the future, you can be sure of it, June Allison."

"I'm so glad, Mr. Wilson."

"What kind a tree would grow on a cliff?"

"Is this a riddle, I hate riddles, ask Beth."

Noon came and went with this chatter.

Afternoon, Ted Wilson sat as an L. He had tried an I after the A and before the L, but could not hold it. The I was most difficult letter: both track shoes on one branch while hanging still from the fingers from the jut, the feat was impossible, and he could not hold it longer as if he'd shrunk. He succumbed to L then backwards C, then a U, a Y but only for seconds, then X for a stretch then back to the L, which was a long-term letter. He wondered if he spelled anything, P E C T O R A L S, L U M B A R, C A R T I L A G E, T H E N EC K T H E N EC K T H E P A I N I N T H E N E C K. This wind seemed a dash off kosher but hard to explain. THEYWILLFINDMEBYTEATIME.

A station wagon drove over the old bridge with a blinker flashing distress,

distress, distress. Ted Wilson wondered and hoped for those sad blinking passengers.

"You see, I thought it was a clearing," Ted would begin to the Blue Ribbon Panel well after Tea Time. "A simple error. I like to see new places and adventure is in my genetic make-up. Americans are like that. We are a nation of immigrants and risk-takers, we've been naturally selected by trans-Atlantic crossings and umpteen epidemics. My great-great granddad was a tunneler in the Civil War, for example, the most dangerous job in the Union Army. He died in a pit but had his children before the war so his genes passed on. We have his buttons. It is no wonder about this cliff ordeal."

Afternoon, Ted turned himself upstream for a while, one arm then leg at a time etc. When he missed the traffic and the old bridge he reversed himself in opposite order.

Afternoon, the taxi van came from Piper City, empty and northbound, then a second van, southbound, with business lettering Ted recognized but could not remember. When the taxi van recrossed southbound it had a passenger who looked familiar. Ted knew everyone this side of Piper City.

"The Japanese have very little interest in American history, the Constitution and the cocker spaniels, as you do, June Allison."

"I'm sure I'll be very be bored to death."

"We'll write."

"We will not write."

Afternoon, the sun rose till then hit a cloud which turned silver and rose to another cloud then the clouds cleared and the sun bit into Ted's large strawberry head. He missed his cap.

Afternoon, a white cat appeared from the brush by the creek. A white dog caught up to the cat, and they followed their miserable cat and dog routine. Its people would not

miss the cat. They were pouring milk for children and saying not to spill. They were watching TV on this sunny day.

"Tea Time!" called up the engineer, "Is a British term from across the Sea with a capital S!"

"But Sea sounds pretentious, I prefer 'ocean' as a term! It's more American not to say sea!"

"I agree completely! Ocean with a capital O, one hundred percent, fine! You are now a capital O!"

"I like you!" called Ted.

"I like you too!" called up the engineer. "You are truly a good guy!"

So they were friends. They called up and down and told comforting stories about flowers and astronauts. When they ran out, Ted told the engineer all about his brother Brian, also an engineer, who, once, at Tea Time, collapsed in the hospital while visiting a friend with a bout of flu. Brian's heart had stopped in the hospital. He lay on the tile by the friend's bed. The doctors and nurses revived Brian Wilson with CPR. They pounded his chest, etc., and by nightfall Mr. Brian Wilson was awake, though he never told his wife. "Never?" called up the engineer cupping his hands, chewing a sandwich and fries.

"She was young and pregnant! 'There was no reason to bother her. The danger's passed,' he told me!"

"Famous last words. How's your brother's friend!"

"This friend recovered quickly, an airline pilot!"

"Fights from Japan take off and land multiple times daily, with connecting flights to Piper City!"

"Don't get me started!"

“How’s the brother!”

“Dead!”

“Like a black and white movie!”

“It has nothing to do with me!”

In the afternoon, a passerby might be anyone, they discussed: a trooper with a flat tire, a family with drop lines, catching nothing, luckless. A dog walker prefers afternoons when the dog has digested, when the walker has digested, ditto fat ladies on diets and executive assistants on vacation from the Orient and yellow-vested survey crewmen in helmets with a walkie-talkies working Saturday at time and a half, as well as hatchery staffers in jumpsuits with leg pockets for screw-off turbidity cups, slow and heavy legged, but they would all be along by Tea, they concluded.

“Good afternoon, June Allison,”

“Mr. Wilson, hi.”

“Perhaps we could go for a walk, I need some files in my car.”

“Where are you parked?”

“I’m in the alley.”

“I’ll meet you at Tea Time.”

Ted Wilson rested his throat. It was parched and overtaxed from all this yelling and screaming. The article would describe the throat. In the picture Ted Wilson would stand at the guardrail, captioned “Cliff Ordeal.” An arrow would point out the tree. One of the girls in the office would snip and forward it to Osaka.

“June Allison will certainly send a card!”

“I can’t say, I don’t know her!” The engineer was eating donuts. “Does this Marty own her! Sounds medieval!”

"No one owns June Allison!"

The engineer stretched and drank from a flask, he offered but Ted could not reach.

"My mother was German!" called down Ted. "She was terrible!"

"That explains it!" called up the engineer.

"My mother thought Tea meant four!"

Ted thought of his children who all had names and faces hard to remember, Dehydration, Exhaustion, Captivation, was the youngest one. They fought over the bunk beds. Beth had picked the names, that's how she was.

"I thought it was a clearing," Ted would say to his mother on his private extension. "A fire burned area, or a burial mound. I'm attracted to such places, as you know, as you know very well."

"He wasn't the first. He won't be the last," his mother would say to June Allison in the alley. June Allison would slap mother's face.

"She sounds like a moron!" called up the engineer.

"I told her, 'Those Asian men are rather small!'"

"That got her! Hey!"

"Sure, it did!"

"Who will pronounce her name right in that country? Junarrishon Junarrishon Junarrishon!"

"I'm truly sorry for that country! I say it with no hesitation!"

Sometimes June Allison sketched Ted Wilson after dictation. Sometimes after double signatures on triplicate, and after especially difficult closings. June Allison sometimes smoothed his hair after the stairwell vent, or the alley wind or rooftop wind. June Allison sometimes bought him ties or straightened his ties or retied his ties since

Beth was ***laissez faire*** on ties. June Allison sometimes stayed late with Ted, "as late as needed," she'd said, but that was clearly falsehood.

"What a lie, June Allison."

A yellow-scarfed lady stopped in a yellow convertible with a black tripod. It was a rental surely. The wind took the scarf up off to the sea and the jellyfish and scarf-loving sharks. She held the hat with one hand and splayed the legs and posed at the guardrail. If the lens was good, the picture would contain the yellow lady, the red mountain, the green foothills, the foamy creek ascending and noisy, a cliff with a tree with an enormous S floating backward, with blue with orange stripes its mouth wide open, and an engineer in a white-iron shirt smiling and waving. The yellow lady would borrow a magnifying glass from the next door stamp collector. After a sandwich and the tripod folded, she flung the crusts off the guardrail. The gulls got there first. The yellow rental drove away. Once June Allison said Ted must be French Canadian. Once she said Ted had an athletic build, and was very photogenic, though Beth totally disagreed. Once, June Allison said Ted was probably Cree, given his mother's picture's coloration, his generous but frugal nature, and his attraction to jerky and other smoked meats.

Five skinny deer milled on the creek shore. They ate rotten beechnuts between their skinny legs. They knelt and their legs made twelve lower case m's. Ted blew his nose on a leaf and dropped the leaf between his foaming legs.

"Good Afternoon, Mr. Wilson, I knew you would survive it."

"June Allison, you surprised me."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You could rub my poor shoulders."

"Don't let her touch you!" called up the engineer.

"Be quiet!" Ted called down as she slid onto his lap till the can lid fell, clamored in the alley, anyone could hear it and know.

"It's just geography colliding with carelessness," she said in his ear. "You're just the kind of man for a cliff ordeal."

"You give me such courage."

Afternoon passed.

Late afternoon. The trees on the opposite cliff leaned toward Red Mountain. Ted straightened his head and the trees straightened, the mountain straightened, the opossum straightened, the governor straightened his tie. The trees on the far cliffs were just saplings in shadow. The cliff leaked and Ted licked the leak, salt and gritty, his busy birds.

Mr. Ted Wilson would tell the whole ordeal to the Governor, "I misjudged them at first. These far trees would not have held a opossum."

"The Cree ate willow like aspirin," said the Governor on his golden throne on the cliff edge. He looked like the fire chief's brother.

"Aspirin is just willow with a modern pharmaceutical name," called up the engineer.

"Here, take one," said the Governor, "It's Beth's fault."

Mr. Ted Wilson put his hand to his mouth. The fire chief would summarize at the press conference with the Governor: "Cliff incidents are only too common in our region, though amateurish. Tourist are the most likely victims, with skiers and hunters in second place for frequency. And for the record," the chief with emphasis, "ledges and cliffs look exactly like clearings, like house sights, or burn areas, or the end of airports, or tide pools

with starfish. People run right to them, as with magnets, people plunge right off them with amazing frequency." To the nodding rookies he'd continue, "I urge compassion: for the teenagers encamped on ledges for the very first time ever, in sleeping bags with bags of stale cookies licking the plastic innards and crumbs and for women's groups in pits near old dead soldiers in red hats for whom archeologists must be called! Newly old men in trees on cliffs are simply run-of-the-mill though some lost are never found down fouled wells with garbled names, German accents, or new subtle hairstyles. It's no one's fault. Rescues are necessary!"

The reporters would describe their clothes and faulty footwear. The search parties would be interviewed, about GPS transceivers, radios and ham sandwiches donated from the café down in Piper City.

A motorcycle girl pulled over at the old bridge. She cut the engine, kicked the stand down, unzipped and unbuckled herself on the way to a bush. Her hair was long and red.

"Hello! Hello! Help me!" called Ted.

She scuffled in the bushes. She walked back to bridge buckling her belt. She dropped her visor and restraddled the bike. She skidded out and was gone.

"I never gave up," Ted Wilson would say to the Rotary Club as keynote speaker. "But the motorcycle girl's departure was truly a low point."

The motorcycle girl would see him on TV two days later, Ted surmised. That's how she'd realize her intersection with his story.

"I was so surprised," Motorcycle Girl would say in private conference with the Blue Ribbon Chair. They would meet in the bar of a roof top restaurant. Ted would join them, or even better, in the Hotel lounge on cow skin couches, the Chair would grease the

wheels of conversation then discreetly leave the two to talk.

"I never even took my helmet off," she'd confess to Ted, smooth her hair, then smooth his. Her name would be Jeannine.

"My name's Jeannine. My mother was French."

"You look French."

"I'm looking for work. I'm a Pisces."

"Cheryl in HR will set up the interview. I'm sure the firm can use you somewhere."

Jeannine's middle name would be Allison. She would take her socks off on the edge of the bed, or in the copy room with the hand on the paper tray for balance. She would buzz Mr. Ted Wilson frequently, check his doorknob when she arrives in the morning.

"Good Morning, Ted, how are you?"

"I'm wonderful, Jeannine Allison."

Her stockings will run frequently. She will wiggle in the new pair at the outer desk when she thinks no one's looking. She will like him best in his college tracksuit.

"The stripes are attractive," she will say.

She will massage his feet in olive oil in the supply room. She will feed him smoked meat with creamed fingers but when her knuckles get rough from windburn Ted will ask her to give up riding, a marvelous typist, good with people, expert in all the necessary programs and spreadsheets, and not an ounce of fat on her, who could have predicted this?

"Mr. Wilson, you are working late again."

"Yes, I'm very busy as you can see, Jeannine Allison."

"Shall I stay again, do you need me?"

"Yes, please, do."

A dump truck rolled south, unaffiliated, then a minivan affiliated with a set of ten bikers. A jeep with the top off and music blaring drove north. Ted Wilson shifted from heels to toes. He made a K and the K was comfortable for two quarters of a hour.

A tree swept down the creek, jammed on another tree and made a V and made a bridge for a while, the third made a Z, then the jam broke and tumbled to the South Seas full of trees, islands of them floating. Some fat deer nibbled just across the creek watching Ted. They chewed and enjoyed their meal. Ted almost caught a word along their backs and legs and twitchy tails, among the shrubs and grass they chewed on, but before he caught the word, the deer scattered. A magnificent black dog had galloped up the path though Ted had not seen the dog or the master on the leash until the deer and dog ordeal was well underway in the gravel and brush, at its height of barking and fur flying furry.

That's how it passed with dust scent, dog scent, deer scent.

Perhaps the dog was deaf. Perhaps the master was deaf since Ted could not have yelled or screamed any louder to this deaf man, it was the deer's fault, and the dog's fault, the horrible deaf man's fault who did not know otherwise how to train the otherwise magnificent animal.

The master dragged the dog to a blue car which pulled away. When it was gone then birds settled back and Ted doubted the whole thing: the car, the leash, the twitching tails, Ted Wilson had a good imagination and his heels and toes were numb. Ted ate a leaf and turned the K to an R, Ted was never good with birdcalls, neither *quiki quis* or

kawaki kays, so many millions, he once had a book. In the morning only the crows and magpies were brave enough to land and see who Ted was but now, as the sun descended, even the smallest and shiest fledglings came by to foul Ted's tree. Soon, the Allisons would meet on a Pacific atoll, an exclusive place. The Two Allisons will be beautiful in silver and gold shimmery gowns. It is a fancy posh place with Rolls and Mercedes. June and Jeannine circle each other around a concrete island with a palm near the Lamborghini. The crowd of crows gathers with fresh drinks. Servants in jackets bring folding chairs and Japanese fans and make a ring. Mr. Ted Wilson blows the whistle.

The Allisons begin the wrestle. A girl in a hat takes bets. It is Greco-Roman Freestyle. There is growling, of course. The heat makes sweat. One Allison drives for a lightning fast ankle-pick. The leg is captured for a single-leg takedown that surprises the other wrestler, but she counters. She heaves her hefty legs and weight in the back of the opponent, a nicely executed pancake, which neutralizes the move. The crowd cheers this resurrection. She has flattened the aggressor's face in the parking lot. A nose is bleeding. One Allison complains over the coin toss. The crows throw their sandals. They throw hats and hors d'oeuvre at the clinch on the tailgate.

"This is very exciting!" someone says.

They suck the cherries from their drinks. A tiny umbrella stabs an eye in the crowd. The grapple moves to the shore. The rules are ignored. A dunk-under before the whistle then an illegal full-nelson in retaliation and one neck is snapped, but they were warned. The whistle blows. The tide ducks in. Washes red sand.

"I'm dropping a canteen, Mr. Wilson, watch your head."

"Is it poison?"

"Get real, you should conserve your strength. Drink it!"

"As if you care, go away!"

"You look so thirsty!"

"Go away!"

A school bus went by empty over the old bridge, yellow and innocent.

"I have a new assistant."

"Good."

A cow trailer with sheep. The sheep were alive but would soon be dead, this was the thing with sheep in a trailer.

"She's pretty and thin."

"I've lost weight. I look great. I wear a kimono."

A milk truck converted for Volvo house calls, the man waved at Ted and sneered but Ted knew this was impossible.

"I like her better than you, June Allison," but she laughed and Tea Time passed.

There is no name for the time between late afternoon and early evening. The air cools, Ted cooled, the sun was gold and prettiest for photography.

They'll come by nightfall.

At this time a water truck from the prison parked on the end of the old bridge and lowered its nozzle. The driver read a book on the guardrail as the nozzle sucked in water. The driver looked up a few times but the sun was low with golden glare. He took the calling for mice or a loose joint rusting, it was an old truck. He reset the nozzle and the truck U turned toward the prison.

Once Ted had hit a dog on the road and it had died instantly. Once he had unraveled a hand-knit sweater, hand knitted by his mother.

“What did you do to it?”

“What do you mean?”

A fine mother, an outstanding mother on the mother question, wonderfully motherly, once, he had missed the third grade play, his daughter was the donkey, a star at nightfall, once, he evicted Beth’s brother from the house for singing his guitar too loudly.

“A man’s house is his castle.”

“He was singing, Ted Wilson. He’s my brother. He’s happy.”

“His voice is only mediocre, I can’t take the strumming. Get him out.”

Once, very recently, after June Allison’s departure, Ted Wilson cut down a tree. Just a small tree, a spruce, it had interrupted their view of the north end of the beaver pond. An odd occurrence followed: When the spruce started to tip and fall, another tree one hundred yards through the woods, a cottonwood of magnificent size, tipped over and fell at the very same moment. This great cottonwood fell with tremendous noise. “They were totally different species,” Ted Wilson had said when telling the story later. “Totally unrelated and unprovoked,” Ted Wilson had said, and “there was no scientific way the roots were somehow entangled given the distance and size differential, the Arbor Society confirmed this for us.” And now on the cliff, the day ending as it was, Ted Wilson remembered the tremendous noise and thought the whole cottonwood incident over. The cottonwood’s root ball was twenty feet high. The cottonwood had fallen with tremendous concussion as well as sound, other trees were smashed in its path, of course, and the enormous scaly trunk was imbedded a foot down in soft spring soil.

How sad how sad.

The neighbors had called. “Did you guys feel that earthquake?” They left messages on their machine since Ted was still dumbstruck in the yard by this fallen giant,

Beth was presiding at a Historical Society function, and the kids were on play-dates. They had missed the whole incident. And when Beth asked Ted about earthquake messages, "what do they mean by it?" Ted found he was only able to reiterate the facts of the incident to her. He was never able convey to Beth the feeling the cottonwood incident inspired, or the meaning the incident seemed to imply.

"My darling, I'm thankful. It's as if this tree had grown there on this cliff for me. Suffered years of rain and wind and gravity just for me at this exact moment. I'm not religious. But it's not easy to be a tree alone on a cliff."

He made himself a W, or approximation, a letter from a totally new alphabet and yawned.

"A yawn is a small gasp for oxygen!" called up the engineer. "Yawning has nothing whatever to do with sleep!"

"I'm so tired of this!" said Ted.

"Stay awake till nightfall!" called the engineer.

In early evening, a car stopped. A boy and girl slid out with two poles from the backseat and a tackle box. They held hands off the bridge, along the creek to the river. Another car came. It parked behind the first. The second kids stood on the old bridge and dropped stones at fish and stones, then the second kids climbed back in their car and u-turned toward town.

Ted tried not to close his eyes, Ted had never been religious, he adjusted a hand on the bark. Ted Wilson's mother had been religious, a Catholic, who loved babies under three, and had eight. She worked at the Parish on weddings and baptisms, priests imported from other cities and countries. "Priests are getting rare," Ted's mother has

said time and again. She baked them cookies. At home, she rationed orange juice, four ounces round the large kitchen table, Dixie cups to measure. Ted Wilson had always resented his mother though he'd just learned it in the tree and in the books on maternal resentment which Jeanine Allison would lend him soon: Hate-As-Action, the book will say he made an H which he could not hold then wedged himself as a period or hyphen, small and stable, against the cliff. After all, he'd done well. These days Mr. Ted Wilson drank as much juice as he wanted, 12 ounces if he wanted, a pint of juice three times daily if he wanted, gallon upon gallon if he wanted, if he desired Mr. Ted Wilson could fill up a tanker with juice and pulp and pump every ounce in the creek, if he chose, thereby changing flow and color for at least a few minutes.

The first two kids returned up the creek from the river, hand in hand. They dropped the poles against a boulder on the far side of the old bridge. They lay together on their jeans and zipped down sweatshirts. The treetops were purple. Serrated light cut their skin. A siren at the fire hall sounded the shift change.

The kids read their field guide and pointed at birds. They rummaged each other till the boy went to the bridge for the cooler. He left the trunk wide open. They sat together and yawned.

"You see it?" the boy said, pointing.

"No, I don't see it," the girl said.

"Across the bridge to the right," the boy said, "the cliff and over, the third branch up. You can only see the head, a big one."

"I still don't see it," the girl said. "Oh yes, now I see it." The girl marked her book.

Once, when Ted's mother's sister had her first child in Chicago, Ted's mother

took the two oldest to the big brick corner to be watched by the nuns. Brian was just an infant so she took him in the backpack to the Windy City, it had once been Teddy's backpack. Teddy Wilson was an early reader and could already read the small orphan sign carved and gold above the door. Mother and children and backpack ascended the steps.

"I'll see you boys Sunday," their mother had said, but orphans are so suspicious.

The orphan food was served in big orphan spoons at long orphan tables by nuns in long aprons and spotless and fell to the black orphan floor. Their giant spoons waved in the air. They turned like shovels onto giant white plates like maps, my God, my God, the orphan meatloaf with ketchup, and he ate, and the lima beans with orphan butter which he ate four at a time, one per tine, though he hated lima beans at home, and when finished half the plate was piled by shovel and apron with mashed potatoes and more orphan butter, just this much salt please, no pepper, please, no, I do hate pepper, and the nuns were kind and listened to what young Teddy Wilson said. Then pie! Young Teddy Wilson ate and ate. The chocolate milk was last. The glass was filled to the top which he chewed and swallowed, cut the last into bits in the bottom of the glass with butter knife and fork, to take it slowly, to make it last, this first supper, the prayer at the beginning, a nun at the end with a giant brown pitcher and she sent them to bed at nightfall.

The nuns tucked them in in rows: Timmy and Teddy then another Timmy and another Teddy so on so on so on in iron-bleach sheets. "You see, Mr. Teddy Wilson was an early reader," said an old dead nun with a crow and cocktail. "Mr. Timmy Wilson, by contrast, was slow with reading. It's made all the difference entirely as outcome."

Night would fall and Mr. Ted Wilson had never told it to June Allison. But how sad and strange to tell the orphanage incident now by trans-Pacific letter, impossible.

“You could always jump!” called June Allison from below with wine and the engineer on a big green waterbed with no headboard or footboard. They floated and sipped.

