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Two from the Underworld: Short Fiction

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Stephen Glass
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John Morefield
Dr. Fred Waage

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ABSTRACT

Two from the Underworld: Short Fiction

by

Stephen Glass

The following thesis contains two works of short fiction. The first, "Afterlife," is narrated by Jeff Carlton, whose unenthusiastic passage into fatherhood is complicated by his girlfriend Charlene's obsession with mummification. The second, "Jolly," is the story of Calvin Edwards, a young bus station attendant haunted by his father's ghost and visited by a cadaverous stranger, Jolly, who also sees the dead. The stories are preceded by an introduction in which the author discusses his views on implied motivation in character development.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In order to draft a convincing story, an author may find it necessary to create the illusion that his or her characters are not only consciously motivated human beings, but also that they are driven, at least in part, by unconscious desires and fears. In other words, the author may at times find it helpful to arouse suspicions in the reader concerning characters' professed motives, self-knowledge, and statements. This technique seems especially suitable in cases when the author seeks, as I have in the following stories, "Afterlife" and "Jolly," to guide a character toward a significant revelation. When warranted, characters must subtly convey more about themselves to the reader than they personally seem aware.

Of course, characters who are unaware of some essential part of themselves are not new to readers of literature. The epiphany story, after all, has become a staple—if not the prevalent form—of short fiction in Western literature in the ninety years following the publication of James Joyce's Dubliners. As most readers will undoubtedly recognize, fiction of this type could not function without limited knowledge on the part of its characters. Take, for instance, a handful of the most widely anthologized short stories of the twentieth century: Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Flannery O'Connor's "Revelation," Sherwood Anderson's "The Egg" and, of course, Joyce's "Araby" and "The Dead." Each of these stories relies on a lack of self-comprehension on the part of its characters for the author to set up and bring about a conclusive revelation.

Yet even before the publication of these influential writers (one has only to pick up a recent issue of The New Yorker to see how truly influential, directly or indirectly, they have been), authors such as Herman Melville were already subtly implying that something deeper lay not-so-quietly beneath the surface of their characters' perceived or professed motives. Ahab in Moby Dick and Claggart in "Billy Budd" are perhaps the most obvious examples of the type of psychologically complex and conflicted characters Melville created in his soundings of the human heart. However, the most pertinent of Melville's characters to the subject at hand is, to my mind, the narrator of "Bartleby," or "Bartleby the Scrivener," as the story is often called.

The nameless lawyer-narrator of Melville's "Bartleby" is an unmistakable example of a fictional character who reveals far more about his own nature than he perhaps intends. The Lawyer's digressions pertaining to, among other things, his fondness for repeating the name of the late John Jacob Astor—"for it hath a rounded and orbicular sound to it, and rings like unto bullion"—divulge his shallow preoccupations and, depending upon the reader's perspective, either serve to heighten or undermine the effect of his final statement concerning Bartleby's death, a death to which he, the Lawyer, however passively, contributes: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" (Melville 4, 46).

Briefly, "Bartleby" is the story of the Lawyer's relationship with a copy clerk, Bartleby, hired during a busy period in the Office of Master in Chancery. At first, Bartleby works diligently for the Lawyer. "As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents," says the Lawyer (Melville 12). But the Lawyer is often brusque with Bartleby and the other copy clerks, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger, and in time, Bartleby refuses to

copy his documents. He also refuses to leave the office when the Lawyer attempts to fire him. "I would prefer not to," Bartleby typically responds to any request for action on his part. The picture of passive resistance, Bartleby never leaves the office, eats little or nothing, speaks only to refuse commands, and frequently stands transfixed in what the Lawyer refers to as a "dead-wall reverie," staring out the office window at the brick wall three feet away. Eventually, frustrated by Bartleby's immobility, the Lawyer abandons his own office, and Bartleby is escorted to the city's jail, the Tombs, where, refusing to eat, he ultimately dies of starvation, "huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones[...]" (Melville 45).

One interpretation of "Bartleby," the one to which I personally subscribe, portrays the strangely recalcitrant and undernourished copy clerk as a doppelganger, or psychological double, of the Lawyer himself. As Mordecai Marcus writes, Bartleby comes to represent the Lawyer's repressed sense that he and his subalterns, in going about the routine business of their Wall Street office, are engaging in acts of courtesy and habit that are nothing more than "impersonality masking itself as personal contact" (367). According to this line of thought, the Lawyer, engrossed in the formalities of his office, neglects Bartleby—an essential part of himself, a part deeply aware of the hunger, limitation, and absurdity of human existence—and allows him to die a lonely death, wanting not only for food but genuine companionship, facing the walls "of amazing thickness" in the city's Tombs (Melville 45).

No one, of course, can say definitively what Melville intended when he penned "Bartleby," which is, like much of his work, highly ambiguous. However,

one can say with relative certainty that the ambiguities of Melville's work are, more often than not, its strengths and not its weaknesses. If one entertains, for instance, the idea that the intractable Bartleby is the Lawyer's essentially human side, the final lines of Melville's story ("Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Humanity!") resonate with an ironic clarity that many authors could not achieve—speaking at once to the shallowness and profundity of the man, to both his moral blindness and his existential insight.

In my own writing, I have found that, like Melville, allowing characters to tell their own stories often creates a tension in the narrative that could not be achieved otherwise. Because characters in fiction often have moral and emotional blind spots like those of Melville's Lawyer, they will, if allowed to be thoroughly honest, betray themselves in ways that reveal not only who they are but also what they need. In "Afterlife," for instance, Jeff Carlton feels bound to his girlfriend, Charlene, who is having a child he doesn't want, simply because she has been a source of security for him in the past. But for Jeff to state this frankly would require more introspective knowledge than he possesses. On the surface, Jeff is little more than a narcissistic child, at times whiny, irritable, and self-indulgent. His inability to articulate and reconcile his feelings, however, creates the essential tension of the story: he is both drawn to and repulsed by Charlene during her pregnancy.

On the one hand, Jeff, as the story progresses, turns his focus increasingly toward Charlene. Charlene's newfound obsession with mummies becomes Jeff's obsession, and it is through this shared, if not altogether desired, fascination that he ultimately connects with her. On the other hand, Jeff also feels repulsed by Charlene, and he begins early on to act out in ways that could sabotage their

relationship. For instance, after Charlene quits her job following an accident that endangers the fetus, Jeff resumes a previously terminated affair with Annette Chilton, a young coworker. Though, on the surface, the affair seems to denote a desire for change on Jeff's part, in truth it reflects his feelings of ambivalence:

We went to [Annette's] place after work, and it was like nothing had ever happened. We had contortionist sex. We got high. I laid there and stared at the television, thinking how easy things would be if Charlene wasn't having a baby. With Annette, it was like being in high school all over again. It was all sex and drugs and television.

Allowed to speak his mind, Jeff tells the truth. The affair says less about his feelings for Annette than it does about his desire to run away from the threat of future responsibilities.

