

University of New Orleans

ScholarWorks@UNO

University of New Orleans Theses and
Dissertations

Dissertations and Theses

Spring 5-16-2014

The Garden

Todd S. Trulock
ttrulock@uno.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Trulock, Todd S., "The Garden" (2014). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 1838.
<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/1838>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

The Garden

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing
Fiction

by

Todd Sutton Trulock

B.A. University of Tennessee, 2010

May, 2014

Acknowledgments

This collection is dedicated to my mother, Gina, and my friend, Barb Johnson.

April 16, 2014

Table of Contents

Jessie	1
The Dance of the American Noir in the Dark.....	10
The Turning Point.....	32
The Garden.....	56

Jessie

Last night, I had the chain wrapped around his neck. He was dead. He was dead, and I was free. And I had him. He turned his back to me, and I wrapped it around his neck. I felt his throat caving to the chain.

But he rammed me against the wall, and I went black. Now the sun glinted through its hole in the basement's wall. I had been out for hours, and I hurt bad. I hurt real bad.

It was the front door slamming that woke me up. I slid my fingers underneath the back of the collar and flattened the leather flap between the metal and my neck. He was in the kitchen. I heard his footsteps and followed them into the den, and the light came on. I saw only his boat shoes on the top step of the basement, but I knew he was balancing the tray with one hand and locking the door with the other.

"Bastard," I said. But I did not move from the rug. My tongue rubbed against the back of my teeth and found the rotted gum where I was missing a fucking tooth. The cell door screeched on its hinges. He threw a cigarette, and it stopped when it hit my knees. I finally pushed myself off the rug and looked at him. His top lip swelled black, and one of his cheeks was bruised. But it was his neck that had taken the brunt of the damage. "Lighter," I said. He laid down my tray, and without looking he threw the lighter. I lit my smoke and threw the lighter out of the cage.

"Listen, I was at the fucking dentist all last night. Don't fucking push it," he said. I had knocked out one of his teeth, and still my tongue jabbed the space where my tooth should be. I'll get you motherfucker. I lightly blew the smoke out of my lungs. I'll get you motherfucker. The door closed. The door closed, and I screamed. I screamed as loud as I could, and he turned out the lights, but I already knew every brick. I knew every hole in the wall. I knew every stitch in this fucking rug. I knew every link in my twelve-foot chain. I knew every chink in the cell's blue

painted bars. I knew the smell. The smell was mildew. The smell was cigarettes and shit. The smell was me. And I knew, always knew, where he was.

Right now, he was in the living room next to the stereo and television. The music came on. It was Radiohead. It was always this shit. I tongued the hole and puffed the cigarette. I crawled over to the tray. I ate the food. Then I went to the black. There I waited.

It was night when the lights came back on. I knew he was drunk. I heard him walking back and forth from the refrigerator all day. I stood up and wrapped the chain around my hand as the door opened. I was the matador, and he the bull, and if he was ready to do the dance of death, I was too.

“I was flipping through the channels, and there you were. So I thought I’d see how you were doing,” he said as he put two cigarettes in his mouth. “They had that picture of you. You know, the one with your sorority sisters.” He saw me ready to go and stopped unlocking the cell, shifting the beers to the nook under his arm. “Listen, I don’t want to fight. I’m going to unlock you for the night. I just wanna talk.”

The chain fell from my fist, and I lay face down on my rug. He stepped over me and unlocked the collar. “I got the blade tonight, so don’t try anything too sexy.”

I rubbed my neck, and the sores from the chain breathed for the first time in a week. He took one of the cigarettes out of his mouth and put it in mine. I took my first drag before I sat up Indian style on the rug.

“Hey, there you are,” he said. He picked one of the beers off the bunch and handed it to me. “Listen don’t be all silent. You’re just as bored as me.” He sat beside me.

“I want a mirror,” I said and took another swig. I hadn’t seen my face in months, and I just wanted to see what it looked like. It was bruised. I knew it was bruised, but I just wanted to know.