“Can you believe this woman!” called up the engineer and rolled towards her and she laughed like water.

“But what kind of tree would grow on a cliff!” Ted called down. “I’d like to know it!”

“It’s geology and botany joining forces!” called the engineer. “Willows most likely, or some hybrid birch!”

“We’ll ask the Arbor Society if such a mix is known to science!” called Ted, “Beth knows those people!”

“Yes but Beth was against the spruce cutting scheme all along!” called the engineer, nodding. “A hater of beavers! She’s all for cottonwoods!”

“I know that! I know that!” called Ted.

“Marty says every animal eats willow!” called June Allison.

“Marty says willow are the fiercest tree!” called the engineer.

“But a tree on a cliff is eaten by no one!” called Ted. “It’s your fault, June Allison!”

The creek would bubble on forever. They linked elbows and would drink from the other glass.

“You had your chance!” called up the engineer.

They kissed.

“I could just fall in!” called Ted.

“Yes, you could just fall!”

They resumed.

The boy and girl waved at the jeep, which honked. They ate coleslaw from a plastic tub with a plastic fork. They marked birds then shut their book. The sun sat red on the rim of sky, lit the trunks and the boulders and the cliff face, metallic. The girl collected wood for their fire and the boy struck the match and lit a market receipt, the wrappers from their tea, then twigs when the flame was ready, and the flame jumped up and she fed it more, kneeling with smaller then larger sticks. They warmed themselves by the fire and snuggled. The two began a song but forgot some words and hummed the rest.

Day is done
Gone the sun
So on so on so so so lalala
All is well
La la la
God is la

The boy walked to the old bridge. He swung a yellow backpack from the trunk and slammed it. He checked his headlamp, on then off. The boy walked back to the girl.

The boy said, "You should take off your clothes and swim. We have the fire."

"Alright," the girl said and she turned toward the river. She balled her underpants and t-shirt and dropped them at the boulder. She covered herself with her hands and sandals.

"We might get rain," said the girl.

"No one can live without water," said the boy.

"You're a deep thinker," said the girl.

"We should travel," said the boy, and the girl said, "Yes."

The girl hopped boulders around the fire. She talked about the water as if a

student of science, the nature of current as related to the temperature of the upstream source, ice dams and crevasse disasters. She threw the sandals at her clothes.

The boy started the triangle tent in a circle of shrubs. His headlamp lit the blue tarp, a grey rock, a white foot, a white trunk.

The boy said, "You should learn this tent." He fiddled with the poles. The girl sat by the water in a ball and dropped a toe in.

Then the girl said, "I think I'll swim now," and she sat in the creek.

"It's late for swimming," the boy said.

He watched her. They were dark boulders in the deepening blue, the sun was gone. One star appeared.

"It's cold," she said then she lay down in the creek. They laughed at her surprise. She held herself in the current with her arms locked on two giant boulders. She laid her head in. His headlamp waved across her legs and breasts and the bubbles from nostrils and the girl closed her eyes against his light. Then she released the boulders.

When the girl shot away in the foam down the creek to the mouth of the river, the boy ran after her along the shore. His spotlight wagged rock to rock and jumped from fern to cliff at the corner of the river invisible, panting and calling and footsteps and splashing out digging the river. He even caught her once but she was so slippery round her bare middle and her fingers refused to catch.

At nightfall the clouds came and ambulances. The wind calmed with the sirens. They parked on the old bridge, blocked a lane, and flashed the boy's face red and blue. The dive team deployed. A captain examined the book and pencil, dropped them in separate plastic bags, which were taped and labeled by underling officers. The detectives talked to the boy. They wrote what he said. They followed him to the car and talked in

walkie-talkies. They searched in his car with flashlights and over the guardrail. They made long shadows into the lines of traffic held back by a whistle and the female officer's outstretched hand. It was gloved. One by one it waved the cars by and home. She had a pretty face and a ponytail under her cap but the whistle didn't satisfy her any. What she wanted was a walkie-talkie, anyone could see her suffer for one, a walkie-talkie would be bliss.

The helicopter came. It turned its beam on the tent, which was still sturdy and still in the brush, but for the vestibule which was never zipped or staked, so flapped. The helicopter circled back again over the fray of tallest trees, now black, cottonwood and birch mixed with spruce, with branches so netted no light could possibly pass. The helicopter swept again and again from the old bridge over the mouth of the creek to the river, as if river water stands still for hours while ambulances come and helicopters get flight clearance from the control towers. The search dogs barked at the outer orbits of their leashes. They sniffed the air of the water along the shore, loping happily, and licking sand for tracks or other indications. Then the dogs looped back toward the creek through the thick, well-watered gnarl of alder and willow toward their masters' clucks and calls and their padded kennels lined on the old bridge.

Rabbit's Foot

Tommy and Billy were in the stairwell going up when someone yelled down, "Fight on the roof!" A steel door slammed above.

Tommy clapped his hands. "Let's go." He jumped two steps at a time and Billy followed skipping three to the roof party.

The fight was more of a skirmish: two guys, one girl, someone's dog. It was mostly played out by the time Tommy and Billy slammed through the door. The contestants were still chest-to-chest at the burn barrel. Snow was falling on their jackets and hoods pulled up.

"Hey Tom," people said and Tommy said, "Hey."

"Be good," their mother, Rose, had said a thousand times. She spoke loud in Polish to her seven boys and they all understood.

"Come on," said Tommy to his little brother.

The fire in the barrel burned kitchen chairs no one was sitting in. People were breaking them up with a bat and their boots and other people were stuffing the chair parts in the flame.

"We should build a snowman or something," someone said, but no one did.

There was snow on the TV. The extension cord was completely covered up until it emerged in the gap under the stairwell door and drove to some plug-in below. A Lazy Boy collected a snow on old leather with a blanket watching a sports channel, pitches in slow motion, a jockey tossed off his horse over and over, trampled over and over, commentary, golf scores. The stereo speakers thumped. The people stood in groups near the edge and swayed and drank and laughed in the green light of the hotel sign high across the street. Billy shifted his eyes just in time. Girls clustered, an amoeba, or a many-headed amoeba with smoke from its nostrils and slanty mouths. Or a dragon. The girls weren't pretty. He'd thought they'd be pretty. The pretty ones turned to check Tommy out. Billy was still just a kid. People and girls sat on the brick ledge swinging their legs over four floors down. Billy tied his laces. He zipped his coat to his chin. He breathed on his hands and made friends with the stairwell wall.

The card table was in the middle of the roof under a saggy beach umbrella. It was lit up by a construction work lamp that someone had dragged up there. Buckets were turned over for seats. Tommy was looking over the player's shoulders. Tommy wanted in the game but it was the last hand before intermission. The hermit crabs had arrived. The crab handler had a brown bag he held over his head. He circled the table. When the hand was over, he dumped ten crabs on the table by the potato chip pile. Some crabs balled up in

the cold. The live ones were going everywhere on the table between the bottles and half-empty cups. The derby would begin momentarily.

"First one to the edge wins," someone said.

Tommy put ten dollars down to buy in the derby. He picked his crab, chugged his beer, and drew the starting line with cheese whiz. The crabs lined up. Tommy's was medium-sized, built for speed, black and healthy looking.

Tommy said, "My crab will kick ass."

He chugged a bottle that was near.

"He's Billy Super Crab for my baby brother."

A few people looked over at Billy on the wall. Billy liked peace. Billy was scrawny, fourteen and slim, but taller by the day, a rocket on the launch pad at T minus ten seconds.

"On your mark, get set…"

They were off in the first heat.

The flag over their building was only a block and a half away but M.I.A. in this snow. Billy closed his eyes and could see it anyway. The flag was the same year and model as Neil Armstrong's moon flag. Same dye lot, same bolt of cotton. Their granddad's company made the moon flag. When he died, he left Rose a stack of backups. The boys would divvy them up when she died. They were folded in plastic in the front room closet. Rose was conservative with replacements. She made repairs until there was no other option. But if too much city grime had caked the cloth, or if cracks had

formed along the stripes, or if the field of blue began fading into the stars, Rose went to the closet. She shellacked the fresh flags on the fire escape for fumes. They dried on the grating in the sun until they stood straight out like zero gravity. When the flag was absent for repairs or replacements, the old neighbors yelled complaints.

"Billy, where the hell's our god damn flag?"

"Sean, tell Rose to hurry-it-up with Neil Armstrong."

Rose had the boys rig up a spotlight system for night-time viewing.

Billy could not see the moon either. The snow. The smoke was thick from the burn barrel and people's thick breathing made him dizzy-headed. He would never see grandpa's original. Hardly anyone got to go to the moon.

People gathered under the umbrella for the second heat. Billy Super Crab had won the first heat by better than five lengths, though three other crabs never even stuck a leg out to try. The money on the card table was divided with little controversy.

"Give it to me, baby," said Tommy and he kissed his crab for luck which stirred the crowd.

"On your mark."

Billy inched off his wall.

"Get set." He stepped closer.

"Go."

A boy might walk the ledge on his hands. A cartwheel. Billy inched closer to Tommy's back. Billy stuffed his hands in his pockets and watched the racers go. When the race was won, he opened a beer for himself.

Billy Super Crab kept winning.

"He's a natural athlete," said Tommy.

"Mine was half dead when it got here," said one of the losers. "I should get my money back."

"Whine, whine. You got to want it. My guy wants it more."

"Shut the fuck up."

"I could tell it about my boy first thing I saw him. He's serious," said Tommy.

"Shut the fuck up," said the loser.

"My little brother's my rabbit's foot." Tommy nuggied Billy into the circle under the umbrella. "Fuck off all of you."

Rose's magic child was born at the beginning and end of the astrological calendar, her Sweet William. Future President of the USA, and bulletproof. Future baseball star, a left-batting righty, future badass of Wall Street. Future ball-buster, and rich. Horses and pull-tabs would obey him someday.

"Come on, baby, come on."

Super Crab triumphed again.

"How old are you?" said one of the girls.

"Seventeen," said Billy.

"You're taller than your brother."

"Two inches."

"Your brother's mouthy."

Tommy ate pretzels like a bear. He belched and the girls laughed.

Billy Super Crab won the sixth race and the seventh. Someone turned the music off. Most contestants were in permanent hibernation, eaten by the dog, or lost in the snow with the dog digging. People were shivering. The beer was colder and they drank it fast. Only three crabs were still going strong. One guy offered a twenty for the Super Crab, but Tommy said, "Hell no."

"More beer."

A half-pretty girl showed up and Tommy knew her. She leaned in like Queen of the Rooftop. She stood by Tommy.

In the next race, Billy Super Crab pulled away in the last six inches beating out a little orange speedster who came from nowhere.

"Super Crab, Super Crab, Super Crab." They pounded the roof with their boots and threw peanuts at the third place finisher who had not moved from the starting line. He gazed at the chips like warm sand, but Billy knew dead eyes. He drank. He picked up Mr. Third Place, blew heat on him, and put him in his pocket. The sirens whined across town in a swirl of blue flash far away.

Rose made only boy children. She said she didn't want girls since this world was a bad place for girls. Making boys was easy, she said, pound fast and hard for a minute and a half, and no more. It took five minutes at least to make a girl, and some pleasure. Billy's dad slept on the couch in the front room. God had been nasty to Rose, she said, but it skips generations and a boy was a good thing to be: like the ending of Sunday matinee, she said. Like the pilgrims in Technicolor starving for months and months then fine and saved when the Indians finally show up in loincloths. The big beautiful brown men enter from the edge of the big screen. Feathers and fancy leather. They have arms

the size of Rose's front door. The arms are looped round huge baskets of bread, and dried fish, and late red apples the size of this boy's head. It is the camera angle. The enormous feast is set the pilgrim table, grateful, THE END.

In the second feature, Martians pack for travel at low velocity. Back home is far, Rose said. The mission is not really over yet either, since part of the mission is just looking around, hovering. Meanwhile, over at the saloon, the black hat draws but the white hat is faster. The ladies swoon while townsfolk watch the last loop of the last reel.

Billy pulls off his shirt under the marquee. He stretches in the summer sun and yawns. He reconnoiters with his brothers at the corner and they cut down alleys, over fences, between buildings, then they pick up speed through the old bat's yard just because they have all day. Since the old bat's got her own patch of grass. Since the old bat doesn't have to share. She stands in the window and hollers, "I'll be calling Rose about this private property infraction!"

"You do that, lady!" Alan calls over his shoulder. "See what Rose says! Hope it's in Polish!"

They stomp instead of walking. They clang chain links and kick cans instead of stomping. Pretty soon Teddy's making up a song which doesn't make sense but it's funny as hell with every cuss word known harmonized with the seven: Paddy, Matty, Alan, each louder, Teddy, Sean, Tommy, and Billy the loudest since Billy is the loudest word in the English language.

"More beer."

Billy Super Crab was ready for the final. It will be sudden death against the only other crab still on its legs, a big pink-shelled bruiser twice Billy's size. They were calling

the challenger Pussy Crab for his losing record. Some guy was pissing on the ledge. The Queen of the Roof whispered something in Tommy's ear. He tipped his head and slid his crab-cold hand up her shirt. She had no coat on.

"Super Crab, Super Crab, Super Crab."

The racers were off fast. Pussy and Billy neck-and-neck. Billy was finally getting tired, he hesitated on his legs. His crab eyes shifted right to Pussy who saw his chance and surged. Then Billy collected himself. The crowd leaned in for the photo finish. Both crabs went over the edge but Tommy was on the spot. He scooped Billy from mid-air, held the champ overhead, and pumped his arms.

"The winner!"

"Super Crab, Super Crab, Super Crab!"

Pussy bounced off. The dog barked.

Of course the race was under dispute. The construction lamp crashed over first. Then the table and everything on it. Tommy was after a big guy who was mad about everything and Super Crab went flying. The dog was running around and didn't know who to bark at. Arms, fists, the usual, but the fight was green in the hotel sign that was extra dim from several missing letters and old bulbs too, while the crab was lost under all of this mess with only his ocean shell for protection. It had nothing to do with him. Hopefully he would tuck and hide, wait it out, what shells are for.

Billy the Boy crawled on the ground. He reached and swam and groped amongst bottles and bills, chips and heels, cards, cords, glass and thighs, and parts he wasn't supposed to touch yet.

He called out, "Super Crab, Super Crab, come here, boy."

Billy planned to be a huge man someday, six-foot-ten and three hundred pounds of pure, good, unadulterated Bill. He would walk through town and it would move aside. Their dad was small and mean, a little mean dog on a long chain, and they moved aside. He never worked a full day, though his office had papers in piles, no business was transacted there. He kept a diary in the front room, locked, which Paddy Jr. would inherit and the key around dad's neck. The seven stayed clear of the front room on the first of the month, when rent was due, and when the bottle was empty by the couch. They took the back hall to the fire escape. He sang in the shower. Nobody starts out mean. Everyone is born clean and good, a little pink baby with a smile in a carriage and fresh skin and pink lungs to cry out with. Once, a cow died in the creek on dad's father's farm. Before the men came for the carcass, the brothers played a game with the cow. Oldest to youngest they ran and jumped and bounced off the spongy cow into the water. Dad was last. By his turn the cow was deflated. He fell in the cow. He was pulled out by his brothers. He smiled whenever he told this story.

"Go fuck yourself, yourself." Billy found Tommy in the dark.

"Better have his parachute ready," said a bad voice with bad laughter. They had Tommy hogtied at the arms and legs. A third man had his belt buckle, laughing and barking. They staggered with Tommy under all his thrashing. Billy pulled on the leg-man nearest the ledge.

"He won't even die," said the hand-man.

"He'll die," said the leg-man and pushed Billy off him. "Get him off me."

"No, I heard of a guy who fell from six thousand feet and lived," said a hand-man.

"You're high," said the leg-man

"Guinness Book. Look it up, shit-head. Landed in a cornfield," said the hand-man, then the swinging got synchronized. "Broke every bone, but lived."

"There must have been a tree or something he fell on," said the belt-man, who was holding off Billy with a free hand.

"Watch it, kid," said the Queen. She was on the hand-man peeling his fingers.

"Hey, get this kid, get him off me."

"There was no fucking tree, look it up," said the hand-man. He shoved the Queen. "Hey, get this girl off me. She's impeding our work."

Now, the Queen was on the edge tugging Billy, who was tugging the leg-man, who swatted Billy like a fly.

"Billy!" called Tommy.

"Look, he's smiling."

"Get this kid off me. That's not smiling."

"Tommy!" called Billy.

"Man-who-fell-to-earth, it was a special on TV," said the hand-man. "Jerry somebody, a postal worker. Broke every bone, my back hurts."

"Freaked the cows," said the belt-man, who must have weighed a thousand pounds, ten thousand pounds.

People were laughing, watching the show, and rolling around.

"I bet that postman guy goes to church now."

"Someone get this kid. I mean it."

"Paddy! Sean! Teddy!" called Billy. They would be pulling their coats on as they ran for the door.

"Shit."

"Hey, easy, easy," said the Queen on the arm of the leg-man, who pushed her off, and she fell in the Lazy Boy.

"My back hurts," said hand-man. "I'm done here."

"We're not done," said the leg-man. "Not even."

"Alan! Matty!" called Billy, their boots stomping three flights down to the Lincoln sidewalk with the flag and a net for circus jumpers.

"Swing him higher," the leg-man said, "I hate this little smiling shit."

"Hey don't, hey don't, hey don't!" said the voice of the Queen, dusty and sooty, then Billy fell.

A satellite circling the earth into gravity is falling the whole time.

He fell for an hour, equals 40 boys back-to-back, or 12 girls with some pleasure.

The air was nice. The snow slapped his chin, repent for what?

A fly is the lowest thing always repenting.

A siren for a meteor a mile wide crossing into Polish gibberish.

"Billy!"

"Rose!"

The rocket blasted past the blue ambulance stairwells.

Mother would cry, don't cry. Dad will be dead in two years, I promise.

The snow will be one hundred feet deep, I promise, silky like flour.

Brothers with nets, yes.

Flowers, yes.

Dragon girls, yes.

Collarbones push right back in the headline: Miracle Boy.

No cornfield or cow.

Super Bill, Sweet William.

Out of my way.

No Name Creek

The exact location was impossible to remember in the years to come. And the gas station map was lost. The place was never found or revisited.

What Ben did remember from the day was the following:

Morning: his snug bed, falling curtain and prying sun. His four limbs. He totaled them up under the sheets. Who wants to wake up early on Sunday? On the chair his bibs bent over and touched his boots on the braided rug chewed by the dog. The yard needed raking but would wait. He prayed his prayer in case it might help: please, God, whoever you are, last day of moose season and the freezer's empty.

Ben waited for his brother.

Boak's pickup was noisy at idle. The door slammed. The hinges shook, some crashing in the kitchen was heard. A dot on map looks only like a dot, whole cities were built for brotherly love. This was just Lazy Mountain.

"Get up!" yelled Boak on the first step. The difference between brothers is the step up the stairs.

"Get up!" yelled Boak on the second. "Don't make me gain elevation!"

Ben: groggy and sluggish.

A railroad. Ben would recall that too, with tracks up a Pass for miles. It should narrow things down some on such a big map.

"Get up, little brother!"

On a nice creek, sure, but they are all so nice: water and trees.

"Somebody's waiting to end his days!" Boak on the landing. A vase fell from the corner table to be cleaned up later.

"If there's a God let us get one."

"All right then."

It had been a bluebird day for a drive and a walk. Then stars much later. Only later still wind. Who could say where exactly? Consider winding roads, crooked creeks, trees leaning low and wanting, lines on a map, drawn not drawn, folded not folded, and the mess of mountains, a jumble, just look at them, and valleys willy nilly like twins, trees like trees, buttes like buttes, boys like boys, wind slaps, eyes tear, winter coming fast like every other. They all look so the same on paper.

Fine. Boots and bibs, a swallow of milk, a grab at the cake from some bake sale. The water boiled for the thermos for later. Ben slammed the passenger door.

"Let's go then."

The rifle was in the jump seat. Boak revved it. They sped past the bar, the firehouse, and turned. At the T, Ben goodbyed Boak and Sue's, a little blue house still sleeping with the mailbox open and the front door closed. Once it had just been Sue. Sue at the T this, Sue at the T that, the new gal in town and no Boak whatsoever. When Ben still had a chance.

"What?"said Boak.

"Nothing," said Ben. He set his boots on the dash.

"You were always a mumbler."

"I said nothing at all."

A hunt is a tiresome thing. A moose is big and unaccommodating: fifteen hundred pounds, tall as shed roof, well hidden as needed. He likes to browse and chew and sleep and gnaw and live.

They drove the morning with no success, drove, bumped, groused, walked, drove on further, turned, bumped again, groused again, slogged, aimed, reloaded, and cursed their luck. They saw cows galore in the willow browse, and their calves too, so easy for the taking by the despicable. At Crooked Creek it was grouse, more grouse, and a mate-less swan. At Puritan nothing, a porcupine. Dry Creek, rabbits, got one with the truck, didn't notice. Ermine Creek, birds and birds, seagulls, but why? The sea is far away from here. Why bother asking, who cared? A fox, but Boak missed, and laughed. At Heartbreak Creek, nothing, a yearling bull with velvet horns, and they let him go by the book. Washout Creek, nothing. Goodbye, nothing. Winston Churchill, nothing.

“Damn it to hell,” howled Boak when granddaddy bull popped in the alder on Doubleback. But the shot was high and that’s why they call it hunting.

They drove north and gassed up at noon. Ben had found a penny in the men’s room. Boak found the man with the bull in the flatbed and made friends at the pump.

“Nice one,” said Boak.

“Lung shot,” said the man.

“Help us out?” said Boak. “Last day.”

The man swiped his map from the dash and tapped with his finger on what looked like nothing. He made an X with a pen and circled it.