In developing Jeff's character, I wanted him to reveal indirectly, with a minimum of self-exposition, that his ambivalent feelings for Charlene are motivated by an unconscious struggle with a fear of the future—a future that, as Joseph Campbell writes in The Hero With a Thousand Faces, we all intuitively know will result in “death, disintegration, dismemberment, and the crucifixion of our hearts with the passing forms that we have loved” (Campbell 26). Although this fear is not openly addressed in the narrative, at least not in terms as direct as Campbell's, Jeff's wish for Charlene to abort the pregnancy indicates early on, as does the affair, his resistance to change.

As Martin Peters, a friend and coworker, tells Jeff, his dilemma is a relatively simple one: potentially lose Charlene or quit the affair and commit to her and their unborn child. But commitment, for Jeff, is no simple matter,

because committing requires a symbolic death of self through acceptance of a new role in life.

Martin is the story's voice of social responsibility and life-affirmation. When Martin first hears that Charlene is pregnant, he, in his unrestrained enthusiasm for fatherhood, gives Jeff the nickname Big Daddy and begins to tell everyone in the break room about the baby. Jeff says:

It pissed me off even then, but what was I going to do, hit him?

Martin Peters was thirty years older than me, and his enthusiasm for fatherhood, anybody's, was genuine enough. He had three kids of his own, two grand kids, and a wallet full of sweat-stained photographs to prove it. I swear, the way he carried on when I told him, you'd think he believed that fucking and making babies was the meaning of life.

Though Jeff never overtly states why Martin's calling him Big Daddy is more than a minor aggravation, it will, I hope, register with the reader that the name suggests that he is expected to take on a new role in life. Jeff's statements about Charlene during the scene in the break room also tell more than he realizes. His first comment concerning her is one of annoyance. She doesn't know his preference of sandwiches and has packed him a lunch of liver loaf, which "she should've known [he] hated." Throughout the story, Jeff makes several food-related observations concerning Charlene. Each of these, I hope, will underscore the notion that Jeff senses Charlene is becoming an insufficient nurturer. When Jeff comes home from Annette's house, for instance, he is annoyed to find Charlene "propped up on the couch with a bag of Lay's potato chips balanced on her belly and a two liter of Pepsi, greasy fingerprints all over

it, clinched between her thighs.” Angry that she has neglected to prepare dinner for him, he sarcastically suggests, “Maybe you should just stop cooking altogether, Charlene.”

Essentially, Jeff wants Charlene to mother him. And so, unconsciously at least, he senses the child growing inside her to be a threat. If he is to mature as a character, he must suppress his childish desire to be pampered by Charlene. He must take it upon himself to face the future with her as an equal. She must, in other words, become more to him than a symbol of thwarted desire. In Modern Man in Search of a Soul, Carl Jung discusses this type of dilemma.

Every problem, therefore, brings with it the possibility of a widening of consciousness—but also the necessity of saying good-bye to childlike unconsciousness and trust in nature. This necessity is a psychic fact of such importance that it constitutes one of the essential symbolic teachings of the Christian religion. It is the sacrifice of the merely natural man—of the unconscious, ingenuous being whose tragic career began with the eating of the apple in Paradise. The biblical fall of man presents consciousness as a curse. And as a matter of fact it is in this light that we first look upon every problem that forces us to greater consciousness and separates us even further from the paradise of unconscious childhood. (Jung 96)

Whether Jeff is brought to recognize that he must die to his childish self and take up the mantle of fatherhood through Egyptian mysticism or through Christianity seems, to me, merely incidental. In Christianity, the rebirth of the soul and the renunciation of self find their culmination in the crucified and

resurrected body of Christ. Jeff experiences a similar revelation through the dismemberment of his own body during the nightmare sequence in which Charlene prepares him for mummification.

In this dream, Jeff sees Charlene as both a guide and a priestess whose role is to orchestrate his journey into the afterlife. He is horrified by the scene of Charlene removing parts of his body and placing them in the canopic jars used to preserve the organs of mummified Egyptians. In part, Jeff is frightened because he has no means of interpreting the dream's peculiar set of symbols. Only after Charlene tells him, during the final scene, the purpose of Egyptian ceremonial embalming does he make the connection between the journey he is expected to make with her in their life together and the mystic journey of the dead into the underworld. During the dream, however, Jeff does intuit that the shriveled fetus Charlene takes from him, which looks to him like a bad olive, is a part of himself, "a part that [is] dying, a part that [he will] never get back." To my mind, the bawling fetus represents something like Jeff's Id—his selfishness, pettiness, et cetera—though he, of course, is not likely to think of it in such clinical terms.

I hope that readers will identify with Jeff despite (or perhaps even because of) his narcissistic tendencies, and that they will, at least in part, recognize something of their own resolve in his resolution to do what he ultimately believes is right. In his discussion of conscience in The Denial of Death, psychologist Ernest Becker writes, "Man is the only organism in nature fated to puzzle out what it means to feel 'right'" (Becker 151). Becker goes on to say that this quest for rightness results from a "genuine life-longing" that can only be realized through transference—that is, through identification with the life force

by way of society's symbolic representations of it (152-153).

Even in the absence of a recognizable system of symbols, however, it seems to me that this desire for union with the life force would still be strong and somehow make itself manifest. After all, humanity has re-created time and again sets of symbols to represent this force—from the Venus of Willendorf, with whom Charlene identifies, to the Madonna and Child and countless other incarnations. That Jeff's symbols are makeshift, pieced together out of documentaries from Discovery and the National Geographic Channel, will hopefully not diminish the effect of the story's climax, when Jeff senses that Charlene has become an avatar of life's generative energy.

Also in the final scene, and perhaps of more lasting significance, Jeff begins to understand that Charlene, too, is making sacrifices for their future—that she, too, has desires that will go unrealized if their life together is to continue. Only after he comes to this knowledge can he take an active interest in the life, both real and symbolic, within her. Whether or not Jeff is capable of truly making a lifelong commitment to Charlene and their child is, of course, up to the reader to decide. I, for one, think he can.

Whereas "Afterlife" deals with birth and rebirth, "Jolly" is essentially a story about coming to terms with the grief and anger that haunt us in our confrontations with death.

For me, the most crucial part of "Jolly" is the voice of Calvin, the narrator, whose father has committed suicide. Calvin's voice is emotionally blunted, an initially unconscious imitation on my part of the existentialist writings of Albert Camus. Almost all of Calvin's statements are unadorned observations of fact, short and direct, somewhat like those of Meursault in the opening lines of

Camus' The Stranger:

Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I got a telegram from home: 'Mother deceased. Funeral tomorrow. Faithfully yours.' That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday. (Camus 3)

While Meursault is uncertain about the date of his mother's death, Calvin finds himself confused by the funeral director's offering too many details to explain the delay of his father's funeral.