“Are you mad about the tooth? Aw, Jessie, you can’t even tell.” The television hummed its muffled drone through the living room’s floorboards. “I’ll get you one in a minute, but I came here to talk.”

“Fucking say something then,” I said.

“They rebuilt the Georgia Theater,” he said. I just stared at him for a second and then killed the rest of my beer. The theater had burnt down the day after he snatched me. We had shared the local headlines, but that fucking theater was the last thing I wanted to talk about.

“Okay, so what do you want to talk about?” he asked. I knocked his oncoming hand away.

“Give me another beer,” I said and threw the old can into the piss pot, but it missed.

“Don’t do that shit,” he said. I smiled. I couldn’t help myself. He pulled another tallboy off the bunch and threw it hard. The beer exploded against the wall. I crawled over to the foaming can.

“God, you’re still so sexy,” he said.

I looked back and he was looking at me. Just you wait. The beer was coming out in a slow froth. I picked it up and sucked it out of the hole. He watched. He watched the beer drip down my body. “I will kill you one day,” I said.

“Not if I kill you first.” He smiled before taking another pull off his drink. “You almost had me last night, I really thought you did,” he said. I threw the empty can at his face, but he swatted it down. “Please stop being such a bitch. You don’t want to play with me tonight.” Then

he gulped down the last of his beer. The crickets' songs slipped through the cracks in the basement walls letting us know that they were shaking off that southern rain. "Do you want another beer?"

"Yeah."

"Okay," he said.

He locked the cage and came back with a half a bottle of Jack, a glass, and a solo cup. He rattled the ice in the solo cup, and I took it in one gulp. As he poured me another drink, he said, "You know I had a great nose before these things." He pulled out the pack of Marlboro 27s. He was hammered, and the serious expression that he wore drunkenly sagged upon his face. "I could smell better than anyone. I went to a perfume factory this one time when I was little." He lit the cig and pulled it out immediately to take another sip of beer. "And there are these people called noses. And they can smell better than anyone. Get paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to smell for fifteen minutes an hour. I know I was a nose, but I've ruined it with these things." He shook the smoke for emphasis before handing it to me and lighting another one.

I took a drag, "That's so sad."

"That's not my point. I was getting into scents," he said. "See, I had this girl, but we were dating. It's not like this thing we have here." His head was drunk, crooked, eyes puffed. "She was good looking, but I couldn't take the way she smelled, you understand? I couldn't even kiss her after a couple of months." He sniffed himself. "See, I know my smell. I love my smell. I know what I am. I'm an animal, Jess." He took a pull straight from the fifth of Jack Daniels. "Straight animal," he said, turning his eyes to the border of the soiled red and black rug. "You know I really regret what I've done. I shouldn't have snatched you, but I was in too deep before I

knew it. I never denied that beast inside myself, and it got bigger and bigger. There was this thing I read on the back of a biker's—"

"Bullshit," I said.

"What?" He smiled like a hammered clown, like Bill Murray in *Caddyshack*.

"It wasn't instinct. It was loneliness," I said. I tilted my cup to him. He poured whiskey over the remains of the ice, and I took it before continuing, "You were lonely, but I was just a girl, and you ruined me." I understood now. No, I faced the truth for the first time, that I would never sleep soundly, that I would never look at a man or the night the same, that my periods would always be brown, that the life I had a year ago was gone, and by acknowledging all of this, the woman I was a year ago was gone now. "You took my life from me." My face was hot and wet. Please, God, let time heal me, I thought. Please, God, let me get out of here. Please, God, never let the world be as cruel to me as it is now. Please, God. Please. "Do not touch me," I said.

He withdrew his hand. "I wish I never did it. You have no idea." He rubbed my back, and I, I crumpled on that rug. "You were always an animal," he whispered. "You were just domesticated. It's not a bad thing. I had a shitty hand dealt to me too, Jess. But I tell you something: he who makes a beast of himself, gets rid of the pain of being a man. That's what it said on the back of this biker's jacket. You get that kid?" He pulled out two cigs, put one in my mouth, and lit mine first. His knee was next to my face, and I was in a grungy, drunken haze. "Hello?"