“Can’t miss there,” the man said. “It’s a regular zoo.”

“What’s it called?” Boak said.

“I never heard. She’s too little for naming,” the man said.

“All right,” Boak said.

“You boys try it,” the man said and he and the bull turned south.

Ben watched Boak and the man with the bull on the flatbed from the coke machine. There was the big glass window. The coke machine was empty.

Ben watched Boak and the man with the bull on the flatbed from the coke machine. There was the big glass window. The coke machine was empty. Ben waited hand on hips, nose to glass. Then Ben and Boak were driving again, looking for moose.

In the north the sky was clear. The road was empty: trees and trees and a yellow dashed line. A few trucks passed and saluted with hands. The boys saluted back and Ben counted vehicles, each of them going by, for miles.

"One," said Ben.

They swallowed cold coffee from the station. Styrofoam squeaked at Ben's boots. Sinatra sang on the tape deck. The truck rumbled warm and sleepy and the yellow leaves fluttered and smoothed the pavement, which was a conveyer running to its end. Ben sang along with Frank till Boak pinched them both off with his fingers on the dial.

"Can't Miss Creek," Boak said. "Zoo Creek."

Trees and trees. "Two," Ben said as a semi passed.

"Granddaddy Creek," Boak said. "I like the sound of that."

A hill passed.

"Nice Guy Creek," Boak chimed. "Gas up Creek."

A pit, a dozer passed aimed west.

"Three," Ben said, getting sleepy.

The sky. A dull sky.

"No Name Creek," said Boak. "That's what, that's what."

The road twisted and straightened. Trees and more trees, a house, a barn. A gas station boarded up, a culvert crushed by something even bigger. A fire engine sped south without the siren and waved.

"Four," said Ben.

"Last Day Creek. Where's My Moose Creek. I Got Mine Creek," said Boak and laughed. "Ha ha ha."

Once at mother's, Ben drank milk from a glass and it was delicious and cold. But before the last swallow, he felt a thing on his tongue: a shave of glass long as a nail. A

man might often scream. Ben showed the glass to mother. She shook her head and made batter for morning. Ben kept the glass on his sill by the jar with the lucky pennies.

"Five," said Ben at a Harley whizzing up and by.

Once, Boak kicked a baby pool out of his way.

"How Bout Lunch Creek," said Boak.

Ben grabbed the sack of deviled ham and Swiss from the back. They drove north and chewed like twins: twin mouths, twin noses with exact matching rotation. The hands rose from the elbow with the same angle and thrust.

Hills and trees, lakes and birds, hills and lakes. A bird alone. A flock. A flock and an eagle on a phone line sagging. Can the caller on the phone hear eagle's claws? Hills and hills. A bag of trash in the ditch.

"I Gotta Piss Creek," said Boak.

They pissed twin arcs at some pleasant looking birch. They drove on. The road bent toward the mountains parting swarms of black spruce marching up the slope.

"Makes me think of winter," Ben said to the high white.

"Of course. It's October, little brother. What kind of dope needs whitish mountains to tell him that?"

The peaks jabbed at the sky and the sky just sat there and took it.

The station man's creek ran up the rusted railroad line to the Pass. Parallel the railroad, the truck growled in low up the road that was really no road at all: just two lines of dirt in the brush that kept going. The cliffs climbed up and made the day end early. The truck bumped and dragged and stalled and revved and wallowed in mud pits

between. A moose ran by while they fussed with the winch. They passed many signs of life, all long dead: a locomotive off the tracks and in the trees, a cedar tank dripping rain at the rivets; a stationhouse with a coffee can roof and the sign said MINE YOUR OWN BUSINESS.

"Mine your own business Creek," said Boak. "Mine your own business. Mine. Your. Own. Business."

They passed a handcar on a side rail toting green bottles. They passed a pallet with black punky cordwood, leather boots unmatched and tongue-less hanging from a clothesline across the back deck of a caboose, trees chewed down, a beaver lodge built, lump coal in a pile and another, logs stacked and tarped, a ball of rebar big as an outhouse and twisted like some kid's joke. More coal. More rabbits. More trees. More Boak. He rolled down his window and spit.

"We aren't idiots!" he yelled to the Pass.

The rifle jumped off the jump seat any number of times. Ben righted it again and again till he set the bag of deviled ham and Swiss on the weapon as anchor. The road curved up and up and on along the railroad tracks. Another station house came and went in poor condition: its canned roof was caved and the walls were nothing readable. The creek wagged and jumped by the boys like a friend. The eagles circled and swooped as was right for them to do. The eagles sat in trees tops and snags when their wings got tired and watched the tiny truck driving. The headlights off. The sun was so west that the boulder, when it came, spread in the road as big as any blue whale. The boulder had tumbled from that cliff. Five hundred feet down and had rolled very little. The crack in the mountain was just so wide, very narrow in fact, with no room for boulders rolling on

and on and on. The boulder had crushed the rails like a penny. The boulder would sit for a million years. The rails would rust. The boulder had jumped from the cliff and crushed the rails on a day no one saw and no one remembered. The rest was just guessing.

"I guess we're walking," said Boak.

The truck shuddered dead at the boulder. The boys shouldered their gear and got walking.

A Pass is a big cut that doesn't end where it looks like. It just goes over the other side. They walked by a shot-up Ford with a fridge door leaning on the headlight. By a tree with one leaf left. By a bush turned red. By a bush with berries. By berries in shit.

Ben thought this:

Mountain: tall, rude or greedy on occasion, made of stone thrust up from elsewhere, terrible, sad, ok, invincible. Useful for poems.

Cliff: rock like a fence.

Rabbit: a small edible rodent, plentiful, friendly reputations, big families.

Magpie: a clever bird, black and blue, steals dinner if able and doesn't care.

They walked and walked. Once, Ben was called to the jury and heard this story: a man was gone three years and the wife wanted the insurance money paid. He was last seen on the ferry from Skagway in a mask, tank and fins. Now what about that? Now what about that?

Kept walking and whistled.

"That scuba-man was not for sure dead, I'm sure."

"What?" said Boak.

“Nothing,” said Ben.

Trees: tall, usually unselfish, of variety and kindliness, carbon, sometimes terrible, sweet sad, appearing invincible to some but vulnerable to axes, old age, lack of sustenance, fire. Useful in cold.

“What were you saying?” said Boak.

“Nothing, that scuba-man trial.”

“Oh, yeah,” said Boak.

Heat rises and cold sinks and the cold sank.

Hand: a necessary appendage.

They passed by a butte and by a gorge with a waterfall with no name either. They heard hooves pounding, branches snapping, Ben ducked, Boak fired, but the game was safe, gone in the darkening trees.

They passed by a rusting wheelbarrow, pouring nothing out sideways, looking like a crab.

Bear: top of the chain so will eat you or part. Good for stories at gatherings and postcards.

“God Damn It Creek,” said Boak in blue gun-smoke. They walked.

Boak: good natured face, balding with ball cap, goatee, shit-kickers, Wranglers, knife on the hip, long strides like no tomorrow, butt in glove, shaft on shoulder, straight like a Roman, half-step forward like a queen gets to.

Poem: a set of words put together to say something that can’t be said. Ben once slid one poem in Sue’s mailbox in his best pretty longhand, but Ben’s longhand and Boak’s longhand were perfect twins.

Mix-up: a mess that causes the wrong or undesired result, brought about by fear or happiness or love or an absent mind or poor penmanship.

Sue: pretty, sweet, nice, sets her chin on her knuckles while listening. Gapped toothed. Holds her head while laughing hard.

Mix-up: a terrible mess brought about by poems. Boak won that one too. Boak always won.

"Wins what?" said Boak.

"Nothing," said Ben.

"How the world is declining," Boak said. They shook their heads at injustice. The brothers walked on, sweated and walked. They heard gunfire the next drainage over and walked faster.

Leg: a necessary appendage needing two.

When the boys were young they played charades with friends. First, they did presidents and movie stars, like everyone, and the notable people in town. But as years passed and the boys grew, they took on greater challenges: a barn door, the kitchen sink, the curtain in the bedroom. The boys progressed to trees by species and cloud formations and diseases of the body and mind. Ben stopped there, but Boak aspired higher: to local geologic formations. He would stretch his arms, stand or squat, tuck his head or throw it back, fling a leg, turn the wrist depending on necessity and art. He peaked as Granite Peak and Castle Mountain. He lounged into Lazy Mountain, thundering into Pioneer Peak, a spitting image of Gunsight. He crescendoed into Denali, greatest challenge in a few continents.

They passed by a helicopter between some trees. One rotor was ripped off.

"Some crash," said Ben. "I'd love to get her home."

"Get her flying again," said Boak.

They considered with hands on hips.

Then Boak aimed, fired, and made a fresh wound in the sheet metal tail. He handed the rifle to Ben who blew away the remains of glass eyes. They squatted and drank their tea by a huge old ribcage. They wiped their mouths on their sleeves. The sun sank. In the ties, they found the matching femur to the ribcage.

"Gigantic."

It was snapped in half long before, between steel wheel and steel rail.

Then the hip, "Enormous."

Then the jaw, "Stupendous."

Then hooves, "Only three," all dragged, gnawed, and left hither and thither by some hungry someones. Gunfire rang out farther off. An owl called and another answered.

Head: a fragile clumsy sphere, teetering in space.

It's hard not to think and Ben thought: Once, on a summer hunt as boys, Boak and Ben came to camp on shore where the men laughed and the bitch barked and the puppies were cooked up in a drum. The fire was rotten and the stirring was done with a broken paddle. A man found it on the rocks. The boys were offered the pick of the litter, *ha, ha, ha*. The boy Boak had cried. Death is a cricket by a creek. A million dead, a million born. A million dead again. So on, and yet. The willow is eaten the moose is eaten. The fish never swam home. A blue whale yawns. A foot crushes a nest and lost. A

tremendous hoof. A splendid club. A bird hits the windshield, chaos of nature. A man drops from cancer, age, or accident, is forgot, and never was.

They walked.

Neck: a necessary and narrow conjunction between body and head.

Ben: a good-natured face, balding with ball cap, shit-kickers except on Sunday, Wranglers, knife on the hip, strides like a thing with a tail.

"It's getting dark," said Ben.

"My brother the genius," said Boak.

"I mean it," said Ben.

"Keep walking, little lady," said Boak.

"It's a long way back," said Ben.

"We've got light yet," said Boak.

"We should turn round and go," said Ben

"But we won't," said Boak.

The shack had the porch light on. The generator was buzzing. A dog was barking, people were moving around. A stupid little dog. The boys ducked behind a handcar parked in the splay of the tracks as the porch door opened and man in an apron appeared for a smoke. The man puffed and the boys watched and the stupid little dog barked louder. The man threw the stub and slammed the door. They backed out of the clearing and kept going.

"Stupid dog," said Boak.

"What?" said Ben.

"Nothing," said Boak. "Just a stupid dog."

With the shack far behind and real dark near, Boak started up his singing:

"Riffraff. White Trash. Stupid Dog. Copter Bog. I'm a Hog! Creek!"

"Quiet," said Ben.

"Where's My Moose. Give Me The Noose. Hey, A Caboose Creek!"

"Quiet, I said," snapped Ben. "I'm tired."

"Tired Boy! Tired Boy!"

"Pipe down."

"Pipe Down. Why the Frown!"

Ben stopped walking altogether. He slumped on a stump.

"Someone should Pay. Anyway. Make my day CREEK!"

He watched Boak over the rise and listened to him disappear: "Look this Luck, Stuck in Muck, Should have got a Duck Creek!"

Bliss among humans is rare. In the morning of the best day and the worst, a man does not know it. And how to tell them apart?

Once, Ben followed a track he had never seen before even in books. The tracks were pressed into new snow. The tracks were a barefoot baby's feet, curved in with pretty fragile lines, but the size was a man-sized foot. The baby tracks walked down to town. They turned corners and crossed crosswalks where boots tread over its going. The baby tracks turned round from time to time to look back. They stood pigeon-toed at the drugstore window, then at the bandstand in the square where Boak and Sue had wed, then at the fire hydrant by the courthouse curb.

Ben liked to go barefoot.

When Ben caught up on the flat, Boak was winded and spent. The rifle was ready, serious again about the task. The wind kicked sand and they turned their faces in to it.

Boak said, “Who makes them up then?”

“Makes what?” said Ben.

“Who decides the names?” said Boak. “Who get the say what the name of the creek is?”

“Some guy in an office in town,” said Ben.

Boak started up more whispery: “Dead Dog. Red Dog. Red Neck. What the Heck. Clap Trap.”

“Who cares anyway?” said Ben to the sky.

“Crap Shack. Shitty Dog,” said Boak.

“He writes the name down on a paper,” said Ben.

“I Can Smell Him Creek,” said Boak.

“He stamps the paper just like that,” said Ben and stamped his hand with his fist.

“I Can Taste Him Creek,” said Boak.

“Some fool stamp,” said Ben.

“Come out, brother,” said Boak.

“Puts the paper in a drawer,” said Ben.

“Show yourself, friend,” said Boak.

“It’s in the drawer forever,” said Ben.

“Show yourself!” said Boak. “Show yourself!”

“People go somewhere else entirely,” said Ben.

The stars blinked awake. The sun was gone behind its pink edge for good. It happens every day.

The bull stood huge between the railroad rails. He turned his rack on cue. Boak fired for the lungs. The bull went down in a heap.

"He's had a setback," said Boak.

They stood, then ran. They stood over him and gaped. They gaped at the long way down the Pass, which was almost too dark except for the light in shack far below.

"Must be eight miles," said Boak. "I'm tired."

"Maybe seven," said Ben.

They sat against the bull. He was hot and died. They leaned on him and drank their last tea. They chewed cake from the bake sale and smiled like girls.

"Long night," said Boak.

"A good day," said Ben.

The beams from the headlamps prodded the black. The fur and his face. The old bull stared out too. Night lowered and the last of the pink faded.

They slit him open, pulled his insides out, and quartered him quick. With the rack he was eight hundred pounds easy. They threw the guts to the trees. They piled his parts off the rails just in case. They wiped the ground with their fingers, then lay between the rails for a nap. The wind picked up. The stars were the Big Bang all over.

On Ben's best day, there was a moving van in it, a little blue house, and the T: a big heavy box with Sue's thin arms round it, saying "FRAGILE," on the side, so true. A

blue print dress. Sue teetered past the mailbox. Ben jammed it into neutral dead center of the T, Ben blocking traffic just like that, King of the Road. Ben ran up the walk to Sue, Ben making the save just when Sue's arms were about to give. The mailbox, the doorstep, the threshold. "Oh, thank you. Oh thank you oh so much. It's my mother's china." Sue could not tell the difference between them then. Boak or Ben, Ben or Boak?

The trucks backed up at the T in all three directions. Sue held her head while laughing hard at the trucks.

"Your truck's still running," said Sue and Ben looked and so it was.

Once Ben saw Sue's face in the paper made with a thousand tiny dots, first prize for jam. Who can find anything when it's really lost? *Yours sincerely, Ben. Sincerely yours, Ben. Always and Forever yours, Ben.* It's Ben. I'm Ben. And so happy, Sue, to be Ben.

"A guy should ride him down," said Ben with the dark.

"That shack," said Boak.

"Let's go."

The windows of the shack glowed but the generator was off. The racket inside was louder, music blaring. The door was propped with a five-gallon bucket and the dog's snout sniffed out it. They slipped among the handcars and picked the one they wanted. They hid when the man came out, stood, and whistled a tune.

They pushed the handcar up the tracks the long way. The ground froze under with each step. The moon rose high. They leaned and strained and pressed and sweated and groaned and wheezed. The cliffs gleamed. The headlamp flashed on the rails. A man

gets tired. They grunted like pigs made of bone and gristle, skin, tendon and teeth, up and up, and no one there to see them suffer.

"A long way," said Ben pushing. Ben felt bush in his gut: red and hot with thorns. He knew it was there, but he didn't. The tendrils reached and rubbed Ben's insides.

"So far."

The bush burned his insides: his arms and ribs, rooted in his thighs, it fingered his lungs and squeezed. The crown of it shoved up and choked him alive, hot and cold.

"It's hurting," said Ben, sweating and puffing.

"What, Ben?" said Boak, sweating and puffing. "It's a long way up."

"Sure," said Ben. "Heavy forever."

The bull moose saw their lights coming and was waiting. They wrestled him in over the rim of the handcar: like the scuba-man sitting on the bench by the handrail. No whale in sight for the scuba-man. The world is big. Gravity is fast and fair. Like falling in gray water, ready to breathe through his face, the judge in black, the bench split and spray spit over the deck and duffle, alive, gray water inviting scuba-man in. Come in and live here! Scuba-man tipped over backwards.

"It was a good idea," said Ben, flinging a thigh. "Two can be, or one can be. That scuba-man had all he needed."

"What?" said Ben with the ribs but Ben had to help him. The ribs were that heavy.

"Nothing," said Ben.

They loaded the gun and gear. Ben found a spruce limb for a brake. He tucked it under his arm. The trees were white with moon.

“A great ride.”

“Yes.”

They leaned on steel and ran. They left the snout to watch for trains.

Black Russian

William had called at five for a table for four at six. He got the best table in the house as usual: the round and white by the bay window, a little apart from the others, facing the ending day. The tablecloth fell off sharp and cast a blue edge on the blonde wood floor. As the sun went down, the edge got wider and bluer, and would swallow the restaurant to the back wall.

Tweedy sipped opposite her husband, William, and William talked to Michael on his right, a new man from the Club. Tweedy's hiccups were at eighteen-second intervals. The doctor had given her pills. She needed a refill. Her blouse was pinned at the neck with a sterling bee. Her hiccups were, for the most part, quiet and unoffending. The waiter refilled the wine with a twist of his wrist. He wore black and white and circled like a planet, pouring. The waiter almost bowed in his duties, but did not bow, while Tweedy's busboy, who delivered a new shaker of salt, in black pants and white shirt too, did bow, and needed badly to fill up his clothes, he was so thin. "I'm sorry," she wanted to say but didn't, poor thing. This boy needed some petting, anyone could see that. The

waiter circled and poured. Her busboy was a beautiful boy, pink and blue in the face, with a basket of bread. At the other tables, he bowed and scraped crumbs with a bronze thing that looked like a knife, but was not a knife, into his hand.

Tweedy hiccupped. The waiter said, "More water?" and Tweedy said, "I have some, thank you," but he filled her glass anyway and she hiccupped again.

"Poor dear," said William, glancing at Tweedy but leaned back to Michael who was taller than William, thirty pounds lighter, still with a sense of future about him. William grasped at the air when he spoke. He reached at territory across the tablecloth. Michael's hands chopped back. They talked the news of the week: the new trash contract Uptown, the judge off to jail, the council meeting gone so very amiss, bosses gumming the works, and how. The new blueprints of the footprint of the central headquarters were planned by the river with a fountain in the atrium, glass and glass, and the high rent view. Tweedy hiccupped and sipped. "Poor dear."

"We are awaiting our fourth," William said to the waiter who was waiting and nodded to the empty seat at his left. Helene was always late.

"Have you tried holding your breath?" said Michael to Tweedy.

"She tried it in the cab," William told him. "Holding her breath hardly ever works for Tweedy."

When Tweedy was a girl she had wanted things like tea parties and lemon cake. Michael straightened his tie. Tweedy dabbed her lips with the cloth napkin, a little smudge, what a shame. She had wanted clean white napkins and a husband with a crown on his head, crystal doorknobs to the powder rooms. Her busboy delivered napkins folded like tents to a table in the back. He was a lovely boy, that busboy.

"The election will be tight, I've heard that said," said Michael to William and they got going about it. The side of Michael's hand chopped the table. His hair was fake and black but his eyebrows were graying.

"I disagree completely," said William. "Murdock will run away with it, I disagree."

"I've heard it from several good sources at the Club," said Michael.

"Well, you are so naive," said William with a smile. "So young still."

"No really! Just think of this, stop and think of this," said Michael.

"Truly, you surprise me," said William.

William went to the men's room. Tweedy asked Michael after his family, what schools, what church, what street? William came back and looked to the door. Tweedy hiccupped after seventeen seconds. William looked at his watch.

"I'm sure she will be here soon," said Tweedy. The men went on and Tweedy counted to fifteen seconds, a downward trend worth tending to. She excused herself to the powder room with a glass of water and her handbag of turquoise leather. In a stall she bent over and drank all the water down, her head between her knees, her lips sucking on the far side of the glass. She looked in the mirror, her face, the bee at her neck. Someone else came, a lady in pink, and they stood side by side in the mirror. Tweedy counted: twenty-four seconds this time. The pink lady said, "Honey and lemon will do the trick every time," and Tweedy said, "I'll try it." Tweedy had tried honey and lemon a week ago, ten years ago, she would try again tomorrow. The pink lady left. Tweedy, refilled her glass at the faucet. She drank between her legs and coughed. She returned to the table where the men were leaning together like old friends again, or better. It was

true love over some debacle in Eureka last Sunday, the crash on some corner, the layoffs, the layout, the lineup of the new team, oh the taxi driver, yes, you should have seen this driver, the colonoscopy, the polyp presumed benign, the repaving of Main. Their heads were so close, perhaps Michael and William would nuzzle. William would run his hand through Michael's stiff hair. Tweedy hoped so. That would be something worth seeing.

They did not nuzzle. The men sat back. They talked of the new steam room at the Club, all cedar with volcanic rocks from Hawaii, and about Art Beeker who died of the aneurism. They were just talking to Art Beeker in the steam room last week. William and Michael both snapped their fingers to signify Art gone. Tweedy dabbed her lips and looked for her busboy. He was bent over at a lady's high-heeled shoe, patent leather and black. He was kneeled like praying to the shoe and saying something to the lady. He dabbed the shoe with tenderness she had not seen in years. A miracle. She might have married her busboy.