The funeral was delayed because of the cold. The backhoe they use to dig graves kept blowing hydraulic hoses. I don't know why the funeral director thought I'd be interested in all that shit about backhoes, except that he knew Daddy ran an engine repair business. But Daddy never worked on anything the size of a backhoe. He was a small engine guy—lawn mowers, rotary tillers, the occasional chainsaw. He killed himself last Wednesday with my grandfather's .38.

Initially unaware of any homage I might be paying to Camus, I was astounded at the similarities between the two voices when it occurred to me what I was doing. Not only are both characters dealing with the immediacy of death, they do so with the same flatness of affect, and both in the present tense. Though I cannot speak to the desired effect of Camus' work, I can say that Calvin's consistent use of the present tense is intended not only to make the story seem emotionally immediate, but also to reflect his need to avoid the immediate past of his father's death.

Calvin's father, however, in the form of a ghost, insists upon intruding on

the present. Even concerning the appearance of his father's ghost, however, Calvin makes only matter-of-fact statements:

In the far corner of the shop, over by Stu Greely's oily Scagg, right beneath the shelf with all the Folgers cans he used to soak nuts and bolts in, Daddy is sitting on an upturned five-gallon bucket. His head is cocked to one side. He's got a flashlight vised between his bloody neck and jaw, aiming it down the port of a tiny carburetor. I startle him. The flashlight clatters to the floor. The beam dies. I hesitate, then flick on the lights. The fluorescents flicker and hum. He's gone. Snow swirls through the door, licks at my ankles through my thin socks.

Since Calvin is such an emotionally reticent narrator, I made use of atmospheric effects to reflect his inner life. In a sense, his environment becomes a sort of Rorschach test, mirroring the underworld of his grief. For instance, when Calvin observes the plumbing supply junk lot during the snowstorm, he says:

Across the street in the plumbing supply junk lot, there's a two-foot drift along a stack of galvanized pipe. Leaning sideways in the drift is an old toilet, flesh pink. The lid hangs by one hinge. It looks like a mouth hanging open—like someone asleep, or dead.

Perhaps under other circumstances, Calvin would not make these associations, but his father's death weighs more and more heavily on him the harder he tries to repress his feelings, and his grief reveals itself even in casual observations.

"Jolly" takes place during snowstorm, and the weather, too, becomes a way of gauging Calvin's emotional depths without his resorting to direct

statements of feeling. During the storm, Calvin is troubled by the noise that sleet makes against glass—“like fingernails.” (Fingernails, the reader later learns, Calvin associates with his father.) Also, through periodic breaks in the storm, I hoped to echo the numb inner silence—like the hush after a snowfall—that speaks to the shock of Calvin’s grief. Several times in the story, Calvin notes soft sounds that can be heard only during moments of nearly absolute silence: the hum of fluorescent lighting in his father’s shop, the sound of the soda machine in the laundromat.

During one period of empty silence, Jolly appears and reveals to Calvin that she, too, can see his father’s ghost. But there is something not quite right about Jolly. She, like Calvin, is too matter-of-fact. When Calvin tries to talk to her about his father’s ghost, she says simply, “It’s no big deal.”

Whether Jolly is Calvin’s anima, a nurturing spirit, a living person who sees spirits, or something more malevolent, I will leave to the reader to decide. But there is something unnerving, at least to me, in her appearance during the time when Calvin’s father haunts him. As the story developed, I began to think of Jolly as something like Calvin’s shadow self. Despite the fact that she is not overtly evil, she is the one who draws Calvin close to a personal fear of death during their brief sexual union. And ultimately, through her observation that “[s]ome people never know the grief they cause,” she is the one who forces him to acknowledge his anger toward his father.

Of course, anger is often a natural stage of grief, so it is crucial for Calvin to identify and direct his feelings of resentment if he is going to accept his father’s death. Because of the way his father died, however, it may be impossible for Calvin to completely resolve his grief. As Lisa Lieberman points out in

Leaving You, a study on suicide and its aftereffects, “Self-destruction changes forever our relationship to the person who died, fixing it at a point beyond understanding and making closure impossible” (132).

Even in working with a fictional suicide, I found Lieberman’s observation to be true. Calvin tells Jolly that he does not know why his father committed suicide. In fact, he cannot know, because only those who have faced the kind of despair that leads to suicide can know what drove them to it. And the dead, even in Calvin’s world, do not speak about such things. This presented me with a serious challenge as an author. I could find no means of resolving Calvin’s grief that did not seem in some way disingenuous, so the story has no definite emotional resolution.

Saying that Calvin’s grief goes without resolution, however, is not to say that the story has no climax. In fact, it has two—one in which Calvin angrily confronts his father’s ghost for his continued silence, and a second in which Calvin accepts that he cannot escape his father’s memory. The use of dual climaxes seems to me more emotionally honest. It shows Calvin contending with his sorrow rather than solving it like a puzzle. For Calvin to do more than continue to struggle with his grief would require more of him than I believe is humanly possibly.

Though “Jolly” and “Afterlife” are dramatically different stories, they both require, like any story, a believable voice to tell them. Neither story works if its narrative voice fails to resonate with the reader. I have allowed Calvin and Jeff to speak honestly, perhaps even believably, about themselves, in voices that are, I hope, deeply human, expressing all the fear, anxiety, weakness, and strength that being human implies.

CHAPTER 2

AFTERLIFE

Martin started calling me Big Daddy the day I mentioned Charlene was pregnant. We were sitting in the break room, swapping sandwiches—my liver loaf, which Charlene should've known I hated, for his bologna and cheese.

“Jeff Big Daddy Carlton!” he said in a voice that boomed like Charlton Heston in the Ten Commandments.

It pissed me off even then, but what was I going to do, hit him? Martin Peters was nearly thirty years older than me, and his enthusiasm for fatherhood, anybody's, was genuine enough. He had three kids of his own, two grand kids, and a wallet full of sweat-stained snapshots to prove it. I swear, the way he carried on when I told him, you'd think he believed that fucking and making babies was the meaning of life.

“Now you'll know what it's all about, Big Daddy,” he said, clapping me on the back.

“I guess so,” I said, biting into my bologna and cheese.

Of course he had no way of knowing the whole thing was a big mistake. Charlene and I had just the day before decided against an abortion—which, in all honesty, I brought up in the first place. I don't think it would have crossed Charlene's mind to get an abortion.

Charlene missed one pill during Thanksgiving, and that was all it took. We'd both taken a week off work and drove down to her grandparents' place in Orlando. Charlene always gets anxious around her folks—and I guess I should've, too, especially with the way they kept implying she was wasting her

life working at the Gas 'n Gulp and, I guess, living with me.

Charlene had been a solid student in high school. When I first met her, she was saving money and applying for scholarships to MTSU. So they were probably right. She could've done better than working at a convenience store and living with me in a single-wide next to the railroad tracks.

Jerry, her dad, gave me the same treatment, asking if I was still working the loading dock at Fenton International, which is a big automotive parts distributorship. But I figured that was my fault. When I first met him, I'd sort of implied that I was thinking about maybe going into the Med. Tech program at the local community college. I didn't want to give him the impression I didn't have any real plans.