I closed my eyes as I smoked that cigarette, and he rubbed my back. I thought to myself things were okay. Right now. I held onto it. I held onto it hard. "Can we go outside?" I asked.

He took a long drag as he thought it over. "Will you wear the leash?"

“Yeah,” I said.

“Okay,” he said. I put the collar around my neck as he unlocked the chain from the wall. We walked to the back porch. I flopped into one of the cushioned porch seats. The air was cool, and the breeze was slight. He dropped the chain in the other chair and sat on it.

“I’m not going to run away today,” I said.

His head was bowed as he ran his hand over his hair. “I know.”

My head rested upon the chair’s wicker back, and I felt the ease of rest. It was wonderful to be outside. The moon was outside. I remembered the time me and my friends smoked pot for the first time, and all night we called the moon, Brother Bear. I laughed.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing.” We sat. We sat, and it was good to be outside. He whistled, and I closed my eyes. I closed my eyes and felt like I was walking to sleep. I listened to him whistle, and then I did. I fell asleep. The song stopped, and I was asleep. Then he said, “Come on now, Jess, it’s time for bed.” And he guided me back into the cage.

“Good night,” I said, but I was asleep and didn’t mean it.

A few days passed and a few more, and he was drunk again. He came down with a six-pack of Budweiser, some cheese, and some bread. The stereo, now in the corner of the cage, was playing an old classic rock station. “Thought you might be hungry,” he said, “so I brought some cheese and bread.”

“I want a beer,” I said. He handed me one, and I cracked it open. “Where you been?”

“A bar with Allison.”

“Which one?” I asked.

“Nowhere Bar.” He lit two cigs up and handed one to me. I was done with my first tallboy before I flicked the butt into the coffee can. Nowhere Bar was my favorite bar in Athens, but that didn’t matter right now. I was distracted by Lynyrd Skynyrd coming on the radio for the fifth time today.

“For the love of Christ please change the radio,” I said as I got up. “No, I’ll do it.”

“Would it kill you to play some Foghat every once in a while?” he asked.

“What?” I looked over my shoulder as I played with the dial, and he said it again.

“Nothing. It’s something Jim Carrey said at the VMAs,” he said. “He was dressed as a biker.”

“Ohh,” I said and went back to the radio. He laughed and ate a piece of cheese. “There’s nothing on the radio.”

“My CDs are over there,” he said as he looked at the time on his phone.

“I’ve listened to all the good ones. Oh, I know,” I flipped through the CDs and found *The White Album*.

“Has the mouse been around?” he asked.

“Not today.” I was shaking, so I grabbed another beer and walked around him. The bowie knife was on his belt.

“You know what,” he said as time began to slow her tempo. “There was something I noticed at the bar. I used to think that there was no difference between a man and a woman. That the differences were put on by the world, but there was something I noticed at the bar. There was this girl, and she was wearing a tux, dressed as a man, had a goatee marked on her face, She wasn’t a tranny. She was just dressed that way because she was drawing people or some shit like that. Don’t ask me. But anyway, she was busy wrapping this guy with a big beard around her

finger as her man played pool and got hammered. All the while this guy drank by himself,” he said.

“What guy?” I asked, but I wasn’t listening. Listening to him babble just made me want to go outside. I just wanted to go outside, but I held it in. I held it and got another beer and I chugged it.

“This guy. He came in just after I did. Nobody said—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said. John Lennon whispered the opening lines to “Happiness is a Warm Gun,” and I threw the beer and its remains on floor. Then I put my hand on his denimmed knee. The look on that fucker’s face, it might have made someone laugh, but what I knew was that the look I gave would make any man as hard as Medusa’s glance. My fingers slid up the denim and it was over. It was over, and he was mine. I hadn’t even touched him. The Beatles were screaming, and I felt it. I felt his cock, and he was hard. And I teased him, and I liked it, and I was wet. I didn’t care.