Helene arrived. Helene was big and blonde, a Viking queen. Once Helene had had a small forest of hair on the right side of her chin. The small forest had suited her. Tweedy thought the spirit of the forest was still with Helene entirely. Men flared their nostrils when they looked at Helene.

"Helene, you look wonderful, " said William. He stood and they pecked lips. "How the hell is Jack? Too bad he couldn't come." William held her waist just longer than necessary and made introductions to Michael, who flared and blinked Helene up and down.

"So sorry I'm late," said Helene wearing red, a good color for her.

"But now we have you," said William. "That's all we want."

"I could eat a horse," said Helene and sat. "Where ever did you get it?" Helene asked pointing at Tweedy's bee. Tweedy said, "Mother" but that was not true at all. She did not remember where she got her bee. It appeared in her jewelry box one day, exactly how all things come.

The candles glowed on the tables across the room. Her busboy skated over the blonde and blue, between the tables and hum invisible. His sleeves were rolled up and made all the difference in the world. Then her busboy tripped on the mat near the double doors to the kitchen. The water in his pitcher sloshed up, a tidal wave in his pitcher, but did not spill, not a single drop.

Tweedy hiccupped and Helen said, "Has anyone tried pounding your back yet, dear?"

"That's for coughing," said Tweedy.

"Might not hurt to try," said William.

"Or *BOO!* from behind the door? Have you tried that yet?" asked Helene.

"Not yet," said Tweedy. "I don't mind. And I don't like a startle."

"I've heard vinegar works for hiccups," said Michael.

"Don't be silly," William said. "The doctor gave her some pills for it. She needs a refill."

The others ordered meat and Tweedy ordered salad. She didn't care for food anymore. Her head and arms and lungs were made of food and water. Why feed them? The waiter poured from a new bottle of wine that had a picture people bending and reaching through vine and leaves. The grapes were tiny circles, the faces were tiny circles. The faces looked as happy as the grapes. Tweedy knew not a single one of the

tiny faces in the picture. The bottle seemed black till the flame on the table turned it green. Tweedy unbuttoned and buttoned her cuffs. She stretched her arms out to see if the wrists were even. They talked of spring rain and water standing in fields which they had not seen with their own eyes, just pictures in the paper and the TV news. The ground was saturating, there would be no irrigating till July. The farmer, the farms, the hogs. Irritation of the eardrum can cause the hiccups, her doctor had told her. Carbonation. Standing up too fast, crying too loudly. She rubbed her ear. The river was rising. She checked her handbag. The bottle was empty, still.

She stood with the handbag and went back to the powder room for another try at upside-down. Her busboy was lifting dishes from a vacated table to his tray. The tray was wide and heavy, too heavy, how could he? She passed him at the powder room door. He staggered, poor thing, and she did not help him with his dishes since helping a busboy with his dishes would not look right at all. He disappeared through the swinging doors to the kitchen. Someone in there might feed him, who was starving starving.

The doctor had said this: lack of water, too much water, eating too fast, laughing too hard, coughing too much, talking too much, burping, crying too loud. In the powder room she had forgotten the glass of water so drank with her nose in the sink.

"It is just math," William was saying to Michael when she returned. "Simple math."

"But the broader considerations!" Michael said. "Just think!"

"No reason to fuss so," Helene said to William in a voice that petted his hot red neck.

"Hogwash," said William.

"But you miss my point entirely! Miss my point," Michael said. "Don't you see?"

"I am not missing your point in the least," said William.

Then Helene did press William's arm. "Come now."

The doctor had said this too: lack of oxygen, lack of vitamins, clearing one's throat, overstretching one's neck, spicy food.

Tweedy cleared her throat. "I hope it's not spicy."

"Hogwash," said William and pulled his arm from Helene.

Michael moved the salt and pepper round and round each other.

Dinner came, they ate dinner. Tweedy ate her salad like a rabbit, round and round. Michael held his knife in the right and his fork in the left, said, "I picked this up in Europe," showing his teeth. He bit at the fork and not the meat at all. William's fork stood vertical while he chewed. His knife stayed in his hand. William leaned toward Helene and the window which was dark, but for dull shapes of people walking past and the reflection of the table of four. The food was stiff and bland. Nearby at the head of a table, a man with a roasted chicken spilled his glass of wine on a lady's lap and the others at the table all groaned "oh dear," "what a shame." They gripped their glasses tighter. The busboy blushed has he took the napkins from the lady's lap. He took the glass and the bundle away. The man with the chicken told a story about a man with no car who hitched rides by waving a gas can at oncoming cars.

"Gas Can Eddie," said the man with the chicken. "This red can. I picked him up myself, no kidding."

Everyone at the table laughed. "Think of a life like that," someone said.

"A life like that," Tweedy said. She might have married the man with the chicken. She might walk over and sit on his knee. It would take ten seconds.

"No kidding," said a man. "Absolutely no kidding here."

Helene told Tweedy of a girl on the news who had hiccups for five weeks straight. "They did shock therapy to stop it."

The busboy brought more rolls. The waiter poured. Michael asked William about the mayor's right hand man, a gesture of peace, and about paving the car park at the Club which had been William's pride and joy along with the backstabbing contractors, backscratching in backrooms, snake in the grass amendments and substitutions, amen for all asphalt, they chewed and chewed. William offered Helene a roll. Helene bit the roll tenderly at him, and crumbs fell. Tweedy set her fork down. Her busboy came with his bronze wand. Once at a fondue dinner for eight, Helene had dropped a thick crust of bread from her fork into the bubbling cheese. With William on her right, they, according to the rules, had kissed. It was a good kiss and everyone watched. Tweedy would give William to Helene if she could think of a graceful way to do it.

Tweedy had once tried it with another man. They had walked between the trees in the parks, he read her poetry with eyes welling as if it made sense to him. A springer spaniel of the man, that park, those trees, how silly. Once the man had left his shirt at the house. Tweedy had washed, ironed the shirt, then hung the shirt in William's closet by mistake. She found the shirt later sprawling the bed soon after with a note pinned, "Dear, this is not my size in the arms. Thanks, W."

"So delicious, all of it," said Tweedy. "Not spicy at all."

William waved to the waiter, "I think we're done here."

But what had the man worn home? It had been fall and windy, too cold without a

shirt. She had never thought of it. The busboy came with Tweedy's handbag. He set it on the tablecloth. "It was found in the powder room." Tweedy set the handbag in her lap.

"Oh dear," said Helene.

"It must have happened a thousand times," said William to the busboy.

"Oh, thank you," said Tweedy, and everyone smiled. "What a darling," and she snapped the turquoise mouth open and shut. Took a tissue.

Her busboy went away.

William snapped at the waiter, "Yes, we are done here, sir." William pointed at the cluttered table and the waiter snapped at the busboy who was drinking a glass of water in the back. The busboy set the glass on an empty tray. He came fast around the tables for the dirty dishes.

The dessert menu was typed out on a small white card as follows:

Crème brûlée
Gateau au Chocolat
Petite Lemon
Black Russian Tort
Pecan Tart
Vanilla Ice Cream, local sprig of mint

"What will it be?" said William as the waiter stood by. "What's good?"

"We have wonderful choices here," said the waiter.

"Oh I love dessert," said Helene, "I just love it."

"Looks wonderful," said Michael.

"What will it be?" said William.

"Anything at all for me," said Tweedy. She set the menu down on a faint old stain.

"Shall we split a few?" asked Helene to the menu.

“Three will be fine,” said William, “after a meal like that one.”

“That’s fine,” said Michael. “Three for the four of us.”

“Wonderful,” said Helene. “I agree completely.”

“Tweedy dear?” said William.

“Anything at all,” said Tweedy.

“You had better come back,” said Helene to the waiter. The waiter went away.

“I always like their chocolate gateau here,” said William. “I say the gateau, it’s won awards, the crème brûlée too, and Helene, what do you like the looks of?”

“I’m for the Black Russian,” said Michael.

“I think I’m for the Petite Lemon,” Helene said.

“Fine, fine,” said William. “But we won’t need two chocolates cakes. Either the gateau or the Black Russian, but not both. Gateau is my favorite.”

“Sounds wonderful to me,” said Helene and waved to the waiter.

“I’m for the black Russian,” Michael said.

“Perhaps the waiter can bring the Black Russian,” said Tweedy. “I think we are decided.”

“Gateau is better,” said William.

“Or the busboy,” said Tweedy.

“Don’t complicate things, dear,” said Helene to Tweedy.

“Gateau,” said William to the waiter who had arrived. “And one crème brûlée and the lemon –”

“I’m having the Black Russian,” said Michael to the waiter. “I’ll have that with extra forks.”

"That's four," said William. "We don't need four."

"Can that busboy deliver the deserts?" said Tweedy to the waiter. He nodded, of course.

"My grandfather was from Kiev," said Michael. "I'm settled on the Black Russian."

"But I tell you, the gateau is the specialty here. You are new in town," said William. "I know this place."

"I'm fine with both cakes," said Michael, "two chocolate cakes is fine with me." He winked at Helene and she smiled back. "All of them are fine, I'm not picky."

"Two chocolates is fine with me too," said Helene. "And the crème brûlée."

"Helene, really, see what I'm saying," said William. "Two chocolates is no fun at all. And what of the lemon you wanted? Keep your backbone, dear, the lemon has several awards too."

"I'm feeling like chocolate tonight," she said. "I'm for chocolate and more chocolate."

William got up and walked round the table. He pounded Tweedy three times on the back and returned to the seat. The waiter hovered ten feet off. The other tables were clearing. Empty chairs sprawled in disorder. Helene straightened the centerpiece, a vase shaped like a seal and a girl dancing in white porcelain. A red rose rose up between the partners.

Tweedy's busboy was far across the room. He piled himself with dirty plates in the crook of his arm, up the arm to the shoulder, the tray and the other arm, more and more. He slumped under the burden, the heaviest thing she had ever seen. This busboy was saving for college, to take his girlfriend to the prom, to get a tux with a blue cummerbund

to match her dress, because he dreamed of her at night, because a limo will cost him, to pay the driver and tip the driver to open her door, to lean at the girl with the hips and shoulders under blue satin, a pair of lips with pink gloss dabbed on to make her taste like pear. The busboy stacked and stacked, impossible. He balanced and tottered. He stepped and steered for the kitchen. A waiter gave him wide berth as he aimed and staggered. He turned his pyramid self at the double doors. Tweedy waited for his crash, his cacophony of china and silver and teacups, the whole world up in the air. For once people will stop their chewing, drinking and chatter. A cure for hiccups is a bullet and a gun, snakebite, a swallow of potion. People will push their plates away just like that and snap snap for the check without dessert. They will all go home and go to bed stupendous. Tweedy sat quiet waiting before the destruction.

Her busboy pushed the double doors open with his narrow backside. He twisted and disappeared behind the double doors.

William slapped the table. "Have what you want then." The waiter stood by.

"I think we need four," said Helene.

"Four is absurd," said William. He slapped the table.

"I want the Black Russian," said Michael to the waiter.

"We know what you want," said William.

"I'm talking to him," said Michael of the waiter. "Black Russian, Black Russian, Black Russian." The busboy pushed silently through the double doors and stood surveying the tables.

Tweedy began to laugh. William held his head. The busboy swept a dollar bill from a table while the waiter was distracted.

Helene said, “Perhaps the pecan tart.”

“Oh my God,” said William.

“Art Seeker liked pecan pie,” said Michael.

“The man is dead,” yelled William, standing.

“And we will have the chocolate gateau as well,” said Helene.

“I won’t eat a bite of it,” said William. “Not one bite.”

“Do as you must,” said Helene.

Art Seeker was a fair card player at the Club and he did not like dessert at all. Tweedy remembered this distinctly. Otherwise, Art was unmemorable, a faded man.

Helene ordered the pecan tart and the scoop of vanilla. The waiter asked Tweedy last. She ordered three vanilla ice creams with extra mint and ate each slowly with three spoons laid out by her busboy. She drank long drinks of water between bites. She could not come close to finishing. She offered to share half-heartedly. She licked her lips and a finger. She hiccupped. The busboy cleared the table as she ate.

After the table was cleared, there was the bill. The busboy was in the alley smoking. The party of four from the best table parted under the awning, which was blue and white striped with small white sparkling lights on the skirting. Two of the four went one way and the couple went the other. The busboy puffed in the chill which surprised the skin after the kitchen with ovens, and candles. The first pair stood at a car and talked, then the lady clicked away down the street. The older couple clicked the locks of the long creamy car in front of the deli. The car pulled out. The headlights slashed the bumpers and tires parked along the street and the glass in the storefronts. The busboy rubbed out the smoke on the brick wall and threw it. He slipped in behind the wheel of his old Dart

parked in the alley and followed long creamy car.

The couple made a few stops. At the liquor store the man ran in then ran out with a bag. At the drugstore the woman walked in. A horse and buggy trotted past from the Bavarian Hotel on the corner. The horses made mist with their noses. The woman walked out of the drugstore with a bag. The long creamy car pulled out and the Dart followed.

Their home was seven turns away and had brick pillars in front and a hedge. The car turned in. No dogs came running, a good sign, the door opened to the light and then the door shut and the light went out. The Dart parked behind the hedge. The busboy shuffled papers in his glove box then the Dart pulled away.

The busboy drove to the river. He took the frontage road that was tilted and ridged. He parked the Dart next to old pilings near the river's edge. The bridge was lit up upstream. The headlights passed across and back. The busboy unscrewed the plates with a standard head screwdriver from the tool kit that was in the trunk with a gas can and a water jug and a small suitcase that had been packed for weeks.

The busboy found a triangle of glass in the sand and cut his arm in a thick hairless muscle but it produced little blood. Not enough. He cut the skin over his eyebrow in the rear view mirror, always a gusher according to movies and slap shots on the hockey pond. Fresh blood flowed in his eye. He smeared the driver's seat, a crime scene, and the inside of the door which they would dust for prints, and the steering wheel which his ex-girlfriend would cry over if they let her through the cordoned area. She was not immediate family. He wiped his eye on his sleeve.

The busboy scuffled with himself in the sand. They would call it a mugging. He

bashed the perfect old hood with a head-sized stone for extra credibility. He stuffed his tips in his pocket. He threw the wallet with the license in the driver's seat, then rolled up the windows and pushed the front tires in the water. The waves sloshed the hood. He threw the triangle glass and stone in the river. The splashes disappeared. He walked out as far as he dared and cleaned himself of the busboy.

He took his tool kit from the trunk, the gas can, water jug, and the little suitcase by the handle that rolled. He walked the long way back to the brick pillars. His feet hurt.

At the car, he dug in his briefs for the turquoise keychain. He clicked the lock and slid in the long creamy seat. He let her roll backward. There was just enough slope and his foot pushed asphalt out the open door. He steered with his elbow. It was a heavy car, full of gas and rolled well. It would sell for a bundle. It backed into the empty street.

Everyone was sleeping. He found cookies in the glove box and ate them slowly. He wiped his mouth on his damp sleeve, swept the crumbs out the open door, pushed the car down the street, one hand on the wheel and one on the door frame, careful of the creamy hinges, slow and peaceful through the neighborhood of big heavy trees.

At a safe distance, well past the pillars and hedges, he slid back in and pulled the door shut. The engine started like a maiden voyage. It was a warm and comfortable car, smelled nice like the powder room, and big enough to sleep in.

He screwed his plates on at an abandoned farm stand. He crunched last year's kernels, soggy from recent heavy rains and sprouting on mud in the taillight. He changed to high tops. He kicked a dried apple in the ditch. The car pulled out and over the county line.

Subtracted Man

Evening rush hour and Marlon squinted at the 32 outbound, which was late. The bus lollygagged at 6th and Washington, while Marlon in his rubber boots waited in the slush. Marlon's feet were cold. The evening was cold. Horns sounded and cars slid between lanes, nearly colliding, fishtailed, spit and sputtered. Second shift came on in forty-five minutes. He might still punch in on time.

The 32 blinked left, nosed straight at Marlon, and accelerated.

By nature a bus is a vehicle with an amiable face. It belched blue and the haze flew up bluer between soaring glass, steel, brick. The city was sticky and hard. For example, if a guy didn't notice the white ground or the bare trees in the median islands or the manhole covers rusted and steaming over the city's seal, or pedestrians' purple mouths steaming and chattering at the stop for the 41 or 56 across town, or the taxis' smoking tailpipes, or people smoking in doorways, arms crossed against the bitter cold

air, and everything cold, or if a guy weren't flying up over to reconnoiter from above, examining the icy tangled streets, how they grabbed and held together, how they webbed out out into frozen gray highways, gaffing the towns and cities and tethering them together into one great raft, he might think he were alone on a hot day in the Sahara.

The girl would get on at Lincoln. The girl, the girl.

Marlon did not like people. He squinted at a star between black towers. Marlon loved this star. He loved the cracked glass in the doors of the 32 as it rumbled to a stop. He loved the decisiveness of the snow, how clean and neat. He loved George Washington best of all the Presidents for his Cherry Tree, though the man would never have been Father of Our Country had he not been so tall. Just another cotton farmer with bad teeth. Marlon loved the bluebird in sneakers painted on the side of 32 and its sisters in the metro fleet. How they flocked busily and helpfully about town. How wonderful.

He loved his skin and body in theory. But once a red mole popped up on his neck, and when a man at work said, "Marlon, you have jelly on your neck," and pointed at the mole, Marlon hurried to a stall in the men's room and, facing the toilet, twisted it off. Marlon squinted when trying to understand things. People at work thought he just needed glasses. His bushy eyebrows prevented him from appearing ungulate on first glance. He had one hair in his left brow that never stopped growing. Marlon loved this hair more than any other part of him, though he knew it was wrong to. At present it was five inches long and resisted tucking into the brow. He used Vaseline to keep it down or an equivalent. He kept the mole in an envelope in his desk. It turned black. He tried to love it anyway.

The 32 lunged when it stopped, and splashed. Snow was predicted with temperatures dropping and high wind revving up over night. The doors snapped open. The fat driver sat amphibious on his throne chewing pink gum. He fiddled with his foul left ear with his foul left hand, where a foul grey audio wire came out it, sly like. Jowly. Overflowing. Marlon had dissected such as him in biology back in high school. The driver bobbed to invisible bass and drums. His lips, teeth, and tongue snapped and licked. This driver looked down at Marlon standing in the slush. He blinked and subtracted Marlon instantly. Deletion is painful. Marlon fingered the pocketknife in his trousers.

The driver's nametag said "Boone," but Marlon knew this name was a lie. A name is just a word and can be concocted for show or effect. "Boone." Once, "Boone" hit and killed a calico cat at the corner of 6th and Hoover. Marlon was the only rider in the 32 at the time, the only witness. Hate is like a rock in the dirt that a guy finds when he digs deep enough with a shovel.

Dear Mr. Bluebird Metro:
I am a regular customer on your bus line service. I take the 32 out to work at 5:10 Monday through Friday and back downtown on the 12:33 am, the last bus. It is hard to complain. I am not a complainer by nature but

"Boone" parked his car on BB, the lowest level of the metro lot, space #429 and was often the last metro employee to leave at 1 am. An earthquake or terrorist attack would crush the small car easily. Rat poison, enough to kill every living thing on earth, could be contained in one average sized water tower. Marlon dreamed of retaliatory deletion: in the elevator down to BB and a lead pipe; in the bushes in front of the driver's rundown apartment building by the river with a pair of scissor from a Hitchcock movie about love and jealousy; in his favorite coffee shop, a Styrofoam lid, a syringe; between

the yellow lines at #429, a maul from the thrift store for a dollar, redumped in the donation bin later that night after the deed was done, and wiped for prints. The yellow would slant parallel, but the yellow paint on the concrete was not permanent. Grease and blood on concrete were not permanent. Nothing was permanent.

Well, the girl at Lincoln was permanent.

His mother was permanent. Way back, Marlon's mother had given him the pocket knife for Christmas embossed with the word M A R L O N in gold script over red enamel. At work, silverware and cutlery were commonly stolen from the break room. Marlon's knife had often saved the day in break room emergencies: blocks of cheese needed to be cut, for example, a salami log, celery and carrots for the dieters, a cake on someone's birthday. His thumb had since rubbed away all the letters but the M A. Once Marlon had a dream of subtracting himself of his arms and legs. He lived on a cart with wheels and a pull cord for a puller. A bad vision to wake up to, but he attributed it entirely to the driver. Marlon did not believe in dreams.

Marlon stepped from the slush onto the 32. His coins clanged into the steel box. Marlon sat, as always, in the seventh row back on the left and watched the driver. The man next to Marlon at the window wore all black clothes: new slacks, a jacket, an overcoat, and an old fashioned felt hat too small for his head that must have belonged to some other older man. He wore sunglasses with lemon yellow rims even with the sun almost down. He tipped his chin in the air as blind people do and Marlon knew the man must be blind. He held a thick pile of legal-looking papers on his lap. His fingers rested on the mute lines of type. Marlon craned his neck and read Whereas, Whereas, Whereas written in bold at the beginning of each paragraph. The heading at the top said Last Will

and Testament of someone. The paragraphs were totally surrounded by white space, by nothing at all. Marlon felt sorry for the man and the white spaces. The Blind rode free on any Bluebird Metro. They got on first, got off first, even before the pregnant ladies and the old folks with walkers.

The 32 took off.

It stopped at Adams, a President who, history has proven, loved his wife more than the Presidency or power. An old man climbed on, gave the driver a dollar bill, then kept walking up the aisle to a seat by the emergency exit in the way back. The driver stuffed the bill in his pocket, a crime Marlon had witnessed more than once. The driver grinned greasily and waved in a pretty girl in a peach parka who did not pay her fare. He gave guff to a kid in a hockey jersey over some nickels.