At any rate, Charlene got so distracted by her family, mainly her sister Alice, the pharmacist, who showed up Thanksgiving afternoon in a new Cadillac Escalade, that she missed her pill the second day we were in Florida. As best we can figure, I knocked her up at the Motel 6 outside of Chattanooga on the way back home.

So everybody in shipping and receiving started calling me Big Daddy after Martin announced, like Moses on the frigging mount, that I'd fulfilled my biological duty to the human race. Everybody, that is, but Annette Chilton.

The thing with Annette started a few weeks before the Florida trip. We were standing in line at the time clock one Friday afternoon and she asked me if I wanted to go for a ride in her new Camaro, maybe smoke a jay. Charlene was working late at the Gas 'n Gulp. Things had been pretty bland between us for a while, anyway. All we ever talked about was bills and groceries and moving out

of the trailer park. Annette was nineteen, right out of high school. She had the tightest ass I'd ever seen.

"It's got tee-tops," she said.

"Sure," I shrugged. "Why not?"

"You tell me."

For a while, I was going over to Annette's place almost every day after work. She didn't talk about much, but she liked to smoke pot, and she was a regular acrobat in bed. She had me doing it every way but standing on my head. After we'd do it, she'd light up the bowl she kept on her night stand and turn on the television to some rerun sit-com—*Full House* or *Married with Children* or *Family Ties*—and we'd lay there and horse laugh ourselves silly.

But I'd cut things off with Annette the day after Charlene came out of the bathroom crying, holding that drippy little EPT stick between her thumb and forefinger like a burning match. Annette was kind of curt about it at first. She still sat at the table with me and Martin at lunch, but she wasn't flirtatious with either of us the way she used to be. It was all "pass the salt, please" or "can I have a light, please?" Whenever I went to her work station—she ran the Wrap-O-Matic, this giant robotic arm that sheaths each loaded skid of parts with a layer of industrial-strength Saran wrap—she was always too busy to talk.

Charlene had a scare with the pregnancy near the end of her fifth month. She was still working the register at the Gas 'n Gulp, which seemed like it ought to be easy enough, even for a pregnant woman. But things got busy at the Gas 'n Gulp around five on Fridays. That's when first shift from Fenton and the Clorox plant and Sylvania all got their paychecks and headed straight for the check

cashing place and then on to the nearest convenience store, which is either the Gas 'n Gulp or Phil's Exxon, for beer and cigarettes.

Mitsy Pritchette was supposed to be working with Charlene, but she hadn't shown up that afternoon. So Charlene was working for two people, and there was a line backed up all the way to the beer coolers. A bunch of guys were jostling around, picking at each other, the regular Friday afternoon horseshit, and somebody knocked that great big jar of pickled pigs' feet off the counter. So there was pregnant Charlene, running after cartons of cigarettes and lottery tickets, all the while tiptoeing around spilled vinegar and pigs' feet and broken glass. She was reaching above the cigarette rack for a pack of J.O.B.s when she fell. She gashed her arm pretty good, just below the elbow, which was bad enough. But what was worse, what really scared her, was that the baby, who'd been kicking like a regular kangaroo all afternoon, suddenly stopped moving.

I called Charlene's boss, Charlie Mahoney, from the emergency room to tell him she'd quit. Charlene made me do that. She was pretty well panicked, and I think she felt like something, anything, needed to be done. She said that if she called Charlie, he would talk her into staying. She was probably right. Charlie was a real asshole.

"What'd he say?" she asked when I got back from the pay phone.

"He said fine. Whatever." I scratched the top of my head with the brim of my ball cap, a habit I get into when I'm really worked up about something.

"Is that all?"

Charlene's entire forearm was wrapped in gauze from the Gas 'n Gulp's first aid kit. There was a red patch the circumference of a navel orange just below her elbow. She had dried blood all down the front of her smock. That arm

was going to need stitches for sure. All the color had left her cheeks, and even when she looked at me, her fingers kept moving, leafing like crazy through the soda-stained issue of Better Homes and Gardens in her lap.

“He said to bring in your smocks before Monday, and...”

I hesitated.

“And what?”

I rubbed my scalp even harder with the brim of my hat. I could feel what little hair I had left standing up with static.

“And what, Jeff?”

“And don’t bother asking for your job back.”

Charlene looked like she was about to cry. I really hated to see that. Her lower lip pokes out when she cries. She looks sort of like Popeye the Sailor. Toot, toot.

“I told him he’s lucky we’re not suing his ass,” I said. “I’m sure OSHA would have something to say about those pickled eggs.” I don’t know why I thought that would make her feel better.

“Pigs’ feet,” she said.

“Pigs’ feet, then.”

Her hands flutter like hummingbird wings through the magazine, flitting over page after page of whitewashed houses with hardwood floors and glossy ads for shit we could never afford. She was holding her breath the way she does when she’s thinking hard about something. I wished I hadn’t left my cigarettes in the truck.

Suddenly Charlene let loose with this big puff of air, and with it came all the tears she’d been holding back.

“What are we going to do, Jeff?”

“Do?” I said. “About what?”

“About the baby,” she said. “About money.”

Was this the same woman who’d just quit her frigging job by proxy?

“It’ll all work out,” I said.

“How?”

Why the hell was she pressuring me about this now?

“It just will,” I said. “It has to. I’m going to get my cigarettes.”

I guess I got mad at Charlene and sort of stayed mad. A few days later, I started seeing Annette again. We went to her place after work, and it was like nothing had ever happened. We had contortionist sex. We got high. I laid there and stared at the television, thinking how easy things would be if Charlene wasn’t having a baby. With Annette, it was like being in high school all over again. It was all sex and drugs and television.

“Do you think Bugs Bunny is gay?” Annette said, handing me the bowl. We were watching the Cartoon Network. Bugs Bunny was playing beautician to some red furball thing in high-top Converse, curling its hair with sticks of bright red Dynamite.

“I always say,” said Bugs with a lisp, “Month-sters are the most interesting people.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe.”

Annette leaned down and kissed my nipple.

“Think about it,” she said. “He’s always dressing up in women’s clothes, kissing all over Elmer Fudd’s fat face. And think about this: Bugs is a rabbit,

right? Rabbits are like world famous for fucking. But does Bugs Bunny have a girlfriend?”

“Not that I’ve ever seen,” I said.

“You can’t tell me he ain’t gay.”

It didn’t take Charlene long to settle into a routine after she quit her job. The ultrasound had come back fine, and she was more relaxed than I’d seen her for a long time. When I’d come home, she’d be propped up on the couch with a bag of Lays potato chips balanced on her belly and a two liter of Pepsi, greasy fingerprints all over it, clinched between her thighs. It seemed like she was always watching some show about Egypt on the Discovery Channel.