And I reached for the top button. And I unbuttoned it and pulled the zipper down. I pulled it out, and I pulled his pants down to his knees and he was mine. And I didn’t waste any time sucking. Yeah, so I laid him down, and I rode on him, and I rode on him, and I rode on him good. And then I felt it, and I wrapped the chain around my hand, and I gripped hard, and I felt it, and I heard him moan, and I rode, and I rode him hard, and then he felt it, and his head lifted in pleasure, and I fucking smashed his head, and it ricocheted off the concrete, and the blood spilt, and he wiggled and writhed, but he couldn’t do anything, and his legs tried to kick off the jeans, and his hands covered his face. But it didn’t stop me from slamming his head against the concrete, and then he was still and blood crept from his head. And I listened to his heart, and I

heard it beat. And I grabbed the collar and put it around his neck. I put the collar around his neck and slid the lock into place, and he was mine.

He came to with two broken kneecaps, nine less teeth, and I assumed a concussion. I was on my fourth cig by then so I gave it to him. I had already wiped the blood off his face. I lit another cig. He was terrified, and he was me on that first night I was locked in the basement.

“I was going to rip your dick off.” I felt the beer in my stomach rise just from saying this. “But after doing all this, I don’t know if I could stomach it. You—” I took a puff “—as far as I’m concerned we’re even. Where you are going will be as bad as it is here, if they find you.” I took a deep breath. “But there’s something I have to say to you.” I caught my breath again. “I was just a girl walking at night by herself. I was a girl. That’s it and now—” I couldn’t hold it in, and I broke down crying. “But now I have nowhere to go.”

My body bowed into my knees, and I was bawling. And I felt it coming up, and the beer spilt from my mouth and the tears from my eyes. Then the dry heaves came. They came over and over, and they racked my body, and my stomach muscles tightened, and then, and then it was over, and I lay there, wet with sweat glistening and evaporating. I lay there on my side and let it evaporate. I felt reborn and lay there until I could finally stand. I took a deep breath. “Goodbye,” I said, and I kissed him on the lips.

“Where are you going? Please, please, oh God, please,” he said, but I was already walking up the stairs. “Please, no.”

The basement door cut him off. The tears were coming again, and my knees were weak, but I was outside in the night breeze, free. I collapsed in that chair on the porch and closed my eyes. I let the tears roll down and the breeze carry the sweat from my body. I let the tears roll down my face and filled my lungs with that Georgia night.

The Dance of the American Noir in the Dark

4. Gene

Man Vs. Man
12/6/11
Los Angeles

“Two Jack and Cokes,” I said. The bartender read my tattooed hands before she served up the drinks. It takes a while for people to get used to me. It’s my face. It ain’t no secret. She tried to throw another glance before she thought twice and pushed the drinks across the bar.

“Eight dollars,” she said.

I threw a ten down and walked to the back of the bar. He was sitting in one of the three booths that hugged the back of the room. His name was Jake, and he was a real looker, a Goddamn movie star. This guy had been tailing me like a lost dog, and it was time to see what this bitch wanted.

“You must be thirsty,” I said as I sat down, sliding the drink across the beaten wood.

“Excuse me?” he asked, eyeing the scars underneath the patches of my beard.

“You’ve been running around for two weeks looking for me.” I sipped my drink, taking my time with my move before finishing with, “I know who you are, but I don’t know what the fuck your game is.”

He picked up his drink and looked over its rim before taking a sip. There was a forgotten ace sopped to the table. A parchment-colored banner with “In thee do I put my trust” wrapped around its spade. I peeled it off and flashed it towards him before stuffing it inside my jacket.

“Right now, you’re following me on my dollar,” I said. Every time I looked at this guy I remembered that he fucked Kat. It killed me. I could feel my veins surge with the stampeding blood. But I stayed focused, pushed everything out, no emotion.

“I was. Now I am in this shit for myself,” he said, but his eyes slid over the top of my ear to the wood paneling behind me.

“Where’s Kat?” I asked.

“I was about to ask you the same question.” He stole another glance at my mouth, and I knew he wanted me. By this point reading people was second nature. Fucking people.