The blind man's phone rang in his pocket but he closed his eyes behind the glasses and didn't answer. Marlon took the opportunity to squint at the blind man's paper: a silver set including all trays and servers to be passed on to, twelve Wedgwood settings to be divvied up between, a wedding dress to be pressed, vacuum packed, and shipped to, a sterling football charm bracelet to be soldered and polished to be donated to, an international thimble set inventoried and delivered to, a Wagon Wheel pattern quilt in blue and white cotton, stitched in 1924 by a long dead Delilah to be cleaned, repaired, and passed on to the loving daughter, etc. Marlon quit reading when the driver refused a lady with a stroller, telling her the stroller was too wide for the aisle, no room for it, collapse it or wait for the next bus. She started yelling. The driver bobbed his head unmoved. She got off and the bus kept going. Marlon wrote up the incident in his

notebook citing date, time and location. Waiting for the other riders, he was able to finish the last few lines of his latest letter:

Dear Mr. Bluebird Metro:
First too, let me explain that I admire Bluebird. But enough is enough as they say. You are the man in charge. I care. I am a credible person. What is truth, what is goodness? Doing things right. What is true is everyone needs all their senses attuned and running tip-top for driving the public around in a metro bus. Eyes and ears. Focus, civic awareness, obviously. The law is on the public's side. Please note: "No driver of any city vehicle shall employ any device or implement that impairs or could impair in any way his auditory abilities or function while operating any municipal vehicle." IS 646.82.7(D)(a). Further, no driver can elect to let riders ride free except those authorized by law, like the Blind. Or to deny legal riders. This is happening on Bluebirds every day, sir. I can assure you. It is egregious. Please rectify this. It is bad for the morale of the city.
Thank you for your consideration.

The new riders settled into their seats and the 32 sped away. It stopped soon at Jefferson, the red-haired drafter of the Declaration of Independence.

She would get on at Lincoln. She had red hair too but going gray. She had been riding the 32 for seven years. She averaged every fourth night so she was overdue. In school, she swam the crawl in lane four during practice. She sat two seats away in biology sophomore year. Once, when the student between them was sick, she and Marlon had silently dissected a baby rat together that was not dead yet. She had handed him the sharp implement for the liver and he had brushed her finger in the handoff, which was small, pink and agitating like the rat. He had backstroked and butterflied in lane three or five all those years, as near as possible. In history class, Marlon got all A's and one semester sat right behind her and smelled her hair day and night. Thomas Jefferson owned a slave girl name Sally who gave birth to untold numbers of red-haired babies. Despite his numerous A's, Marlon learned this shameful fact only after high school and he was angry at his teacher for the omission. This teacher had also said Marlon could be

president of the USA if he wanted it enough. But Marlon wanted many things. The 32 departed Jefferson with a few teenagers and a lady and her toddler.

The 32 stopped at Madison. A gang of new riders came on and none of them paid a dime. They milled around near the NO STANDING SIGN and talked to the driver. They laughed as if they were all friends. It seemed unlikely. Marlon wondered. The old man and the hockey boy played Guess-Who-I-Am at the back. They got loud sometimes with an occasional word yelled out: Al Capone! Sinatra! Wayne Gretzky! Bugs Bunny! Peels and snorts of laughter. Strangers. Marlon wondered. The blind man's phone rang again. He ignored it again.

Anyone can get a job driving a bus: it had been just a theory. To test it, Marlon had once taken a day off work and gone to the third floor of city hall where a woman with bags under her eyes and a seeming constant headache handed him the paper. Her small desk was ringed with smiling family pictures. The paper said: APPLICATION FOR METRO-BLUEBIRD DRIVER. Felons drive public buses for years before they are discovered. Child molesters have a difficult time finding steady work, for example. The lady on the third floor also received all the completed applications, glanced at them, dropped them into cubbies marked YES, NO or NEED MORE INFO. After that, Marlon thought much about betrayal and the Rights of Man.

When Marlon got down and out about life, he thought about the girl. He closed his eyes and pictured her standing in the glassed-in stop in front of the tall, bronzed Lincoln who pointed at the ground with a longer-than-natural finger, drawing his line for Emancipation, etc. Her red hair under her tight wool cap. Marlon would spot her from a block away. She would have a magazine rolled up in her pocket. The driver would

unplug his foul left ear, in deference, as she ran up the steps. Her wild animal eyes would knock Marlon over hunting for a seat on the 32. She might sit in absolutely any row at all, any seat, so unpredictable was she, his angel.

When they married, Marlon would get the ring from his mother. It would be silver with a row of tiny diamonds leading to a ruby of some size in the middle. Old fashioned. The tarnish would rub off with skin and matrimony. They would honeymoon in Fiji. They would eat from wooden bowls with knives and forks inlaid with mother-of-pearl. They would snorkel with Australians and hold hands underwater as fish of every color swam by.

They would live together in a small town with a water tower near the courthouse. There would be a pool at the high school and they would swim together in the mornings. The belly of water tower would be hoisted in the sky like the belly of a pregnant queen. The place would be named Chillicothe or Greely or Eureka and the word would be painted across the belly in a script expressing the personality of the town. Marlon would keep his job at 7th and Roosevelt. He would take a different Bluebird and would rid himself of this driver entirely forever. She would keep her job until the kids were born. There was a town called Marlon, Idaho in an atlas and they would go there on vacations in a minivan. She would take his picture in front of the city sign as a joke. She and he would swim next to each other in lanes three and four at the pool while the kids took their lesson. Everyone would bob and cluster at the side of the pool, talking together. The old ladies from town would wear bloomer suits and swim in lane one. They would admire the kids and offer to babysit as their pendulous breasts floated weightless in the lovely blue. But it wasn't blue water. The blue was just the color of the paint on the bottom of

the pool. The water might have been purple if purple was the popular color for water, and trendy. The pool would contain all the town's fluid and feeling: sweat, spit, semen blood, and tears.

The 32 stopped at Monroe. No one got on or off. Marlon petted his eyebrow down. The blind man seemed to be studying the paragraphs on the paper, but that was impossible.

The blind man's phone rang again and this time he sighed, answered. He smoothed the papers down with his free hand.

"Hey, Desmond – Thanks, yeah, I'm real tired, that's how. You don't want to know – I just went over it with the lawyer – Millie got the quilt – Betsy got the silver set –Yeah, sure it's worth more. Betsy won't care. She wanted the quilt. Tighten your seatbelt – all this shit – Desmond, you have to tell her for me and – You've got to. I can't right now – Better you than me – So ok? – I owe you one."

The blind man hung up the phone. "Fighting like cats," he said to Marlon.

"Sounds like it," said Marlon, shy and nervous at talk with a strange blind man.

"My sister and my wife hate each other. Sixteen years of this. What can you do?"

"Hard saying," said Marlon, "Not knowing."

"What can you do? That is the question," said the blind man. "Not one damn thing."

"I hope it turns out ok," said Marlon.

"Everything always does, I guess," said the blind man, and Marlon thought his was a very noble position for a blind man to take.

The 32 stopped at Quincy. People moved in and out, briefcases, strollers, bag and backpacks. Polk, Taylor, Fillmore. Street lights, stars, the half moon popped between buildings and disappeared. A blaze burst up from a grease fire at a street vendor's cart and the man's face glowed for an instant. People walked, ran, milled, clustered and broke apart in black bundled shadows. A bundle of newspapers busted open in the wind and the pages cartwheeled in feathery sheets in the headlights. The city whizzed by. Windows and doorways blinked and the sky darkened. From the back, the hockey kid yelled "Steinbrenner." The old man muffled his mouth laughing. "Michael Jordan." "Captain Ahab."

"My mother grew up around here," said the blind man. "She's dead."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Marlon.

"Your mother dead?" asked the blind man.

"No, she's not dead," said Marlon, which was not altogether true. "I hope the weather holds."

"Yeah," said the blind man looking out the window.

After graduation, Marlon heard through alumni contacts that the girl had married Rich the meteorologist from Channel 7. Several years later, Marlon's contacts confirmed the marriage had gone south. The couple was separated and was possibly divorcing. Rich had been "Richie" in high school, then just another regular guy on the swimming team. But Richie won the state diving championship in 1972 – a long shot for victory from the high dive. He nailed a maneuver never seen before or since, called "the Bomhold" for Richie's last name. Witnesses still disagreed on elements of the dive and in which order they were properly performed. Marlon was on the bench and remembered it this way:

Richie had climbed the ladder, pale and grinning at the crowd with crooked teeth. Pulling himself up the tops steps, he sprang onto the platform. He strode to the end seeing his future. He turned and wiggled his feet backward out to ready position over nothing. The judges gripped their pencils. People in the bleachers sat up from their tired tropical slouches, suddenly and unexpectedly expecting something big from this no one. Richie sprung backward out up into the empty, flew up up to spectacular height, pinnacled dangerously near the gym roof, then snapped himself in half, twisted, spun projectile, twisted again, unsnapped himself, tucked into a ball, flew like a planet forming its own orbit and no sun at all to bother about. He thundered down, and just as he parted the water, he appeared to burst into pure hot flames. No splash at all. Richie disappeared under flat blue forever. Rich came up out at the ladder tan with capped teeth, slicked back hair, a two button blazer, the weatherman's wand in his dripping hand. Of course she had married him.

"Actually she's dead," said Marlon, remembering the dive.

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"I don't like it," said Marlon, "that she died."

"We're in the same boat then."

"She gave me this," said Marlon and he pulled the knife from his trousers and handed it to the blind man.

"Real nice," said the blind man, seeming to look over it anyway.

"I'm glad the blind get discounts," said Marlon.

"I agree," said the blind man.

The blind man's phone rang and he gave the knife back to Marlon.

"Did you tell her? – And? – Oh, Jesus – Oh, Jesus – She break anything? – God Damn it – I'm on the bus. Put her on – Well, then tell her to pull herself together and call me back."

He hung up. He took off his lemon yellow sunglasses and rubbed his eyes. The city was smaller, shrinking away from its center. The shadows leaned across the streets. The blind man's eyes looked like anyone's eyes. They stared at Marlon's eyebrow, but that was impossible. Marlon smoothed his brow. He glared at the driver in the big round mirror, still bobbing and chewing as if nothing mattered.

Dear Mr. Bluebird:
I believe in things, sir. I believe in things. Do YOU believe in nothing at all?

The blind man's phone rang.

"Betsy, sweetheart – I'm sorry. I know how – I didn't but – I know, Betsy. But think about it sweetheart – her own daughter it only makes sense – You get the – Yes, of course she did. You can't take it personal – Sweetheart – Now don't talk about scissors at a time like this. Stop it. You wouldn't do that – You're talking crazy – You wouldn't. I know you wouldn't. My mother's favorite – No, Betsy. No, Betsy! I totally forbid it!"

The line went dead. The blind man stared at phone and put it away. The 32 rolled on. People squirmed in their seats. Marlon squinted. He had never seen or heard of such a thing. A lady watched and ate a spotted apple, chewing slowly. The 32 might have stopped at Pierce, but no one was standing at the stop and no one pulled the cord. The blind man folded up the papers.

"The world is not what we wish for," said the blind man.

"I'm sorry for all your troubles," said Marlon.

"Thanks." The blind man tapped Marlon's sleeve. He stuffed the papers in his breast pocket. The lady threw the apple core on the floor. The 32 drove stopped at Buchanan and she got off. Guess-Who-I-Am ended in a huff when the hockey kid picked a rock star the old man could never have known. The blind Man blew his nose. The stars jangled in space. The snow was holding off. So far, the weathermen were wrong.

She got on at Lincoln. Her red hair was pulled up in a bun. She read her magazine in the 5th row right. She had been the prettiest girl in school by a long shot. At Johnson the 32 sat at an accident and traffic jam at the convention center where a horseshow was starting next week. Cop cars swarmed the intersection amidst a mess of crushed steel and scattered glass. A trailer was on its side. A person was on a stretcher but waving his arms by an ambulance. A black horse with an arched neck was skittering on the corner with an officer holding its bridle. Two small bays burst out from an alley with people chasing their ropes. Their hooves skidded from under them in the sloppy street. The girl called out "Oh no, oh no," at the horses. The suffering was too much for her to see. She covered her mouth and went back to the magazine.

The blind man shook his head at the scene and said, "I love horses. I hate to see this kind of thing." He looked away and down over his papers again.

Marlon watched the scene and the girl and the blind man, all amazed. One equine casualty was reported on the news later that night. Eventually, another officer waved the 32 through.

She got off at Grant, not her usual stop, a tone deaf President with a cross-eyed First Lady. She ran on the sidewalk till he couldn't see her anymore. The 32 sped away.

Hayes, Garfield, Arthur, Cleveland. Rat poison enough to kill every living thing on earth could be contained in one average sized water tower, but how was the calculation done? Marlon could not remember. The city was so big. The city contained so many streets and doors, more than a person would expect. Anyone could come and go elsewhere anytime.

At McKinley, the blind Man stood and shuffled down the aisle.

"I'm sorry you're blind!" called Marlon after him. "Blindness is the worse of all disabilities!"

The blind man stopped and looked around. "Blind?" he said.

He fingered the lemon yellow rims, "No, no. I'm not blind at all. But thank you, though, if I were. I agree blindness is the worst possible affliction."

Then the blind man shuffled down the aisle to exit where the driver was calling out, "Blind! Blind! Blind!" laughing and holding his belly with one fat hand. "That's a good one."

The blind man stood at the top of the steps and the driver pulled the lever and the door flung open.

"Have a good evening, blind man," said the driver.

The blind man shook his head. He adjusted his sunglasses.

"Remember to be kind," said the blind man, "Please."

The driver kept laughing. The blind man stepped down and out of the 32, which then pulled away only to stopped again and wait at the light. On the sidewalk, the blind man looked both ways. He then crossed the avenue with care, stepping through slush. Marlon switched to a seat across the aisle to watch the blind man disappeared around the opposite corner.

The 32 drove on.

Rich at Six and Ten was a popular weatherman with a strong jaw and a thin mustache. He made his reputation for extreme weather accuracy one Christmas Day when he predicted a freak set of funnel clouds would descend around the region by noon, an unheard of thing for that time of year. Some scoffed as he pointed with his wand at his pale green chart, the counties looking safe and dry. He tapped the places of imminent touchdowns and waved toward depressions looming in the west. That day, the rain had smashed sideways at the windows. He foretold tornadic conditions, wind-makers too severe to quantify. He told everyone what to do. Even Marlon went to the basement. He carried his portable TV and plugged it in under the laundry table. From there, he watched grainy footage of a delivery truck blown over on the interstate. Loaves of bread in plastic bags tumbled in the ditch. The birds would make the most of it in the morning.

Marlon got off the 32 at Roosevelt, who, during his term in the White house, blinded himself in one eye during a boxing match with a friend. The 32 rolled on. Marlon punched in thirty-five minutes late due to traffic. Somewhere in the three blocks from the bus, the pocketknife disappeared from Marlon's trousers, out a hole newly formed, escaping into the slush. On break, Marlon took a flashlight and went searching for it.

For Swimmers

1. Drowning is unnecessary.

Ruth tucked a white curl under her cherry bathing cap. She wiggled into ready position on Slippery Rock. It was a perfect day for a swim, a bluebird day, a Lake Day as her father would have said. The water was calm and calling. It was May and the water was still very cold and he would have noted that too in his finger wagging tone. Her father had been such a worrier. Ice just went out when? She did not remember. She was trying to forget things. There was nothing to worry about. Yes, she was very old, but she had made the roundtrip to Victory Rock 1000 times at least. This day would be 1001. Anyway, hardly anything was verifiable and certifiable, nothing entirely and completely. So true. She just wanted to swim. She had lived 29,997 days so far. So she dove.

Jim and his wife bought the place just north across Ruth's property line on Pike's Point in 1961. They came in May that year with all the other summer people and showed up every weekend. They were a friendly family. Just as soon as they got settled they invited Ruth down for dinner at their picnic table by the Lake for introductions, fire, wine, and congenial conversation.

Ruth was very welcoming to the new family, an attractive woman. She was so very independent. She knew she was just their type of person. She could see the wife admired her and so did Jim, that they agreed completely at first. She came from a big family in the area, Ruth told them. She toured them through the old family cottage on the Point. She, of course, knew everything there was to know about the Lake. Right off, she offered to show Jim, who liked to fish, all the good fishing places and Jim's wife, who liked to bake, the places where the berries grew biggest. Ruth was perfectly harmless to them and vise versa. In short, they all three looked forward to many years as friendly neighbors.

Ruth told of the rocks off their shore: Slippery Rock, Station, Three Sisters, Flat Rock. If you were a good swimmer you could navigate from one to the other out to Victory Rock, much the biggest, and farthest – a monster of a rock out in the deep deep. Too deep and far for you little kids, she said. There was man-sized V scratched into the granite where your feet went. The kids had called it Victory during World War II for morale and the home team.

Jim's wife did not like swimming, she told Ruth, and someone had to watch the kids. The next day Jim and Ruth already stood out on the Victory together, both up to their ribs in the drink and waving.

"Why's it here?" he said.

"Why's anything. It will be here till the next Ice Age," she said.

"Ice Ages are rare," he said.

They dove back toward shore.

The three new friends were always together. They sipped coffee and made cakes and meatballs. Ruth brought dusty albums of pictures: the cottage from 1908, her father and family by a fire and a horse, Ruth in Indian buckskin and braids, the Lake's record trout on the end of line, and Ruth grinning in her canoe. On their whitest wall, Jim and his wife projected slideshows of places they'd been to, California, Yellowstone, and New Orleans. They unrolled maps of places they might someday visit. "Together," Jim suggested, with Ruth, and the women agreed. They boiled lobster and ate it with butter dripping. Ruth's face was a mess, "like a child," she laughed, and Jim dabbed her chin and lips with his napkin while his wife tucked the children. They swam to Victory Rock daily and from Ruth Jim learned the contours of the shoreline and the underwater terrain.

At night they played guess-who-I-am and charades till late. They watched the waves during three-day-blows, violent storms that rattled the windows. It would rain and rain. The night trail between the cottages was a tunnel of wet and the flashlight tumbled its light up into the trees and made the strangest shapes. Jim and Ruth soon discovered they shared a strong weakness for each other. She laundered the sheets on Friday morning readying for the weekend arrivals and his midnight slide into her bed.

2. Don't swim far from shore unaccompanied by a boat.

Ruth paddled in the cherry bathing cap and no boat. The boat had been sold, when? Then she forgot the question. Most questions needed forgetting. She stopped to

adjust the cherry cap. Red had been Jim's favorite and she considered blue. Station Rock was for a swimmer's rest. So the old lady rested.

Ruth's father was the first person to own land on the Point. He blasted the road in with dynamite when everyone else said it could not been done. He was a careful man and had a great respect for the water. "Anyone could drown in that Lake," her father had said, pointing out the blue window. "Best swimmer in the world." Then he told the story of his motorboat being swamped at Perch Place way back, and so on.

Father was a believer in rules and procedures and so for his children he had written out a list of instructions for swimmers. His warnings looped on the page like too much fish line in deep water. Six instructions in all. He had affixed the paper on the wall in the cottage under his photograph so unknown progeny would recognize the author. The corners were pinned. Four pins in all.

"My wife is not a bad woman, just not the right woman." Jim had said this more than once.

"Leave her then," said Ruth crawling on top of him. They had a wonderful time together.

"Give me time."

"How much time?"

"I don't know. Give me time."

"This is a once-in- lifetime thing," Ruth said and was absolutely sure this was true.

"Of course," he said and crawled on top of her this time.

Then the wife stepped in. Ruth lost many friends, of course, but had her family. Jim busied himself with work and family. He joined the planning board back home and took on many new responsibilities that gobbled up his time. His wife asked him to fundraise for the Save the Loon Society and he did though he cared little for the bird.

They both repented, but not completely. They swam by themselves to Victory. She watched him with binoculars from her screen porch when it was his turn. His midnight visits were rare and surreptitious to the extreme, but more romantic and passionate because of that.

3. It is sound advice never to swim alone even in shallow water.

Ruth swam and smiled at the quaintness of the rule and turned like a mermaid. Three Sisters. As kids they played tag in this triangle, diving between the one stone sister and another, one kid treading in the middle - The It. Inhale and hold it through the dive till you get ther. Beware the clutch of the foot from below. She sat on the smallest sister and pulled her legs up. Triangulation and strangulation. To children, all that screaming and howling at the grab was fanciful, entirely outlandish, a farce. Maybe the wife was dead. People die every day. Such black fish come up from somewhere. So cold. She shivered. A dog barked, maybe it was Elsa's dog of the run again. Sound carried so far on calm water. SO FAR! Miles and miles or at the beach, that dog. One could count on dogs and rocks and beaches. The mermaid dove on to Flat Rock.

Years passed. Ruth made new friends, Elsa at the end of the Lake and a pen pal in Rome. Ruth met him in cities mostly when he was on business. On trains. They made love and fucked alternately, rolling and chatting in between about irony and telepathy.

This while the sleeping car swayed and the whistle sounded. So strong, it was just a matter of time.

They had once argued about falling out of love.

"It can't be," she said. "If it's real love, then it can't be undone." This is how she thought then.

"Even if I never leave her," he said.

"You will leave her," she said.

Then Jim told her this story told to him by the friend of a friend: "A man and woman were in love. I mean wild about each other. Nothing could part them. One day they drove down the road on an errand to a town they had never been to before. They disagreed about the best way to get there. She said turn left and he said right. To keep the peace he turned left, but he was still angry about it when, shortly after the turn, a dog ran into the road in front of their car. The man swerved and hit the dog. She left the man soon after.

"Everyone has a dead dog," Jim said.

"That's a horrible story and a lie," Ruth said.

"Just think about it," Jim said.

Years passed.

Jim came to the Lake less and less.