“Did you know that the ancient Egyptians believed you could take all of your worldly possession with you into the afterlife?” she said one night after I came in from Annette’s. I’d been telling her I was working overtime, which was, of course, a total crock.

“Fat lot of good that’d do us,” I said. “Looks like we’re fucked in the afterlife, too.”

“There’s some Swansons in the freezer if you’re hungry.”

I opened the freezer and stood there for a long time, feeling the cold air on my face, goose flesh prickling up on my forearms. I was still a little high.

“Maybe you should just stop cooking altogether, Charlene,” I said.

Annette and I had been sneaking around for a few weeks when Martin pulled me aside one afternoon during smoke break. We were standing on the loading dock. It was one of the first hot days of the year, mid May, and there was

a stack of thunderclouds on the horizon.

“Come here, Big Daddy,” said Martin. “You and me need to have a little talk.” Martin had a flare for the dramatic. I wasn’t thinking he had anything serious on his mind. “What kind of mess are you trying to make for yourself, son?” he started in.

“Martin, what the hell kind of question is that?”

“Look, Big Daddy,” he said. He wanted me to look him in the eye. Martin Peters was big on looking people in the eye. “It’s the kind of question your friends—your real friends—are likely to ask when you screw around behind your pregnant wife’s back.”

“Charlene’s not exactly my wife,” I said.

“She shares your bed, don’t she?”

I figured that was one of those rhetorical questions, the kind that makes you look stupid if you try and answer them.

“Look at me,” he said. “She’s wife enough she’s having your baby.”

“What the hell are you getting at, Martin?”

“I’ll tell you what I’m getting at, Big Daddy.”

The sarcasm in his voice when he called me Big Daddy made me want to whip his ever-loving ass, but there was no way I could start shit with him. In a way Martin Peters was more of a father to me than I’d ever had. My dad had always been the distant type. He just sort of took up space around the house, usually tilted back in the recliner with a beer cooling his balls. Sometimes I got the impression that he never wanted kids, since the only time he ever spoke to me or Lonnie, my brother, was to tell us our heads were blocking his view of the television. Right now, though, I was beginning to appreciate daddy’s parenting

style.

“You’re making the biggest mistake you can possibly make,” Martin said.

“And I don’t like watching you do it.”

“Then don’t,” I said.

“Alright.” He thumped his cigarette into the weeds beside the loading dock.

“I won’t. It’s your life, Big Daddy.”

“Goddamn right it is,” I said.

“Fuck it up any way you want.”

Charlene got downright obsessed with mummies. She started highlighting the T.V. Guide schedule so she wouldn’t miss any shows about them. I’d never noticed, but it seemed like there was something about mummies on television all the time—on Discovery, on the History Channel, on PBS. She started talking about mummies all the time, too, telling me little mummy factoids while we ate dinner or when we were drifting off to sleep at night. We weren’t having any sex at that point. Despite what Dr. Purcell told her, Charlene was afraid we’d poke a hole in the baby’s head.

“Did you know that Chinese royalty used to mummify their dead?” she said one night when we were stretched out in bed, staring up at the ceiling. “It wasn’t just the Egyptians that did it.”

“No, Charlene, I didn’t know that.”

It seemed like most of her sentences lately began with “did you know” or “would you believe” or something like that, and I was getting tired of admitting that there was so much stuff about ancient dead people I didn’t know.

“It’s true,” she said. “But they didn’t put their organs in jars or anything.

Only the Egyptians did that. They put them in jars called canopics or cathartics or something like that, the Egyptians did. The Chinese, though, they buried their royalty in these sort of underground mausoleums that were really cold, like a sort of natural refrigerator. And they wrapped them in silk instead of the other stuff—I forget what it’s called, flax or flux or something—that the Egyptians used. If you wrap something in enough silk, it’ll actually kill all the bacteria inside, suffocate it.”

“That’s fascinating, Charlene,” I said, my face in my pillow. Outside, a train rumbled by. The windows shook. Charlene waited until the train passed before she got all wound up again. She sat up in bed and rubbed her gigantic belly with both hands. Her breasts were getting huge. I said something to that effect, hoping for a little you-know-what, I guess, and she said she liked them huge, that she felt like some fertility goddess thing—the Venus of Willendorf, she called it.

“The what of what?” I said.

“The Venus of Willendorf,” she said. “It’s spelled with a W, but you pronounce it with a V. She was some kind of fertility goddess. People made statues of her way back even before bible times and kept them in their houses for good luck and stuff.”

“Oh,” I said.

“Yeah, isn’t that cool?”

“Real cool,” I said. “Good night, Charlene.”

Martin didn’t mention anything else about me and Annette for a while. For about a week we took our breaks on the loading dock in silence. We’d smoke

and stare off into the distance beyond the stacks of tractor-trailer tires and broken pallets in the shipping yard.

“Charlene’s been watching all these shows about mummies,” I said one afternoon, just to thaw the ice. Besides, Martin was interested in all kinds of weird shit—like the ingredients of potted meat or the fact that the world’s fattest man had to be buried in a Steinway piano crate—and I had a feeling he might appreciate Charlene’s newfound fascination.

“Like Egyptians?” he said.

“Yeah, Egyptians and Chinese. They’ve even found mummies in Yemen,” I said. “Arabian mummies buried high up on these cliffs, where the archaeologists have to rappel down to dig them up.”

“How’s the baby doing?”

The goddamned baby again, I thought.

“Good, I guess. Charlene still doesn’t want to know if it’s a boy or a girl. She looks like she’s trying to hide a frigging medicine ball under her blouse. Dr. Purcell says everything looks good. Normal, you know.”

Martin was the one who’d recommended Dr. Purcell. He’d delivered all three of his kids.

“Good,” Martin said. “*She’ll* do fine.”

July was Mummy Month on the National Geographic Channel. Charlene was so frigging big she could barely get off the couch anyway. She just laid there with the remote in her lap and her feet up on the coffee table, eating ice cream and salt and vinegar potato chips and whole bags of those little powdered sugar doughnuts.

Around the middle of the month, the air conditioning broke down at Fenton, and the OSHA guys came in and shut everything down until it was fixed. We all took a three-day layoff starting that Wednesday. Annette was on vacation out in Utah or Idaho, so I had five days of nothing but mummy this and mummy that with Charlene to look forward to.

That first day we watched eight solid hours of documentaries starring Zahi Hawass, head of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. There was more stuff about Anubis and Isis and Ra and Osiris and Tutankhamen's curse packed into those few hours of television than it seemed humanly possible for any one person to know, and the whole time Charlene was talking around a mouthful of Doritos or Hostess cupcakes, giving me extra facts about this and that and talking about peat bogs and natural mummification—desiccation, she called it. She'd started taping all this stuff, so after Zahi Hawass we watched a few of her other favorites. The first one was this film from an autopsy some guy in China performed back in 1974 on a woman who'd died hundreds of years before Jesus was born. The woman had been soaking for centuries in what looked like brine, and her skin was shriveled up like a bad olive. Her guts were still gooey. I have to admit, some of that shit was fascinating, but that night I had the worst dreams I'd had since I was a kid.

In one dream, Annette had me staked out on a packing skid. She was whistling the Looney Tunes music and mimicking Porky Pig—"Hibbity, hibbity, that's all folks!" The Wrap-O-Matic whirred around me, binding me with cellophane from my feet to my head. I woke up sweating from that one and had to drink three beers before I could get back to sleep.

But the next dream was even worse. Charlene was wearing this dog mask,

like Anubis, and she was leading me through all these catacombs, or whatever you call them, inside a giant pyramid. She guided me into this one room, and I saw myself stretched out on a table surrounded by more masked people. They chanted in a foreign language that sounded more like Spanish than ancient Egyptian. But who would know what ancient Egyptian was supposed to sound like, except maybe Zahi Hawass, and probably Charlene? Anyway, while they chanted, Charlene stepped forward and stuck what looked like the hooked end of a wire coat hanger up my nose. There was this squelching, sucking sound as she yanked out my brain. She took the whole gray mess and put it in one of those canopic jars shaped like a fat little baby. Then she turned back to my body, parted my legs and lifted up my balls. She reached up between my legs and pulled out this little dehydrated-looking fetus from God knows where. The thing was alive, sort of. It squalled and cried. It's skin looked gray, like the flesh of a bad olive. She put that into another jar. When she closed the lid, the squalling stopped. I knew the fetus thing was somehow a part of me, too, a part that was dying, that I would never get back. Charlene chanted along with the other figures. They chanted in Egyto-Spanish, but I knew what it meant: "Your life is over, Big Daddy!"

The next day, Charlene sent me to the library for anything I could find on ancient Egypt or mummies in general. I hadn't been to the library in years. When I was a kid, I'd hang out in the reading room on rainy days after school and flip through Time Life books about the Civil War and the Old West, fixated on all the pictures of dead people taken after battles and barroom shootouts. I could take that kind of stuff when I was a kid. But there was something about the

library I didn't like now that I was older. It seemed like one giant maze of books. One person couldn't read them all in a lifetime, even if he wanted to. I was wandering around, sort of pulling things off the shelves at random, when Martin showed up.

"What the hell are you doing here?" I said.

He held up a book on the history of diesel engines and then, of all things, one on mummies.

"I was looking for that Yemeni mummy Charlene told you about."

"That's new stuff," I said. "I doubt anybody's written a book about that yet. Where'd you get that, anyway, the mummy book?"

I followed him upstairs to the anthropology section, and he pointed to the books on Egypt. I was feeling a little out of place in the library in my greasy Carhart jacket and Levis. Martin was wearing a button-down Oxford and a cardigan in spite of the heat. A pair of drug store reading glasses jutted out of his breast pocket.

"Have you given any thought to what we talked about a while back?" he asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Not really. Is it really that important?"

"It will be if Charlene finds out."

"It's not really about Charlene," I said. Even to me it sounded like bullshit, and I was relieved when Martin let it go.

He pulled a book from the shelf and handed it to me: *A Worldwide History of Embalming and Burial Ritual*.

"Here," he said. "I bet she'll love this."

Charlene was crying when I got home. She'd been watching her tape about the natural mummies of Ireland. Frozen on the television was a desiccated corpse. It was all prunish, curled up in the fetal position.

"What the hell, Charlene? Are you alright?"

Charlene shook her head and hiccuped.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I don't know," she said. "I just felt like crying."

In bed that night, Charlene was quiet for the first time in months. Her belly didn't rise and fall softly the way it usually did when she was going off to sleep. She was holding her breath.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" I asked. We were both looking up at the ceiling.

"I don't know," she puffed. "It's stupid."

Outside the window, in the darkness beyond the railroad tracks, lightning bugs flickered in time with the thrumming crickets.

"Do you think I could have been an archaeologist?" she said after a while. "You know, like Howard Carter or Zahi Hawass?"

I thought about it for a minute. I guess it hadn't occurred to me that Charlene might not be happy with the way things were turning out.

"I don't know," I said. "Probably."

"Really?"

"Yeah," I said. "I think so."

In the moonlight, the folds of sheet over her ripe belly looked like the ripples of a sand dune. I reached under the sheet and rested my hand on her

stomach. The baby moved inside her.

“I’ll be damned,” I said. “You’ve got a regular Jean-Claude Van Damme in there.”

“My little kangaroo,” she said.

I searched for something else to say.

“What do you think we should name him?” I asked finally.

“Or her,” she said. “I don’t know. Certainly not Charlene. It’s such an old woman’s name.” She paused, holding her breath. “I was kind of thinking about Nefertiti,” she said after a minute. “Or maybe Zahi, if it’s a boy.”

“How about Carter?” I said.

I kept my hand resting on Charlene’s belly. She relaxed a little more. I liked the warmth of her tight skin. The rise and fall of her breath began to soothe me.

“What’s the point of it all?” I said.

“The point of what?”

“The mummies,” I said. “Why’d they do it?”

“For the afterlife,” she said. “I thought you knew that. You watched all the shows.” She sat up, excited now. “The whole process took like ten weeks or something, the mummification,” she said. “But when the body was ready, the priest of Anubis would perform a big ceremony. He used an adz, kind of like a tiny hammer, to open the eyes of the dead person. You know, symbolically, because the real eyes were removed and replaced with pearl onions. Remember that? The stuff about the onions was in one of the shows you watched. Anyway, the thing with the eyes was so the dead guy could see in the afterlife.”

“Then what?” I said.

She settled back down and nuzzled in, ready for sleep.

“Then Anubis comes and takes the dead person down the river, the Nile,”
said Charlene, “to the source of all life.”

CHAPTER 3

JOLLY

The snow slants in sideways. It's been drifting in, in flurries, in gusts, for three days now, since the day of Daddy's funeral. The funeral was delayed because of the cold. The backhoe they use to dig graves kept blowing hydraulic hoses. I don't know why the funeral director thought I'd be interested in all that shit about the backhoe, except that he knew Daddy ran an engine repair business. But Daddy never worked on anything the size of a backhoe. He was a small engine guy—lawn mowers, rotary tillers, the occasional chainsaw. He killed himself last Wednesday with my grandfather's .38.

The snow is blowing in from the west. It's mixed with ice. The ice ticks at the plate glass like fingernails. The radiator's been broken for weeks. The station's windows are fogged with condensation that drips down to the sills. Paint is already starting to peel and warp around the window frames. The wood beneath the curling paint is souring, turning black. It's like a terrarium in here. Out there, the temperature is dropping. The snow is more ice than snow. Tick. Tick.

The girl who came in on the 10:30 is still waiting around. I have a feeling she's not on a layover, that she's got no place to go. I watch her because I'm supposed to. Bag, that's my boss, Bag Peters, gets mad if girls hang around in here too long. He thinks they're all turning tricks. It's too cold for me to kick her out. I offer her coffee or hot chocolate instead. She shakes her head at first, but when I turn back to the window, she says, "Cocoa might be nice."