Once, for their anniversary, Jim sent Ruth a box of twelve chocolates and she was grateful. He sent a lacey nightgown once and she wore it at night in front of a mirror and turned this way and that way to admire the lines and potentialities. Once, he gave her a ring with a blue stone and she wore it on the left, even around town, until the letter. After the letter she wore it only to measure whether she was shrinking or expanding.

4. Don't stay in swimming until you are very cold.

She broke the surface at Flat Rock, which was three quarters to Victory, give or take. Flat Rock was put in the Lake by some god as a couch for the miserable. She lounged. She thought of the nightgown and the mirror. Her teeth chattered.

Once, long ago now, the waves had come up in a passing squall and swamped her canoe not far from Victory. She had fallen in, a rarity. She'd lost the line and bait right away and her book on her lap had sunk fast, gone, an argument on fallout shelters and first strikes from submarines. Her hip-waders had filled. Down she went. Good practice for drowning.

On the way below, she saw a huge new rock she didn't know, had never seen, but how was that? A newborn giant just off her shore? This is not how the big rocks came to live here. No, it couldn't be, but there the huge new rock was!

Where is the mother? Where is its father?

They died.

Gone.

Gone?

The big bass had darted under the huge new rock. Wasn't that proof of the rock? A big bass swimming away, under the shoulder of the boulder? A big bass frowning hugely? One does not imagine a frown.

Concentrate, I tell you. There is only so much air in your lungs.

She had spun and turned away from the bass. She had fumbled with the wader buckles. Then came the threesome of land-locked salmon, a rarity. They had floated by after the bass, a fish parade. They had paused and watched her kick and tug for her freedom, but the buckles were just that stubborn.

Why not just breath in through your gills? the threesome's suggestion.

Bubbles and frowns.

Leave me be!

Concentrate.

She had squirmed one leg free from the waders, a lithe woman still. She had kicked air-ward with the free leg, had risen some, then sank back down again. The leg was too heavy. The threesome of salmon had come very near to better study her troubles. They had turned. Then they dove toward a huge new gorge below. She had never seen this gorge either and stopped to study it. It was a thick, rough, new cut deep into old gray lakebed. The gorge ran off into the murk, wide enough to eat her up, her cabin, every rock on the shore for a mile. So huge and still. Then she kicked harder, but still she floated down to it.

The buckle, the buckle. Attend to it.

In the end she outwitted the buckle. With both legs free, she kicked off edge of the new gorge. The hip-waders dropped away. She floated up.

Yes, I'm certain of the gorge. See?

I believe you. Swim hard now.

She pulled toward the surface.

Good practice for holding one's breath. A full minute is above average.

It's nothing. I've done at least twice that.

Oh, you.

Swim harder now. Kick and pull. Up, now, to air.

She kicked.

But there has never been salmon in the Lake.

I've seen salmon in my day. Swim.

She pulled at the surface coming. She did not look back to see if the hip-waders stood above the mouth of the new gorge.

Swim harder. Your life is short.

Yes.

Or if the straps slung over missing shoulders, never to be seen again. Or, if the threesome of salmon had tipped and followed the hip-waders down in.

Who will you tell?

I'm telling to you, old friend.

You won't die this time.

Good.

She had dragged her canoe to shore. She had breathed more air than she needed and dried off with an old shirt from the knot of the tree.

She never found the new rock again, or the gorge, though she searched for both for years in her canoe, cutting the surface with her paddle and hands, digging holes in the Lake, and though she swam out searching with snorkel and mask, trolling in her stiffening body. In the end, she had mapped every foot off Victory Rock, 200 feet in every direction, through surely the canoe had swamped no more than 20 feet away. She had circled, circling, had circled back. Sometimes she had rested on that old friend. Tracing the V with her toe, then diving off its ledge again. Once she had found back cover of a book eaten at the edges on the beach by Elsa's. Had the canoe swamped on some other Lake altogether?

Possibly. Such mistakes occur.

A mistake?

A mistake.

Years later, she had reported the missing rock and the missing gorge to Lake authorities at the town office. She told the men her story and they nodded and leaned over subsurface maps. They said they would look into the missing geological artifacts.

They might.

It is wonderful they might look into it.

I'm sorry for that rock and that gorge.

Terrible, yes, to be missing.

On Flatrock, she lounged a bit longer. The stone was a pleasant shape that hugged the hips. She snugged the cherry cap. Her legs dangled for minnows. The silly swimmers. Flat Rock was the most contented rock, with its nose always just out of the water in this early season.

But I am contented too.

Of course.

I have lived well.

Surely.

Dying is just getitng very cold.

Yes.

One must still swim.

Indeed. Of course.

She pushed off Flatrock. She kicked the shore away with her old feet. Spit and nostril. The Lake deepened. She kicked and pulled the last bit toward Victory Rock.

After reading the letter, Ruth went to the closet in the main room of the cottage and started looking for something. She found the following: poles and rods jumbled,

reels, creels, baskets, bobbers, spinners and sinkers, tangled line; an old motorboat key tethered to a life preserver; her father's tackle boxes, uncle's, cousin's, all spilled out, desks of cards, flashlights, dead batteries by the tens and twenties; black bugs dead and alive; lobster pots, a soup ladle, muffin tins, pot holders burnt at the edges; broken dishes intended for fixing set in a pile with a tube of dried up epoxy on top; a magazine in Spanish with a picture of Frank Sinatra on the cover; miss-folded maps of Romania, Chili and New Mexico and a road atlas of the US with most of the states torn out; board games broken up like driftwood - Monopoly, Risk and Clue - sets of Chinese checkers, backgammon, dominoes and chess; piles of Readers Digest dog eared; the Farmer's Almanac from 1963-8; newspaper clippings – MOONWALK, KENNEDY'S DEAD, NIXON RESIGNS and her father's obituary from 1984 in lower case; old fishing licenses and regulations for herself, her brothers, sisters-in-law, her father and mother, and people's whose names she did not recognize all alphabetized in recipe index file with a rubber band around the whole; more dead bugs; a stuffed fish taken from one of the oceans and chewed by mice; a small pine box from the five-and-dime in town with the name of the Lake in gold cursive on top and someone's rock collection inside; a marriage license with names smeared; a box of push pins.

She didn't remember where any of it came from.

Once Ruth had fished one of his blue-lipped twins from the bottom of Clay Bay. She dove and got the twin. She swam and pulled the twin. She coughed and dragged the twin. She kicked and lifted the twin. She twitched and breathed for the twin. Skin to skin, lip to lip, tongue to tongue. He had penned and posted the letter five days later.

Jim and his wife moved to Hawaii and sold the cottage. They were all old people by then. The wife had picked Hawaii. Nothing could be completely clearer.

5. Don't plunge into cold water when exhausted or overheated.

She swam out and out. The crawl proper, as he father taught her, the breath stroke, then the dog paddle as she tired looking for Victory. She floated on her back to rest. Shore seemed a mile between her toes. She turned and turned. Her legs twisted. Where is Victory? She sank, determined to find bottom but her feet never touched and she pulled at water to get back to air. She treaded, the most efficient form of staying alive, then tucked under again to spin and search the water with open eyes. Where's the rock?

A rock that big does not just depart unannounced from a lake.

No. It's considered rude.

Father?

But if a rock does depart unexpectedly, the swimmer should wait patiently for its return.

Is that the next instruction?

Yes. But there are no more.

She treaded and turned, treated and turned.

She did not completely believe in telepathy anymore. She didn't think she believed in *completely* anymore. She only believed in fractions completely.

A dive for a twin was only reflex. The loons were rarely saved.

Ruth's best friend was Elsa for years. Elsa was German and once had a dog she'd stolen, kidnapped from some substandard people at the foot of the Lake. The dog had

been shaved and its hair dyed from blonde to brown after the theft to prevent detection, identification, and all subsequent injustice. Ruth admired Elsa very much.

6. Don't get panicky when in danger.

She floated. She counted the cabins on shore and lost count at three. She knew it was the wrong number except in case of fire, panic, or dynamite, which can kill even the most enormous rock, anything, a hill, a mountain. A big enough bird could pluck the rock from the Lake and away, a mistaken mouse, anything at all is possible with the right size talons. A mere rock stands no chance, a girl child.

She went under for the first time.

Smug. The thing with him was. If she had to say.

She once talked to him, mouth-to-ear, on the cot in her screen porch. Sound carried so far over calm water.

"A rock as big as Victory Rock must have been deposited by a glacier during the retreat of the last Ice Age."

"Fascinating," he said. They were playing with each other's private parts.

"It's known as an erratic," she said kissing his nose sweetly.

"I like that word," he said with enthusiasm.

"All those other stones are from the glacier too," she said. "The small ones everywhere on the bottom and shore. Even the tiniest ones."

"Who cares about them," he said, annoyed.

"Do you get it?"

"Yes."

"It's out of place," she said. "That's why erratic. See?"

"Yes. Come here."

"Out of scale."

"Yes. I get it."

"Completely out of scale."

"Yes."

She bobbed up and breathed once. Then she went down the second time.

All swimmers will bob up a third time. It's a fact well known.

At night, with her eyes shut, she had chipped away at the rock till it was a pile of pebbles, practically sand, small enough for the fish to eat it by mistake.

A dog barked off somewhere.

It was probably Elsa's dog off its tether again roaming the beach. She liked that dog. Elsa's place was so near the road, dangerous to animals. She might look for it later. Tie it up. Down the steps to the dock to the canoe to the beach.

Blue Nevus

Preamble to the National Space Agency Employee Manual

1. Safety First

"Hey, Roger, what the hell is that blue thing on your arm?" said Stan Penrod in Locker Room One. He was zipping his old NSA jumpsuit, which was too tight for him.

"Hey, Roger Cotton, hey men. Come look at Roger Cotton's arm. There's something on it."

The men stopped dressing and undressing.

Stan Penrod's voice had military training. That was part of it. Although retired, Stan Penrod's voice was still like the tip of a missile, a fact that cannot be discounted here. Or at least noted. Stan had been short-listed for the Ulysses Program in the middle of that century. The body ages at a particular rate, but the trained voice declines more slowly. Modern medicine has noted this.

"My God," Stan's voice beaconed more softly. "It's like a little blue caterpillar

walking on dough."

The naked men and half dressed men and men in towels on the edge of the cloud of steam which billowed from the shower entrance turned. They looked at Roger Cotton on Bench 6, slumped and gray with his clasped hands. Though Stan Penrod is tangential to the story at best, peripheral at best, a distraction.

"Hey, Roger, that blue thing looks very bad," said Stan and waved his cigar.

The men of the Y gathered closer round Roger Cotton's bicep, breathing in Stan's smoke. The cigar was a violation, of course, but who was going to stop Stan Penrod?

Roger Cotton leaned on a tower of clean, white towels just delivered to the bench by gloved staff.

"It's nothing," said Roger Cotton. He covered the blue thing with his hand.

"Looks like cancer," said Alonzo Porter in his racquetball gear.

This was back when everyone died of it. The towels fell. The buzzer sounded. Men looked at the clock above the door and hurried with their things. They ran off to the pool, the weight room, the Jacuzzi tub.

"I'm late," said Stan Penrod. He took up his racquetball gear. "Have that thing looked at, Roger."

Stan Penrod exited the swinging door to Locker Room One. He crushed out the cigar in the water fountain on his way. The few remaining men rewrapped their towels.

"It's only a Blue Nevus," Roger said to the lockers. "I've had it checked out."

"Never heard of it," said Alonzo Porter at the drinking fountain, a barotone.

"It's well known and totally benign," said Roger Cotton. "A Blue Nevus is naturally occurring, nothing at all. The doctors said so."

"Doctors," said Alonzo. He disappeared into steam.

“But blue is not a color the skin should make,” said Max Robinson, a minister, who would live to be one hundred and fifty-two. “It’s a worry. Remember, cancer is also naturally occurring.”

“Yes, that’s right,” someone said.

“And Ebola is naturally occurring too,” said Alonzo Porter, who had forgotten his shampoo. “There have been outbreaks in South America moving northward.”

“I need water,” said Roger Cotton.

Albert Bunting filled a Dixie cup and handed it to Roger. Roger drank. The men watched his Adam’s apple go. The men lost interest. The last of them took showers or talked of other things or went away.

“What’s Martha say about this blue thing?” said Albert Bunting. They sat on Bench 6 and leaned on their knees.

“Martha’s in Omaha,” said Roger.

“I see,” said Albert Bunting, who had a cold and blew his nose. “Pardon me.”

“Thank you for being kind,” said Roger Cotton. “They promoted her to oxygen washers. Omaha is the epicenter for that research, as you know.”

“Of course, of course,” said Albert Bunting and he draped a towel over Roger’s arm like a cape. “Well, I’m glad you’re starting tennis.”

Roger Cotton nodded, “Yes, me too. It relaxes the mind. I’ve also been doing yard work, raking and pruning.”

Albert Bunting took a shower. Roger Cotton sat and waited for the locker room to clear.

When Alonzo Porter dried off, he was looking thin and ill but he and Albert Bunting shaved in the mirrors and had their usual talk: about the recent bicycle thefts in

Lennox with no suspects at all, about their frustration with the head master of Lennox Science Academy, they were both on the Board, and about how worrisome it was to see acceptance rates of LSA graduates declining at the Air Force Academy.

"The life-blood of the school is draining," said Alonzo Porter. "I hate to see the school jeopardized like this." Alonzo spoke in the same gruff tone as always, but the volume was lower, much lower, Roger Cotton noticed as he pretended to read a tennis magazine.

After they rinsed their faces, Alonzo and Albert talked of Kelsey Starr's recent visit for her 36th birthday. It was her last trip home before the pre-flight quarantine. They discussed a rumored Kelsey Starr boyfriend.

"I hope it's true," said Albert Bunting. "She deserves happiness."

"She's really taken her sweet time," Alonzo Porter said. "Her eggs are dying. Her mother was getting frantic about it according to Jason."

Roger Cotton listened to their happy talk. Barbeques and invitations. He studied the ceiling, mildewed and cracking. Rebar broke through and the ceiling crumbled down. When the men were gone, Roger Cotton tried his locker, but forgot his combination. The basement of the Y would be renovated soon after and a decade later the Y would be moved to retrofit on Appleton and Markley.

Roger took a shower without soap. The hot water pummeled his shiny head and naked skin just like it would anyone's. Roger Cotton dried off. He drank at the fountain. He found bandages in the bottom of an open locker near Bench 7 and fumbled to cover the Blue Nevus. He dressed. He walked to his car and sat for a long time on the bumper under the parking lot light. It was a terrible car. The Middle Ages was a better time to live. Life spans were shorter and more defined. Small pox and black plague took people

quickly regardless of sin or previous health. Horses were the main form of transportation, besides walking, which was what most people did, the average people. Average horses lived and died and had average foals, who lived and died. The people fed the horses in the fields. The people opened the fence door and watched the horses walk through. Once upon a time, people brushed horses in the morning as their first act of the day. They picked the dirt between the horse's shoes at noon. The horses stood and ate in beautifully green fields in the afternoon. It was a wonderful time.

A child's small bike leaned unchained on the fence. It was an older model, green and yellow, with steamers and a bell. It had a flat tire. The child had left the bike stranded and gone to get help. But this child had not found help. This child had not returned. Once upon a time, there were people down the street such as cobblers and blacksmiths who could fix the bike in a snap and who cared about the child, who wanted to make his life good, who asked after his happiness and well being amongst themselves.

Roger looked around him. The parking lot was empty. The Y lights were still on but it was just the janitor. A car was parked on Campbell with its interior lights on, but no one was in it. Roger waved at the car to be sure. No one waved back. Roger opened his trunk. He went to the bike and petted the green and yellow seat. He picked up the bike by the throat of the handles and laid the bike in his trunk. The bell trilled as he slammed the trunk door. Roger Cotton drove home smelling of Stan Penrod's cigar. He carried the small bike down the basement steps to the ping-pong table, which was never used anymore for ping-pong. He pulled the string over the net for light.

On the near-court, Roger Cotton stored his collection of silver and gold amulets, arranged in a small city of boxes within the service line. Across the net in the far-court, stood corresponding city of boxes, the amalgamated metals, the coppers and the pewters

too, the lesser amulets, neatly lined and stacked, rarely opened. In total, the entire ping-pong table metropolis was built of one hundred and twenty-seven amulet boxes. Each small, hand-crafted tricket within represented the handiwork of one of Roger Cotton's favorite historical and notable human cultures of the extinct past: amulets crafted in celebration of the Golden Age of post-colonial African, high-latitude/non-guttural Native American, and the late-north Low Frisian of central Europe were his special sub-specialties, though he he owned a smattering of others. He had ordered them from Mexico City as he and Martha could afford it. It was a thorough collection, but hardly fully exhaustive. This was just the beginning. He stood and admired the shadow the tallest buildings cast.

Roger Cotton set the bike down. He rolled it and parked it against the far-court backhand line. Its small front wheel and handle bars tangled easily into the cluster of seventeen other bikes. He pulled the sting over the net again, this time for darkness.

That night, Roger shaved his mustache with the straight edge. The bathroom mirror needed cleaning, but that was Martha's work. The mirror had a round face and a round lip. At the doctor's office, there had been a glass box with a phone girl in it with a headset over her skull. She talked to air: an ugly girl, orange plastic chairs, and old magazines. The hairs over Roger's lip were like dried-up grass. The doctor was dark and smelled of carpets and frankincense from India or Mongolia but the diploma said Baltimore. Roger had looked at the diploma closely. He had taken it from the wall and cleaned it with his sleeve while waiting for this doctor forty-three minutes.

A toothpaste lump fell. It stuck to the sink. Roger picked the skin with his nail and the lump slid away. The hairs slid down the drain, gone, absolutely gone.

Roger heard a noise in the house and called "Martha?" No, it was not Martha. It

was the Blue Nevus. Blue Nevus. Blue Nevus.

Roger neatened his sideburns with the straightedge and said something original: Up yours, Cinderella, you pink-pantied Fool, you Glass-shoed liar, what a Moron you are. I wish the stepsisters had burned your Dress. Smashed your Pumpkin. Caught your Mice in a Trap and dropped them in the Barrel, the one in your stepmother's Barn.

He wrote it down then tore it up. He knew he had gone too far.

When done with the sideburns, Roger pressed the blade to the neck of Blue Nevus but did not cut. Everything was backward in the mirror, confusing and dangerous. Roger Cotton went to bed since a good night sleep changes everything.

In the morning, Roger Cotton tried Martha's number in Omaha. He left a message. Before work he wrote a card to Ms. Kelsey Starr. He addressed it to her in Omaha at NSA headquarters on the Flight Crew Campus, though he knew her to be traveling in Europe on a promotional tour for the Gypsy VIII Program. She would get the card when she returned.

> Dear Kelsey,
> Thanks for the article. I am ever honored you take the time to edify fellow Lennoxonians and your fans. I love your work on meteors, especially, and cancer treatment. I've seen the protesters in Omaha. But they are fear-mongers and people see through that sort of thing. Don't let thugs like that bother you. They are not worthy of your fear. Threats are easy, words, words, words. Enclosed is an interesting article on free-test inversions, my specialty. It might interest you. The best of everything to you. The launch is coming soon, I know, and you must be very, very busy. Please know what an inspiration you are to me and my wife (Martha), who is a colleague of yours over at the Research Pod on NSA campus. She's redesigning the individual oxygen gooseneck scrubber valve assembly for safety improvements. She's brilliant and always wanted to go up there to space. Like all of us did/do. We can't all go. Maybe you will see her. Say hello from me if you do see her, thanks.
> Yours,
> Roger Cotton.

It was not his place to ask about a new boyfriend. He mailed the card, a pussy willow print signifying spring, on his way to work. That day, work scheduled Roger for six Marksman inverter installations, laborious and tedious. He was running non-stop from nine to five though hardly at the top of his game. His Blue Nevus was throbbing so.

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National Space Risk Assessment Manual

        1.  Safety first.
        2.  Space is not political.
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Kelsey Star got her foot in the door during the Gypsy VI era when most in Lennox had lost hope. Lennox worried, by then, Kelsey was wasting her time. Other flight candidates from various Tier One institutions could match Kelsey Starr's skill set, they were younger, and they did not carry with them the "always the bridesmaid" aura. But Kelsey Starr made the alternate list a month before the last launch of Gypsy VI. The destination was a rendezvous off Titan with a meteor field of particular promise for Uranium 238 harvest, one of Kelsey Starr's sub-specialties. When a fluke flu hit Omaha and knocked out the meteoric science officer three days before launch, Jason Starr was the only person not surprised. He said privately that his daughter was like an old-style caboose: "Never first on board, often last, but Kelsey always made it on the train."

Kelsey proved herself on Gypsy VI and VII, and by VIII there was no question who would fill the science officer slot for important meteor work. Kelsey was also well liked. She was outstanding with crowds and children and the press. Protestors' accusations of corruption and incompetence at NSA, criticism of privatization of public resources for the gains of big mining interests, and general attacks on the imperialistic nature of space travel were rendered impotent by Kelsey Starr's open, forthright, scientific style and small town manners. Everyone loved her. Kelsey Starr was brilliant, competent and good for crew morale on the tortuously long round trips to the frontier

mineral outposts that obsessed the NSA at the time. She was a shrewd staffing decision from the upper levels of the Gypsy VIII Program, despite all its other well-known dissappointments.

The Gypsy VIII was the most perfected class of craft of its day. Designers and engineers had worked out all the persistent issues with deep cold solubility and permeability that had plagued pervious versions of the craft. Kelsey Starr, at the time, was still a middle 30's tomboy. She did five hundred sit-ups a day, but was not beefy. She drank only persimmon tea and water and gave up all meats native to her upbringing due to current damning analysis of nitrates and the liver. Kelsey had a pristine liver. She had perfect organs generally, as preflight body scans and development scans for the CODE pre-mortem cloning system confirmed. She was, in fact, the favored subject of all the CODE scientists since all her organs ranked in the ninety-ninth percentile. Kelsey Starr had a lifespan expectation range from one hundred and ten years on the low end to one hundred and twenty-eight years on the high depending, of course, on lack of unforeseen mishap, unnatural death, foul play, or inadvertent toxicity exposures. She looked twenty-five at blast off of Gypsy VIII.