"Marshmallows?" I ask.

She nods.

She looks young, maybe seventeen or eighteen. Her backpack is on the chair beside her. It's stuffed. A bra strap is caught in the zipper. I wonder if she's living out of it. She has mud caked on the frayed cuffs of her jeans, but her shoes are clean, worn. The left one has a floppy toe. She keeps picking at it, like it worries her. I make hot water in the Mr. Coffee, then pour it over a packet of Swiss Miss with marshmallows, drop in a plastic swizzle.

She holds the cup in both hands, even though it's at least ninety degrees in here. She's got bags under her eyes. Not black, but purple—like old bruises. Her sweater and jeans are black. Her skin is pale. She looks like one of those Goth girls on television, a real vampire.

“What time's your bus?” I ask.

“A while yet.”

I hesitate.

“Look,” I say after a while. “My boss comes in at four. You might not want him to see you hanging around.”

“I'm just waiting for the bus,” she says.

“Okay,” I say. “If you're not, though, there's a laundromat around the corner. It's pretty warm in there.”

She blows on her hot chocolate, then gives me a faint smile that says she wants me to mind my own business.

“I'll mind my own business,” I say.

I walk back to the window. The snow is really coming down. Across the street, in the plumbing supply junk lot, there's a two-foot drift along a stack of galvanized pipe. Leaning sideways in the drift is an old toilet, flesh pink. The lid

hangs by one hinge. It looks like a mouth hanging open—like someone asleep, or dead.

When Bag comes in at four, the girl ducks into the restroom and doesn't come out. I hope she has sense to take my advice about the laundromat.

There's a snowdrift halfway up the tires of my Gremlin. I know before I even get in that the car won't start. I get in anyway. The door squeals and pops on its hinges. The starter whines a couple of times, clicks. The dome light blinks and goes out.

It's a mile walk to the house, a long truck in the snow. I'm still thinking about Daddy. At least I wasn't the one who found him. Bobby Crenshaw did. Bobby said he'd just talked to Daddy on the telephone, that Daddy had called to tell him his generator was ready. It took Bobby half an hour to drive over. He found Daddy sprawled on the concrete floor of the shop behind the house. Bobby told me at the funeral home that his Kubota was working like new.

"Good deal," I said.

It's dark by the time I make it home. The quickest route to the house is through the back yard from Okolona Avenue. I almost go around the long way, just to avoid walking past the shop, but the sleet is blistering my face. My ears ache from the cold.

The shop door is propped open with a cinderblock. I distinctly remember shutting it a couple of days ago. There are a lot of homeless guys in this part of town. Most of them live in the gully by the wastewater treatment plant, in boxes, crates. When it gets cold, though, they go looking for warmth anywhere they can find it—usually the bus station or the laundromat or the Waffle House

out on the by-pass. A few times, though, Daddy found guys curled up by the space heater in the shop. I'm not sure what to expect when I step through the door, but nothing can prepare me for this.

In the far corner of the shop, over by Stu Greely's oily Scagg, right beneath the shelf with all the Folgers cans he used to soak nuts and bolts in, Daddy is sitting on an upturned five-gallon bucket. His head is cocked to one side. He's got a flashlight vised between his bloody neck and jaw, aiming it down the port of a tiny carburetor. I startle him. The flashlight clatters to the floor. The beam dies. I hesitate, then flick on the lights. The fluorescents flicker and hum. He's gone. Snow swirls through the door, licks at my ankles through my thin socks.

I can't sleep. I keep thinking about Daddy. Even though we lived in the same house, it seemed like we hadn't spoken for years. I have this one memory of him that keeps coming back. He's explaining to me how a carburetor works. "It's sort of like the heart of the engine," he says. He's got one torn apart, nuts and bolts and little pieces of rubber tubing strewn across a piece of pressboard balanced on two saw horses. I can't picture his face, the way he looked then. That was back before Mama left, so I must've been eight, maybe nine. I keep seeing his hands. He's got grease under his fingernails and soaked into the deep lines of his knuckles and palms. I think of him as a doctor, a surgeon, like one of the guys on M.A.S.H.—Trapper or Hawkeye. I think of the grease as blood.

I get up several times for a drink of water. Each time, I look out the kitchen window at the shop. A couple of times I go to the back door, flick on the porch light. It's finally stopped snowing. The snow on the ground is blinding

bright in the orange glare of the porch light. The padlock I put on the shop door is still in place, but there are footprints in the snow. I shut out the light. I think about getting the gun before I remember that the police still have it. Technically, suicide is a crime. I can pick up the gun if I want to, but there'll be paperwork to fill out. I don't want the gun, anyway.

Before I think about what I'm doing, I've got my shoes on. I walk out the back door, across the yard to Okolona Avenue, and turn toward the bus station. Sometimes, when I can't sleep, I walk over to the station and talk to Billy for an hour or two. Billy's the one who got me my job. We graduated high school together last May. But when I get to Market Street, I take a left and walk toward the laundromat instead.

I'm surprised to find the place empty. The whole place gleams, stainless steel and plate glass. I take a seat by the window and pull out the paperback western I've been trying to read. I've dog-eared page 205, but I have to flip back nearly fifty pages before I remember what I've read. Before I even finish the page, I close the book and light a cigarette. Ice ticks against the glass. More snow. I look out the window.

Under the street light, about a block down Phillips, someone is sitting on the bench by the mechanical horse outside the Plaza Food Center. I know by the slope of his shoulders, the tilt of his head, who it is. He's got something in his lap. It looks like a carburetor.

When the girl walks in, I jump. My chair falls back against the window. She doesn't seem to notice. She walks over to the Cold Drinks machine and stands there, staring at it. I right my chair, sit down, light another cigarette.

"Looks like you missed your bus," I say.

She turns to look at me. She's got both hands shoved deep in the pockets of her jeans.

"You don't have change for a dollar, do you?"

I reach into my pocket, pull out three quarters, a ball of lint, some nickels and dimes. I cup my hand, jingle the change, then hold it out to her.

She walks over, patting her coat pockets.

"I know I've got a dollar here somewhere."

"Just take it," I say.

She does.

But she doesn't go back to the drink machine. Instead, she reaches into her backpack and pulls out a squashed pack of GPCs. I light her cigarette. She takes a drag, blows smoke toward the ceiling. She holds one elbow when she smokes, the way my mother used to. Mama's living in Vegas now, with the guy we used to buy tires from. Harold Blevins, The Undisputed King of Retread.

I look out the window. Daddy is still sitting in front of the grocery. From here, it looks like his hair is matted with blood. I think I see a flap of skull, or skin.

"Does he belong to you?" she says.

"Who?" I say.

"The guy in front of the grocery."

"What guy in front of the grocery?"

"I guess not," she says.