"I think they're wrong," she told the reporters for a women's magazine. "I expect to live to be one hundred and forty-eight." Kelsey Starr had a disarming, non-professional voice.

"How does that feel?" a magazine asked.

"It feels like I am the luckiest person on planet Earth," Kelsey Starr said.

"Do you have hobbies?"

"Horseback riding."

"Do you have a boyfriend, Ms. Starr? We've heard rumors."

"No comment."

"Some people criticize the space program for unethical practices. You, yourself, we understand, have received death threats. What do you say to those people, Ms. Starr?"

"Space is not political," Kelsey said.

"That's a slogan, Ms. Starr," said the magazine.

"Space is personal," said Kelsey. "We are all all alone just like that."

"How tall are you anyway?"

"6'1."

"That's very tall for space travel."

"Yes," she smiled. "It certainly is."

The suit Kelsey designed as a post doc altered the field. She spoke to her mother on Saturdays at 9 am unless in a different time zone. She wrote weekly longhand to her father. She braided her hair daily. The tail touched her coccyx and drew cameras even before becoming an alternate. She had attended Lennox Public High School though accepted to the Academy, and had been the high school mascot in a brown fuzzy suit. The buck-toothed head was separate, clawed feet and a flat slapping tail – the Lennox Fighting Beaver with a braid down its back. SMALL TOWN BEAVER BLASTS OFF was printed in afont that had not been used by the Lennox News since a 20th Century president was shot.

In the Christmas parade, Kelsey Starr had her own float. Roy's Service built it with sheet metal, a capsule over the bucket of his loader, in which she sat and waved if home for the holidays. "HITCH YOUR WAGON TO A STARR!" one banner read and was rolled up later and stored in the basement under the ping-pong table the rest of the

year. Martha never liked her.

"All flash," Martha said, and never attended the parade. Such factors must be measured and calculated, if possible, for an understanding of the beginning.

At high school commencement, Kelsey Starr spoke as valedictorian. It was a humble speech about small towns and life-long friendship.

"May we all live exciting, happy, successful lives," she said, concluding her speech. "May we all love everyone!"

She sat on the stage after. A man in a mustache brought her a glass of water while the superintendent stood at the podium to gave his statement that concluded in the following:

> Remember this, graduates: A beaver was once like a mermaid in water, turning and diving for pure joy. She slapped her tail at strangers, yes, but only to make her territory clear. She was nature's perfect creature of industry. Beavers never gave up, were never greedy, or complained. (My mother, in fact, once saw an actual beaver in an old national park.) A beaver took what she needed only. She helped others when possible. If the dam of another was destroyed by flood or incursion, she would hurry and swim to help stem the flow. Her teeth never stopped growing. It was her nature to chew and build. Her bloody spittle was left on forest stumps and *calcified there* for decades. A beaver became intimately close to few, biologists say, though she was kind to all, and she loved lodge and family. She was a wonderful species and hope persists with continuing Canadian efforts at repopulation. May your generation continue to attend to the world's most vexing and persistent problems, like the beaver, with wonderful progress.
>
> But, graduates, remember this also as you strike your path tonight. The beaver was brave and a fine swimmer. She was an example to follow *in her aquatic life*. But if a beaver found herself too far from lake or lodge, she, being shy and slow on land, was easily caught by unfriendly predatory jaws, even merely thoughtlessly or unseeing, who can say why? Thus, she might easily be snagged in a leg-trap to be skinned out and flayed out by any bungler. My friends, take note of the beaver. Keep close to your safe shores. Good luck to you.

The kids threw their caps in the air. They knew exactly what the superintendent

meant. It was an old speech. He had used it for the class of ’35 and some of the graduates had siblings in that class so had heard it before. The kids collected the caps between the folding chairs and divvied them up. Some heads did not fit. It hardly mattered. “Moments like this are important!” the superintendent called over their heads and caps as the kids headed for the swimming hole at the old gravel pit for the celebration.

National Space Assessment Check-List Manual PreAmble

1. Checklist as Order
2. Order is Safey

On the way to Alonzo Porter’s Celebration of Life, Roger Cotton’s car broke down. He pushed the car under a big tree on Cherry. He waited for the tow. He wrote a note for the tow driver to leave on the dash:

> Hello Roy – I hope things are good on your end. My car has some very serious sounding/seeming problems. It was making a terrible sound under the engine and rattling. Started overheating very suddenly (smoking) and the battery and brake lights came on. I was afraid to drive it, then it died. Can you work on it? I’m at BN-672321, as always. Talk to you soon about this, I hope.
> Sincerely,
> Roger Cotton.
> PS: I’m having some other troubles right now (with my skin and a recent loss of a friend). It would be outstanding if you could get this car worked up promptly. Martha sends her best. (Key in ignition.)

The tow dropped Roger off at Alonzo Porter’s curb. The rooms were full of mourners shocked by Alonzo’s sudden death. The air was warm with cheese and meat. The dining table was scattered with bowls and crocks and the spoons labeled up the shaft with masking tape.

“If he’d been in Africa, or an African, we would have burned him on a pyre with

some colorful robes, the chief of a tribe, a king, a man of resource," they toasted. They sang songs to a picture of Alonzo on a easel with so many highly trained voices, yes, while now, it is known exactly how factors such as a highly trained voice, the majestic vs. slavish carriage of the head and body, or that elusive considerable-ness vs. inconsequential-ness of the person's bearing among his peers has *effect on his surroundings* and sometimes on the course of events unfolding.

The casseroles were abundant: lidded in circles, ovals, squares and rectangles. Steam squeezed from their lips. The women wore mitts and aprons and flew by like comets with flowers. Roger held the kitchen door open with his back. He held his arm as if in a sling.

"How's that arm?" said Albert Bunting the way a brother or uncle might speak.

"The doctors took it off," said Roger Cotton. "The Blue Nevus."

"I'm glad to hear it," said Albert Bunting. "Will you have a scar?"

"Not much of one," said Roger Cotton.

"The right diagnosis is everything," said Albert Bunting, and waved at Jonelle Porter who was weeping near the arctic entry. "Who's your doctor?"

Roger Cotton said the name of the doctor.

"I met that doctor once," said Albert Bunting. "A dark man and foreign. I have nothing against that. That doctor won the city tennis tournament, the whole damn thing, the first year he entered. Where do you think this doctor learned tennis?"

"I don't know," said Roger Cotton. "I have no idea at all."

"I feel badly about Alonzo," Albert Bunting said. "But it was quick and natural. Cavemen just died like that too. With spears and rock rings on the top of a blue sky hill."

"I know it," said Roger Cotton.

“It’s admirable,” said Albert Bunting. “Most death is common.”

Roger Cotton drank down his juice and seltzer from a plastic cup while Albert Bunting had real glass. Alonzo’s urn was on the mantle between two sets of Dutch figurines dancing. Jonelle Porter wore high-heels. There was a lump in the carpet runner to the kitchen and Roger Cotton bent and pressed a lump in the carpet. Albert Bunting looked healthy.

“You look very healthy,” said Roger Cotton.

“Omaha has a wonderful layout,” said Albert Bunting later. He set his plate on a plate on the table. Max Robinson passed like a passing ship. “Wonderful brickwork and history.”

“Yes,” said Roger Cotton.

“Omaha has a wonderful zoo,” said Albert Bunting.

“Martha likes animals so much,” said Roger Cotton.

“Lennox is sunnier than Omaha,” said Albert Bunting “You should remind Martha that Lennox is sunny.”

“Oh, I will,” said Roger Cotton.

Stan Penrod arrived. Roger Cotton found his umbrella and departed. He walked from street to street looking for his car. The sun set. Walking home, Roger found a bike abandoned between a fire hydrant and a tree. It was unlocked and not tethered in the smallest way. Roger Cotton had no brothers or uncles. He took the bike.

He rode the bike the whole way home seven blocks north and seven blocks west.

At night, the Blue Nevus moved over his body. From the bicep to the shoulder was the usual. But sometimes the Blue Nevus moved in the ear and crossed to the other shoulder. The Blue Nevus roved him.

Roger Cotton roved the house, which was an average wood house. He cleaned the mirrors. He called Martha and left a message. He cleaned the ice trays. He roved again, entering and exiting the rooms of the house through various hatches with knobs.

"They are doors," Roger Cotton said. "These hatches are only doors."

He pulled the doors closed behind him by way of the knobs. He climbed the stairs that were covered with carpet and silent in slippers. In the second floor ceiling, one door pulled down with a loop on a string and a staircase lowered. It was an average wood stairway. It was narrow and steep.

"It is only a stairway," said Roger Cotton holding the stairway.

He climbed up the stairway to the attic. "It is only an attic," he said and sat in the dusty rocking chair by a pair of skis.

From the rocking chair, he scanned the moons and planets for their peculiar movements though a small paned window. He set the skis across his knees as a tippy writing table.

Roger Cotton rubbed his arm. He looked through the glass at the black sky: if this was not the rocking chair in the attic but the commander's chair of the Omaha Control Capsule Simulator, for example, the capsule exit hatch would, of course, sit just up between those rafters. The exit hatch would open by way of a loop on string and a staircase would lower: a steel amalgam weighing no more than regulation: 20 kilos. In such a case, Roger Cotton would climb up the second stairway to the Gypsy VIII Observation Deck, the real one, not some Nebraska simulation. Kesley Starr would be there setting up her experiments, she was so diligent. On the Observation Deck, the rows of oscilloscopes would line up and whine, scanning for White Giants and Red Dwarfs in the bay windows in the nose of the craft, which would, in such a case, most likely be

tethered to the proboscis of the newest, most colossal orbiting dock tower. How wonderful. A batch of asteroids would fly by.

"Perfectly Beautiful," Roger Cotton wrote in the crew log, a dusty book from the floor. He watched the sky for additional facts. Check.

If so.

Dead-center in the dome of the Observation Deck would sit the sky-exit hatch made of thinnest ultrapress, the latest. Roger Cotton's ancestors had been tall people and he set crew log and the skis aside and stood. He went to the old oak armoire in his corner of the attic for his suit. As always, his fingers found the suit in the dark by way of the old leather and ruff at the collar. How his fingers loved skin and fur. Roger Cotton pulled on the old suit: one arm then the other arm. The arms were snug. The arms were too short, his ancestors had been thin-armed, short-armed people, though tall. The skirts of the suit hung to the floor. He secured the button at his collar and the sash, velvet, the silver epaulettes on the shoulder, fringe. Check. Ready?

"Affirmative. Over."

He sat back down in the rocking chair. He reset the skis. He reopened the crew log on the leather and farthest buttons.

If so, if so.

After forty-five second decompression, the sky-exit hatch would open by way of a loop on string and a staircase would lower, polished steelene. Roger Cotton would climb up the staircase in his spacesuit for a prescheduled spacewalk. He would have been pre-assigned by the higher ups for a *human-only* assessment and level B checklist. He would bounce up the staircase. Happy. Check.

“I’m ascending to the sky-exit hatch, Over.”

He would squeeze out the hatch with his harness and O2 tether dragging, and secure the hatch with the knuckle peg. Glide out. Swim out. Float out, Roger Cotton. Check.

“Spacewalk commencement underway. Over.”

“We have you on the screen. Over”

Roger Cotton turned to a new page in the log. The further instructions:

Turn about and see:

(1) noting peculiar pulsars present, check.

(2) noting errant nevi lingering and loitering, check.

(3) initiating and confirming daily waste ejection procedure. Activating shoulder joint assembly, check. The shoulder socket unscrews, check. The flanges expand from the bicep and releases, check, check. The arm is jettisoned. Check.

“The Blue Nevus is jettisoned. Over.”

“Roger that, Commander. Over.”

The skis fell and frightened the cat. The rocker nearly crushed its tail, but no, the tail flew through to safety: just barely, though such factors as regulation guidelines and feline appendages often *corresponded by coincidence* with critical but unrelated other factors, a particularly vulnerable moment in the case history, for example, some crushing other moment, and cannot be discounted ever, if sequence and consequence are to be uniquely understood.

From the rocking chair, Roger Cotton requested a private transmission to Omaha: “Martha, I want to be with you. Over.” It was forever unclear if Martha received the

message. Solar storms were at their zenith that night, always a nuisance in that season, causing catastrophic radio interferences all around the star system.

The morning after the Alonzo Turner's Celebration of Life, Roger called Dr. Frankincense. The Physician's Pavilion was downtown. The receptionist on the phone said she could squeeze Roger Cotton in at one. Could he make that time slot? She had a cloying, sycophantic, disgusting voice.

"Yes, I can," Roger Cotton said.

Next, Roger Cotton called Roy's Service to check on his car and left a message.

The doctor's pen was tied to a clipboard with a string. A hole was cut in the glass for the receptionist to talk through. This pen practice was so common as to seem trite. Roger Cotton signed in.

This receptionist was mostly likely a former patient. She had a sizable strawberry scar on one side of her face. It was the color of boiling jam.

"Staring is rude," the receptionist said.

Roger Cotton slid the clipboard through the hole in the glass then sat down in an orange plastic chair. This receptionist was stamping files, *thud thud*, noises like a heavy animal walking from a swampy area into dark leaning trees. The cavemen could smell such a beast from five miles. The pre-historical wind would carry the scent of game that far while the hungry caveman's olfactory glands were pristine, untarnished by the abuses of modern chemistry, and second to none. The caveman sharpened his spear. He walked across the savanna, through tall grasses, crossed the cold river up to his shins smelling the blood of his prey. He plunged up the hill, which warmed his blood.

"Staring is very rude," said the receptionist. She snapped a blue-green bubble at

Roger Cotton, like a monster in an old story.

Once upon a time the orange plastic chair was tangerine. It was hard and his legs slipped. Roger Cotton read about the meteor protests in Omaha at major centers, Honolulu, Houston, and Akron, where threats had become actual, delivered in mock meteor bombs. Roger Cotton moved to another plastic chair.

"The doctor will see you now," said the nurse at the door.

Roger stood and set down the magazine.

Kelsey Starr's dissertation at Cal Poly made waves in academia. "Gravity: Newton's Miscalculation" was understood by almost no one in Lennox except her father, a physics professor at the university. It's true, Jason Starr was old school. He did quibble over her details and several conclusions. They did argue at the kitchen table but Jason Starr was proud. When Kelsey made Gypsy VI, he passed the Newton paper around amongst his circle: men of the Lennox Science Academy Board, university science department heads, and other select people.

Other copies of the Newton paper did, somehow, get out to the public and circulate. It was public record, after all, and people were fascinated by the new Lennox star in all her variety.

"I didn't get past the first sentence," said most average readers in Lennox coffee shops and Laundromats.

Roger Cotton found his copy on the bench at the Y. He understood every word and had no quibbles whatsoever.

"Not one quibble? Not a single quibble? No, no because Roger Cotton doesn't quibble."

"Stop it, Martha, don't."

"Roger won't quibble."

"Martha, give it back."

Dear Kelsey,
Thanks for the check-in. Europe sounds wonderful. I'm well though I have some sad problems right now you might understand. I don't want to burden you, but I'

National Space Agency Code of Conduct

1. Respect and Dignity
2. Infractions'
3. Violations
4. Penalties

"I can't live with this arm," Roger said to Dr. Frankincense.

"As I've said, Blue Nevi are harmless," said the doctor. "I have one myself."

The doctor tapped his knee. He spoke exactly like an American, brave sounding, articulate and confident.

"I want it off," said Roger. "That's all. I must have it off. I'm losing sleep over it."

The doctor buzzed the nurse who rolled in a tray of tools.

"I hope it's not too late," Roger Cotton added.

The nurse prepared the Blue Nevus with a cotton ball. She gave an injection at angle near its mouth, a long needle and only briefly painful. The nurse and Dr. Frankincense wore masks, gloves, and lights on their heads. The goggles were huge and clean. The scalpel slipped in. The blade cut an oblong ring around the Blue Nevus.

"There is nothing to worry about," said Dr. Frankincense.

There was very little blood. The gloved hands were swift and neat. The nurse handed in tweezers and a tiny tool that worked like a spatula.

"My wife is in Omaha now," said Roger Cotton. "She could not get away for

my procedure."

"It's really and truly unnecessary," said the doctor. The needle crossed with black thread trailing. The skin sucked shut. In the end, the Blue Nevus sat on the gauze on the tray in its own yellow ooze. The doctor snapped off his gloves and exited.

"I dislike doctors," said Roger to the nurse when the door shut.

"No one likes to come to the doctor," she muttered. She had braces on her teeth that affected her pronunciation. She was pretty in a plain way, like most people, when she smiled.

"What will they do with my Blue Nevus now?"

"They'll send it to Kansas City to the medical incinerator."

"But I'd like it to do some good," said Roger. "After all this trouble and misery. Maybe something memorable."

"Incineration is the rule," the nurse said.

"I'd like my Blue Nevus to serve science somehow," he said. He followed the nurse and the rolling tray into the hall.

"I know what you mean," she said and touched his good arm. "No laboratories are studying Blue Nevi at this time. They are not significant." She pushed the cart away.

At the glass box, Roger Cotton showed his Health Card to the receptionist.

"Sign here," she said and he signed.

"We will see you the 13th, Mr. Cotton," she said, not unfriendly now, and wrote out a card with the date. She gave him the card through the hole in the glass. He might have exited then. Instead Roger Cotton bent his mouth to the hole in the glass.

"You are the ugliest person I've ever seen," he said to her.

That night, the Blue Nevus stitches itched and burned. He tried not to scratch

them, as Martha always said not to. But in the end he disobeyed her. He did pull the gauze off. He scratched. In the dark under the covers it was soothing at first.

He dabbed cream on the stitches in the bathroom. In the tool room he found a fresh straight-edge pack and cut a wider ring around the stitches. In the hall mirror, he excised the blue tissue the doctor had missed. It was a painful procedure but life is painful. At the end of the procedure, the stitches floated like a black island in a capillary sea. He stored the Blue Nevus excess in a silver amulet of Navaho design, one of his favorite of the collection. He set the amulet in the basement freezer.

Roy's Service sat between the new dump and an out-of-business modern dance studio at what was then the outskirts of Lennox. Martha had gone to high school with Roy. That was the only connection. Since their marriage, no one had touched Roger and Martha's car but Roy. Roy's shop was on the bus route.

"WE FIX ANYTHING" was painted on the belly of an old-style cement truck. It stood on a rotating platform at the center of the yard. Junkers were clustered under the cement truck like ducklings. The belly turned counter-clockwise one rotation hourly while the platform rotated hourly clockwise, each 8760 rotations per year, assuming no malfunctions. The cement truck was a famous Lennox landmark.

Roy's shop was open air in summer. Tools of every kind were in plain view to passersby or from the bus: drills, presses, power-hammers and welders and the universe of saws: hack saws, wet saws, circular saws, duplicating saws, jig saws were all there for the taking. Lennox was a trusting town. Kelsey Starr kept her Phoenix Speedster under a canvas tarp at Roy's. Roy kept it tuned and ready for when Kelsey was home.

"Your car's not finished yet," said Roy to Roger Cotton in his greasy voice. He

wiped his hands on a dirty rag. “It has a mysterious problem. What’s wrong with your arm?”

“Just a sprain,” said Roger and he lifted the sling. “I’m off work right now.”

“Oh,” said Roy. “Hi to Martha.”

Roger Cotton took the bus home. His arm throbbed. He set the sling on the bus sill. The window was cracked and cool air cooled the sling. Lennox flew by. These nights, when the route was ended, Roger got off at the station at midnight. He walked home from streetlight to streetlight. He sometimes stood in the dark cusps between the streetlights and went missing from the universe.

Weeks passed by.

While on sick-leave, Roger took the intercity bus to Omaha that departed three times daily. Tickets at the Zoo were priced so that anyone could go. The motto of the Zoo was “Animals Are For Everyone!” There was a sliding scale. The bus and Zoo had a promotional partnership. The bus lurched at stops, yes, but there was no reason to have a car.

The ride took three hours. On the way, Roger Cotton called Martha and left a message. He collected and sorted the coupons printed on the old bus tickets found on the floor. Some were found under the seats and in the men’s room in the station. A free bag of animal crackers was often offered but for some animals only, the petting zoo, for example, with the camels at your own risk. The parrots at the entrance were given so many they were never hungry. Roger Cotton looked for her there at every cage. The monkeys licked themselves and others. The lions licked themselves and others. The zebras licked themselves and others. Roger loved the savanna best, an acre and a quarter, the biggest in the mid-west, old prairie grass reseeded. From the gift shop window he

watched the protesters who were truly everywhere with their pickets and sit-ins. They stomped and sang. He thought of joining and lighting a candle to a dead baby elephant they'd stuffed and mounted on the protest flatbed. It was parked in the loading zone.

The perforations on the coupons were often pristine. At home, Roger Cotton kept the perfect perforations in a pile by the flour jar until the expiration dates. After two months, Roy sold the car for parts since the vehicle could not be fixed. He sent Roger Cotton the money in the mail. Upon receipt of the check, which said WE FIX ANYTHING at the top center, Roger climbed up into the attic, sat in the rocker, and wrote in the crew log: Up yours, Roy Martin, you grease-fingerd Liar, you foul-toothed Ape, what a Charlatan you are. Mr. Genius: so you do Trig in your head? Can you feed the Starving on the Starving continents? Water the Droughted? Wive the wifeless? Since ANYTHING means EVERYTHING, Roy. May the Hair-Lipped children hunt you. May the Amputees roast you on a slow turning Spit. Ten thousand turns. Baste you in oil from your Second Rate Drums.