She takes a seat a couple of chairs down from me, crosses her legs like a man and begins to pick at the floppy toe of her Puma. Her cigarette dangles from the corner of her mouth. Smoke drifts into her eyes. She stops picking at her

shoe, takes the cigarette from her mouth and flicks ash on the floor. She digs in her backpack and pulls out a tube of Super Glue.

“What if he does belong to me?”

“It’s no big deal,” she says, puffing at a strand of dark hair that keeps falling in her face. She daubs glue on the toe of her shoe.

“No big deal?” I say.

“Not really. A lot of people have them.” She twists the cap back on the tube of Super Glue.

A gust of wind shakes the plate glass. Eddies of snow blow up the empty street. The traffic light on the corner changes from green to red. In the red glow, the snow standing in Daddy’s lap and on his broad shoulders looks like blood.

“Who is he, anyway?” she asks.

“My dad,” I say. “He killed himself last Wednesday.”

We sit in silence for a while. The drink machine hums quietly. I smoke and watch her out of the corner of my eye. She’s pretty, in that weird, deathly way Goth girls can be pretty.

“What is he?” I ask.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he’s not like a zombie or anything. He’s a ghost, right?”

“I guess so,” she says. “Ghost. Spirit. Something.”

Suddenly, I don’t want to go home alone.

“Do you have some place to stay?” I ask.

We stop off at J’s Quick Mart and pick up milk and cocoa powder and a bag of miniature marshmallows. We wait in line while the overweight lothario in

front of us hassles the cashier for her phone number. He's wearing a muscle shirt and sweats and flip-flops.

"Why did he do it?" she asks.

I look at her. Her dark eyes are beautiful. If I look close enough, I think, I'll see every color, like the oily sheen of a grackle's wing, or a crow's.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I can be way too direct. My mother always says, 'Stop being rude, Jolly. You've got to stop asking people prying questions.'"

Lothario slams his fists on the counter. His belly jiggles beneath his muscle shirt. I notice a faint sweat stain around his navel. "Fine," he says, and struts to the door. "You couldn't handle it anyway."

The cashier jabs her middle finger at him.

Jolly laughs.

"I love the snow," Jolly says.

Under the streetlights, it's like midday on Okolona. Our breath steams in the air as we trudge through the powder. With her toboggan tugged down over her ears, she looks like a little kid. Her cheeks are red. I begin to think how strange the last few hours have been—how everything might have been different if it wasn't for the snow. I might have driven home and never seen him. I probably wouldn't have gone to the laundromat. Just before we turn into the yard, Jolly turns to look at me. She spreads her arms, like a crucifixion, and falls backwards, laughing, into the snow. She waves her arms. She could be flying. Or maybe drowning.

I turn up the burner and pour milk in a pan to simmer. Jolly sits by the window at the kitchen table. She's got her shoes off, her legs crossed under her

thighs, like she's meditating. She's got a bath towel draped around her thin shoulders.

"Can we turn the lights out?" she asks. "I want to look at the snow."

I flip the switch. The burner glows red in the darkness. In the back yard, the shop door is propped open again. A whisper of light flashes across the window.

"Someone's out there," she says.

"It's him," I say. "Daddy."

I still can't sleep. It's half past three. I keep wondering if it was something I did. I think I might be dozing off when she comes to my room. She pulls up the shade. Snow light floods the room. She is naked, thin, frail. Beneath her breasts, snow light makes shadows between her ribs. She climbs into bed with me without a word. Her breasts are cold. The rest of her is warm. She kisses me. I don't know why I'm crying. She makes soft, hushing sounds.

I leave her sleeping in the morning, curled up like a little kid beneath the blankets. The walk to the bus station is easier. The snow is already turning to slush. I think about what she said last night. She sits up in bed, faces the window. I trace her spine with my finger and ask her again about ghosts. She says hers are in the corner, sleeping. Then she tells me about her uncle, who came to live with her and her mother when she was five. He'd brought his dog with him, a Labrador bitch fat with puppies. The dog slept under the house, she says. Her name was Lucy. When Lucy had her puppies, Jolly's uncle had her crawl under the house and hand them out to him, one by one. Their eyes weren't opened yet. He put them in a feed sack and took them into the woods behind the

house. Jolly followed and watched as he threw them into the cesspool of a neighbor's hog farm. The puppies didn't make a sound. That night, they appeared to her, and she slept with them curled up and mewling in the crook of her arm, their eyes still shut to the world. Then she asks me about Daddy again. She wants to know if he left a note.

"What did it say," she says when I tell her he did.

"Take care of yourself," I say.

"That's it?"

"That's it."

"You really don't know why he did it, do you?"

"No," I say. "I don't"

Daddy is sitting by the window when I get to the station. In the daylight, I see that he is hollow. Dusty light filters through the gaping hole in his head. When Billy leaves and we're alone, I ask him: "What are you doing here?"

He doesn't speak. He sits looking sullen with his hands folded in his lap.

"Fine," I say. "Fuck you. I guess you've said all you had to say."

I turn my back on his silence. Outside, snow water rafts out of the gutters. The few cars passing down Market Street splash water on the window. Tires make sizzling sounds in the slush. I think about what Jolly said as she was drifting to sleep: "Some people never know the grief they cause."

I turn to Daddy again.

"I don't want you haunting me. Get out."

He unfolds his hands. He's still got grease under his nails. He stands up, puts his hands in his pockets. I expect him to walk away. Instead, he just

evaporates slowly, leaving only a shaft of dusty light in his wake. I listen to the ice melt, shove my hands deep in my pockets and wait for the 8:45.

Jolly is gone when I get home. I sit on the edge of the bed and look out the window. The padlock is back on the shop door. Islands of dirty snow are melting in the shade.

For a long time, weeks maybe, Daddy drifts in and out of the corner of my eye. I don't turn to him. I don't speak. I keep waiting for Jolly to show up at the bus station. I look for her at the laundromat. I think maybe she'll call. She doesn't.

Daddy shows up at the grocery one Friday night while I'm shopping for the week. I turn the corner of the cereal aisle and he's standing there. He's wearing a ball cap, thank God, so I don't have to look at the hole in his head. I start to turn my cart around. He calls my name.

"Calvin," he says. "Wait."

He doesn't turn to me. Instead, he looks straight ahead, traces the rectangle of a box of Frosted Flakes with his finger. Patsy Cline is playing on the P.A. There is grease in the lines of daddy's knuckles—dark swirls of it—and under his fingernails. I guess it will always be there.

"What?" I say.

He turns to look at me. A tear slips around the corner of his nose, swells in the divot of his upper lip, drips to the floor. I don't think I ever looked this closely at him when he was alive—his thin cheeks, the map of lines fanning out around his eyes, the gray, like patches of dirty snow, in his stubble.

“You do know I loved you, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I know.”

So what if I lie?

I look at Daddy’s hands, at the dark grease caked beneath the tips of his nails, and wait for him to fade. On the P.A., someone calls for a cleanup on aisle five.

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