Roger Cotton was not satisfied with the work, but dated the entry.

"Hello this is Roger Cotton. I need an appointment to see the doctor as soon as possible. I'm having some issues with my hands."

When Roger Cotton arrived home each night, he raked the bushes and brambles behind his house. Because there was no fence. Because there were no horses to eat the leaves. He arranged the leaves in patterns for Martha.

Blue
Blue Nevus
Blue Nevus Blue Nevus

Then the wind blew the pyramid away. Days passed that seemed like weeks.

"I need to show this hand to the doctor," Roger Cotton said to the receptionist.

The hand was wrapped in gauze and taped.

"He's with a patient," said the receptionist.

"This concerns him," said Roger Cotton. "This situation is relevant to his future."

The receptionist buzzed the nurse who unwrapped the gauze and saw the stump of the pinky and buzzed the doctor. The doctor entered and closed the door.

"Please sit down," Roger Cotton said. This doctor sat. Roger Cotton gave the doctor the hand.

"What have you done?" said the doctor. "You've butchered your finger."

"It had Blue Nevus spreading everywhere," said Roger Cotton holding the stump. "I value my fingers, yes, of course, but I want to live."

Roger Cotton rolled the tool cart closer.

"The Blue Nevus is spreading."

"I think you should talk to someone," said the doctor.

Roger Cotton twisted off the iodine cap with his good hand.

"I took the bus here," said Roger Cotton. "I don't have all day."

"I'm sorry, but I can't help you," said the doctor under the wall of diplomas. "I'm not afraid of you, sir."

That night, Roger raked leaves with his good arm. He held a powerful flashlight under the sling. The woods were thick as he cleared the leaves away from under and between and within the branches of the shrubs. The shrubs moved deeper in the unending woods. Roger throbbed in the sling. The woods smelled of clove or cinnamon.

Very late, in the trees, Roger Cotton found Stan Penrod in the woods on a gurney. He was alone and miserable. He was on his back strapped down to a gurney with only

his head free to move. Roger Cotton shined the flashlight and Stan called out for help in that highly trained voice. Then the voice changed to a scream and Stan Penrod thrashed and the gurney bucked in the flashlight beam.

"Get that light out of my eyes," Stan snarled.

He was in his pajamas with the top unbuttoned. His chest was open to the air. In a hole in Stan's belly a medical fixture was drilled into the skin and fitted with a steel ring. The hole was smoking like a tiny dormant volcano. The whole assembly was an inch left of the belly button, rising and falling as Stan breatheds. The steel ring would fit a cigarette or cigar perfectly.

Roger held the flashlight to his face. "It's me, Roger. What are you doing here?"

"What's it look like?" said Stan, thrashing and thumping with his head. The gurney rattled.

"I don't know," said Roger. "It's confusing to see you."

Stan growled and gnashed. "Give me a cigar," Stan said. "I need one or I'll die. Be a pal."

"I don't have one, I don't smoke," said Roger Cotton. "It's late."

"Give me one or I'll kill you." Stan thrashed. His head pounded the gurney. The rake fell.

"I won't," said Roger. "Settle down. Be quiet."

"I'll settle down if you give me a cigar. I'll be content forever. I don't have all day."

Roger found a cigar in the leaves, then lit the match. The cigar fit snuggly in the steel fitting. The rain began on the trees around the clearing. Stan Penrod relaxed. His belly rose and fell as the smoke swirled down the shaft and in. The ashes drifted off. It

was a beautifully quiet time for the two friends.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes, yes," said Stan Penrod.

When Stan started up again, Roger ran home. He went back in the morning for the flashlight or rake.

> Dear Kelsey,
> Thanks for your concern. It's true, installations have become impossible. There was talk of permanent disability and workman's compensation investigations given my exposure to various on the job chemicals. I'm skeptical. I'm sure I'll be fine. I have friends and support.

At home Roger Cotton watched reruns of "Beyond Peacocks," formerly Martha's favorite show. He didn't know what she liked now. "Animals are so comforting," she used to say when feeling low and Roger Cotton felt this keenly now. Once, before the launch, a pair of young brother giraffes came for dinner. They sat with their legs tucked in the living room and lay their necks along the carpet to the dining room table.

"This is a nice house," said the first in the voice of a girl giraffe. His brother's voice was much lower and stronger.

"Very nice," said the second, who asked Roger about his wife's whereabouts. "Will we meet her this evening too?"

"Shush," said the first.

"No, no, it's fine really," said Roger. "My wife is in Omaha. She works there."

After dinner the brothers went to the yard to stretch and the evening wound down. They ate the trees and then went home.

"I think I'm going mad," Roger Cotton told Albert Bunting soon after. They were in the grocery store line. "I think I'm dying, actually."

"They say if you think you are going mad, it's a sign you can't be," said Albert

Bunting. “And you don’t look sick. You have good color.”

“That’s wonderful to hear,” said Roger Cotton. “I was getting extremely worried.”

National Space Agency Employee Manual

1. Chain of Command
2. Duty and Responsibility

Flowerpots lined the Frankincense driveway at intervals to the bottom steps of the back door. The flowers were exotic and not native to the region. Roger Cotton knocked. The doctor came to the door in his bathrobe. The man’s small thin wife hid behind the bathrobe with a steak knife.

“The throbbing is preventing sleep,” Roger Cotton said to the doctor in porch light. “I need some more taken off.”

“No,” said Dr. Frankincense. “You need to leave or I’m calling the police.”

The doctor would have closed the door.

“I’m prepared to inform the medical licensing authorities,” said Roger Cotton. He waved a paper.

“What is he talking about?” said Mrs. Frankincense. Her husband held the wrist with the knife and whispered in her ear. She whispered back. She rounded her husband. She pulled Roger Cotton in the kitchen. She closed the kitchen door and pulled the blinds. She wiped the table before and after with bleach solution.

> Roger,
> Thanks for the pecans! I love pecans and most nuts! I shared them with the crew. Sounds like life is sort of difficult for you right now. I’m sorry. I hate to hear of people’s pain, but I know how that is. HANG IN THERE! They say the pinky finger will be obsolete in less than fifty thousand years. Chin Up. I hope she comes back home to you soon. My dad knows the mayor of Omaha if you want

> me to share any of this issue with my trusted family, maybe they can help. They love who ever I love. They are wonderful! That hand sounds terrible. Don't beat yourself up, Roger.
> Best,
> Kesley
> PS: I do accept good luck charms, since you asked. Just nothing over 226 grams, nothing flammable or hazardous. I'd be happy to bring it up there.

Before the space program came to Omaha, the Zoo was not much to speak about. But with the space program came a white rhino, a pair of pandas, and funding to build the beloved African savanna at the highest acres of the grounds. There, the lions and zebra roamed free but separated. Zoo designers and biologists were especially proud of the Savanna. It was on the front and center of all brochures, constructed with a tasteful concrete gorge dividing the enclosure in half. The gorge curved like a river. It ran between the lion's hill and the zebra's hill that had once been the very same hill when the land was prairie. After the space program came, one species could not possibly devour the other.

"Hello Roger. Roy here. Martha called about the car this week. She's pissed. Maybe you should check with your wife on it. Roy, over and out."

The doctor sent his family to a hotel in Omaha. The doctor stayed to tie up loose ends in Lennox. The house went on the market on August 1. The family moved to Guam in August where his wife had family. Children were born and married in Guam with no trouble. The doctor's practice thrived in Guam. They lived happily there. Lennox grew in the years to come. The population increased such that Lennox was nearly designated an "A2" city for purposes of federal grant funding, which could do such wonders for a community. It was like a dangling carrot. Private exercise clubs were built and the Y diversified. A small civic center was built then expanded to orchestra, an amateur opera banded and disbanded. The town forged an affiliation with an outlying prairie park with

authentic prairie grass and reproducing herds of buffalo, which failed, and the buffalo were shipped to an up-and-coming park in Wyoming. Some Lennoxonians visited the family in Guam. It is a garden place. The wife did charity work with maimed people, the victims of war in war-torn countries. They changed to her maiden name after six months on the island nation.

> Kelsey,
> I so much want to go to space with you. How can I express it? I've written this essay on Time (enclosed). I'm sending too this amulet and chain. It's near and dear to me and if you don't mind, don't open it. It's Navaho. I'm just so pleased one small part of me can go to space, float there. This world is not for me.

In college, Kelsey Starr wrote a short essay entitled "The Missing Color on the Universal Spectrum," which she used for her application to Cal Poly, though her father had his doubts when he heard the subject matter. Belinda rubbed his back and said, "Don't worry, we raised her right."

"It sounds too philosophical," Jason Starr said. "They don't go for that way out stuff at Cal Poly."

"Times change," said Belinda.

As the deadline loomed, Jason Starr tapped on Kelsey's bedroom door daily to check her progress. As an alum, he had a stake in it.

"Dad, trust me," said Kelsey. "Go back to bed. I'm thinking this out."

She was still making revisions minutes before the January 1 deadline. Belinda often told friends about this tense time in their lives.

"We just didn't know," said Belinda.

The essay impressed the readers. Some thought it genius, some did not understand, but thought it impressive in its "attempting," they said. "This brashness is

very rare.”

Kelsey Starr was never sick a day in her short life. Once, Kelsey got a black eye pitching softball, a terrible shiner, but Kelsey’s natural color had returned twenty-nine hours later after application of a Starr family salve made of arnica, Epsom salt, and rosemary. It was later written up by a much younger cousin as a science fair project.

Once, when Kelsey Starr was in college, she went with her girlfriends to a fortune teller in Topeka. It was a schoolgirl lark. The practitioner wore a black beret and had a crystal ball that she looked into. She said Kelsey Starr would not live to her thirty-seventh birthday. When Kelsey Star got famous, the fortune teller sold her story. Entire chapters and dissertations have been devoted to the significance of this seemingly small factor. What if, what if? Once upon a time.

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National Space Agency Flight Operations Manual

        1.  Pre-flight
        2.  In-flight
        3.  Post flight
        4.  CODE Procedures
        5.  Fraternization Guidelines
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The blast off was routine. Dozens of flower arrangements arrived at Mission Control, cards and letters from kids from her European tour, and packages with trinkets that people hoped might blast off with her and the other crew members. Kelsey took only one: a 224 gram silver amulet, Navaho-styled, sterilized, on a chain zipped up next to her skin under her jumpsuit. The protesters were on hand, of course, with poster and placards. They wore black and the males and females were indistinguishable. Their skin was painted ghoulishly like bullet-ridden victims.

“Leave their moons alone,” they chanted.

Security had been heightened due to the new CODE installation. The Catastrophic

Order for Duplication and Epitomization hardware and software on the Gypsy VIII had never been tested on pre-mortem humans. Up until Gypsy VIII, live mammals had been successfully duplicated under the CODE regime with great success from captive populations for repopulation projects all over the redeveloping world. Human cadavers had been used within ten minutes of death but the results were disappointing. It was designed to engage in the last sixty to ninety seconds of life of the subject astronaut in three stages. It had been controversial and expensive, and the nay-sayers were clamoring to shut the CODE Program down in its infancy. The CODE procedure included: Step 1 was verbal confirmation by the subject astronaut to base ship giving permission to enable the CODE body scan and thereby activate the duplication sequencing switch. Step 2 required the subject astronaut to manually engage the activated sequencing switch under the sliding slot on the left breastplate on her autonomous flight suit to initiate the actual CODE body scan. After the 3.4 second scan was completed, Step 3 required a second verbal confirmation by the subject astronaut of her personal password which, if correct, enabled transmission of two complete sets of blueprints, one to the Duplications Lab in Omaha where the subject astronaut's body would be reconstructed, the other set to the base ship, and a copy sent on by the ship to the Records Room of the Library of Congress in Denver for perpetual open public access and scholarly pursuits.

Gypsy VIII spiraled off in the spectacular blast with no incident and the crew went to work at once after passing our moon. They prepared experiments and checked and rechecked systems. It was a long trip out. They slept in shifts in bunks. They ate in shifts. They did daily physical exercises. They transmitted interviews with kids back home.

"Do you like space, Kelsey?" the first kid asked into the transmitter face.

“Yes, it’s wonderful, you guys!” said Kelsey into the transmitter face. “Where are you from?”

“We’re in Kentucky,” said the first kid.

“Is it better than you thought?” said the next kid. “What does space feel like?”

“Yes, it’s strange. It’s light into my bones and head,” said Kelsey Starr.

The kids laughed. “Like dizzy?”

“Not really dizzy,” said Kelsey. “It’s dark out here,” she said. “Sort of like skating and swimming at the same time.”

The kids laughed.

“What’s your horse’s name?”

“Buck and Candy. I have two.”

“Are the meteors big?”

“Some are a quarter the size of our moon. They get smaller from there. Some are the size of Omaha if Omaha was a ball.”

“Will you bring a flag?”

“No flags. It causes problems.”

“What did you bring to space with you?”

“Books to read, my parents’ picture, a pet rock.”

“What color?”

“Brown.” They laughed and laughed.

“Do you ever wear dresses?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Are you scared?”

“Just enough to make us careful!” Kelsey Starr said. “Space is perfectly safe.

We'll be perfectly fine."

Later, the kids all jumped on their gym mats. The teacher could not settle them down until an hour after lunch.

The crew physician said Kelsey should drink a protein shake, so she did in the galley. In the library she sent a message to her mom at 9 am Lennox time and read a horseracing report from Kentucky. She scheduled an interview with the Lennox High Science Club. She went to her bunk. She tried to imagine what Roger Cotton would look like if they ever met.

> Hey Roger,
> Thanks for the essay on Time. Nice work! How the heck did you learn about my Poly Cal essay? You sure are a clever one! I'm writing this message on the Gypsy VIII transmitter, of course, the one under a crew bunk. My space walk is tomorrow. I'm excited. The mission is going very well. Remember, Roger, that things are always better than you think. People can switch and change. When I feel down, I just count up all people who love me. Chin up and happy raking. I hope your finger is better! Guam sounds nice. Send me a post card when you go and thanks for the spice kit.
> Best always,
> Comm. Kelsey Starr
> Gyspy VIII Deep Space Explorer
> 1,335,357,880 km from Lennox, NB.
> PS: I finally met your wife. She's lovely. We had tea on campus. I told her about the amulet. I hope you don't mind.

"Who were you writing to?" asked Commander Sean Griffin, who glided in for sleep shift.

"A friend," said Kelsey Star and punched off the transmitter under crew bunk.

"What a smile, should I be jealous?" said Sean Griffin.

She held out a hand to him. He gave her a back rub.

They slept soundly in cocoons like baby mice.

Roger Cotton made two trips to Guam later in life. He always brought his bike.

The handlebars has been retro-fitted to serve his special needs, an issue of balance and steering.

The doctor's wife wouldn't allow surgical procedures in the house. The first time, the doctor rented a boat for the visit through PX connections for privacy. He brought his black bag with tools and suctions, oilments and gauzes in different sizes. The work on Roger Cotton was done in the galley unless the atmosphere was extremely hot. Roger drank vitamin water on the deck before being rowed ashore. The palm trees were taller in Guam than at the Omaha Zoo. Small night animals moved in black shrubs around the cove where the boat was moored, small but as hungry as bulls or cougars.

"I'm glad to be free of it finally, you know?" Roger Cotton would often say.

"Yes," the doctor would say.

"Everyone is a coward sometimes, I think," Roger would say.

"Yes."

There were spices galore in Gaum. It was a scented island, people said. Roger Cotton bicycled all over it.

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Lennox High School Mascot Manual
        1.    Safety First
        2.    School Moral and Sportsmanship
        3.    The Beaver as Example
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Her space walk to M.Flg45x-27:23 began at 7:23 am in the tricky meteor cluster. The ship maneuvered over as close as possible. Kesley Starr was still required by unforeseen positioning issues to fly for 12 minutes and 39 seconds. She secured her harness to the subject meteor with three anchor clips that she drilled in with a toe-crank and got to work.

Her autonomous flight unit recorded the oxygen malfunction at 8:29 am.

“Kelsey, something’s up with your oxygen. Over.”

“Roger that. My gooseneck scrubber is blown. Over.”

“Kelsey can you secure the line? You are too far out for retrieval. Over.”

“Negative. I can’t reach it. Over.”

“Kesley, This is the commander now. Can you secure your line? Over.”

“Negative. I have a jam. The gooseneck valve is blown to bits. Over.”

Kelsey Starr kicked her legs. She groped behind her.

She hopped on the meteor. She unclipped the first anchor.

“A retrieval crew is deploying, Kelsey. Did you get that? Over.”

She bounced to the second anchor and unclipped. The meteor was a bouncing beach ball. She bounced and it bounced.

“Roger, that. It’s so beautiful here. Over.”

She threw the beach ball in the air, a slow ballet. Sean Griffin came on.

“Kelsey. Stay with us. We’re coming. Over.”

“It’s a long way. Can’t wait to see you. How did this happen? Damn it. Over.”

Her breath was noisy. The commander came back on.

“I have to ask, Kelsey, do you want to initiate CODE? Negative or affirmative, Kelsey, on CODE? Please confirm Step 1. Over.”

She opened her flight pack and pulled the coil of silver in her glove.

“Please confirm Step 1. Over.”

CODE was designed for perfect recordation, transmission, reconfiguration and global composition of every cell in her body from toenail to pony tail, every thought, every memory, and mood. Every molecule relative to every other, and tendon, muscle, and organ, hormones and fluids by volume of blood in those famous veins, arteries,

capillaries. Each follicle and curvilinear trajectory of skin, every blemish, bump and cavity. The clog in the kidney that would cause problems with urination in 5.2 years. The minor infection in the throat that had ignited a cough two days into the mission, ovum number 264 that had just dropped down the Fallopian tubes ready to implant. The expansion of lungs, then discharging. The heart pumping as the lips changed from red to purple in grey space light. Each hairline and line of thought of memory of fact forgotten and remembered by recording in the brain, for hurling back through space to the nose of a satellite dish on a Hawaiian volcano, once dormant but now rumbling and snow capped at such low latitude, to be flung on to Omaha and scribbled in the fresh tangled gray matter in the Omaha basement: I am Kelsey Starr. I see the space line of blue-brown meteor rising in the retina. I know who she loved best, mother or father. The horse and the field. Her crystal ball spinning silver and backward in the moments before cardiac arrest.

"What's that? Over," said Kelsey Starr.

The glove released the amulet and chain. They floated above her head, an inch an hour toward a pretty, nameless nebula.

"Kelsey, can we confirm CODE? Over."

"Kelsey. Can we initiate CODE? Kelsey. Standing by for affirmative on CODE Transmission. Kelsey, we need you to do this. We are standing by. Over."

"Can you get my mother on? Over."

She unclipped the last anchor.

She turned a summersault.

"Please confirm Step l. Commander Starr. Please confirm. Over."

"I want to speak to my mother," said Kelsey Starr.

"We do not have time. Please confirm."

She pushed off the meteor in a new direction.

The mandatory CODE Note of Decision and Explanation by Ms. Kelsey Marie Starr was sealed and addressed to Belinda Starr. It was in a safe at Mission Control. It was hand written on scented paper with lily pads in the corners in a matching envelope inside standard issue Air Force stationary, also sealed with real wax. The President wanted to read the letter on the National Day of Mourning, with the flags at half-mast, but it was election season and Belinda Starr was against the incumbent. She was especially against such transparent political maneuvers when her daughter's death was involved. Instead, Belinda Starr read part of her daughter's words, with some exclusions and edits for style, by candlelight to thousands in the Lennox courthouse square. Mrs. Starr was front and center. She wore a pretty flowered dress to demonstrate her attitude about her loss.

"I died how I wanted to," she read, "which is better than most anyone can say."

Jason Starr wore black beside Belinda and was too distraught to speak or read.

Mourners poured into town all that day. The gas stations and markets sold t-shirts for charity that said, "Never Forget," with Kelsey Starr's picture smiling over a map of the U.S. surrounded by appliqué comets and ringed planets. The shirts were expensive but sold out in hours. Stars on sticks waved above the heads in every color with more Kelsey faces. She had not been pretty but it hardly mattered. Mrs. Starr held the handwritten note up for the crowd. The people cheered and cried, embracing strangers.

Several bikes were stolen from the shrubbery during the Kelsey Starr event. A few lucky others lay on their sides on Main Street and 1st Avenue, as if abandoned by the culprit mid-crime. Still other bikes, equally carelessly parked, leaning and unlocked on

trees or against parking meters, were spared altogether. "There was no rhyme or reason to it," said the police to the victims who reported the thefts after the candles were extinguished and smoke cleared and people began yawning and looking about them. The police wrote reports by their squad cars in the blocked off streets till well past 11. The out-of-town riffraff were blamed.

The crowd dissipated. The Lennox High Band played on beautifully, softly, as the mourners drifted to the edge of the square and stood in groups, talking and admiring the courthouse that was lit up with enormous spotlights on wheels that had been rented and trucked down from Kansas City. The carvings on the façade had an entirely different appearance that night than on any normal day or night, mysterious and ancient. The people went home to their beds but the golden lights beamed up at the marble columns all night long. A tower of light mounted into the sky. The golden cloud, in fact, could be seen for miles over the flatland, so bright that a traveler passing through the region, a stranger approaching Lennox from one of the several small dark highways that converged there, might have slowed at the crest of a hill outside town and parked on the shoulder to marvel at the burning glow.

He might even have checked his map, adjusted his instruments, dials and digits, re-set his coordinates, awaited recalculation and reconfirmation, for a moment mistaking Lennox for a huge, important city.

Then confirmation would have come.

"Yes, indeed. Lennox at fifteen kilometers. And what a fire it must be!"

The traveler might have pulled back on the highway and coasted down the hill toward the light. Happy. He had not, after all, lost his way.