“Look now, let’s cut the bullshit. Why are you here?” I asked.

Jake’s hand fell beneath the table, and I heard the click. “Goddamnit, you know why I’m here.” And he sank lower, and I felt the barrel jammed against my dick. “Where is the money?”

I watched Jake’s eyes. They were brown, fluttering like butterflies, and the air seemed to be tightly sealed in his lungs. He was scared. Though I hadn’t been in Afghanistan in seven years, it didn’t take an interrogation specialist in the navy to see that.

“That was a big mistake,” I said. “You fucking pulled a gun in here?” Jake looked towards the bar’s landscape filling up, then took a sip of his drink. I put my hand on his. It was hot. I began rubbing and trying to wrap my finger around his trigger. “Kid, you know what you’ve just done?” I shifted the gun closer to myself, and the jerk separated the ash from his cig. He wasn’t pressing the gun against me anymore so I held it there. “You’ve put yourself between life or death.”

See all this, all this shit I was dropping on this fucker was an act. I’m not really Gene, but it’s fun as hell to play him. The smell of smoke got to me, and I lit a cigarette before I started back in on him.

“Man, you fucked up. You know before this you might have gotten away,” I said, “but now you’re going to have to kill me right here because if you don’t, I’m going to kill you out there. No way you’re going to get away with it, and it’s going to be life in the pen. Life or death. Whats it going to be, brother?”

I let go of his hand, and while spreading my legs, I put a cigarette in my mouth. I looked him in the eye and made him see what I saw. “Blast my cock off right here.” He jerked the gun from between my legs, and the clip dropped. Nothing would go down here.

He didn’t deserve it, but I was halfway drunk, so I decided to drop a little wisdom on him anyway. “There’s this thing I like to think about. You see I’m a sky that stretches farther than any eye can see. Everybody else is clouds. Some are dark and some are white, some change with certain winds, but once they are out of my sky,” I said, “they’re gone. See normally I wouldn’t worry about any clouds, but she was special. She was my savior, kid, I loved her, and behind that car she stole from me is an invisible string dragging this old sky behind that cloud. I’m gonna chase that cloud, and I’m gonna find that cloud.” I smashed my cigarette out in the ashtray, letting the smoke leave my lungs. “I’m gonna ask you a question in a minute, but I haven’t finished. Don’t worry you’ll get your turn. But I want to explain myself better because when I get excited I confuse people sometimes. And I want to be very clear. I don’t give a damn about the money. I want to find her. Now it’s your turn. So, brother, what do you know?”

“I don’t know shit,” Jake said.

“What do you think?” I asked.

“I think I don’t think that good when people talk to me that way,” he said, but the game between us was over when he kicked the clip out the barrel.

I knocked back my drink, letting the ice hit my teeth. “Well good knowing you,” I said and slung the glass back on the table, rattling the ice cubes as the glass spun loosely. The wood creaked under my feet, and I was gone.

Outside the moon was full, the air was cool, and I was grinning. Grinning like a madman. “Well what should we do?” I was talking to Los Angeles, now, and laughing because I thought of something to say. I always think of it after I leave, but I told City of Angles instead. “It’s not gonna do you any good, but you might want to call the cops, tell them you’re missing,” I said.

I dug in my pocket, and my rubber mask stretched until it reached my chest and snapped out. I slipped the ace of spades under the windshield wiper of Jake’s Pontiac before I slid the sick clown mask over my face. We used to dump spades on what was left of the Hajjis. I had ordered a whole fucking crate for my platoon. We had used it back in ’Nam, called it the Bicycle secret weapon. Scared the hell out of Hajji like it did Charlie. We spread them all over that Goddamn desert letting the spades run forever on that midnight wind. Those bastards knew who the card was from, and they knew what the Kill Team did.

I checked the mask in the stolen car’s rearview before cranking the piece of shit up. The mask was tight, but the mouth hole was big enough to breathe out of easily. The hair was white, stained trash gray, and in patches. My scalp was exposed where the mask was starting to rip. It had a sick white hue as if the mask had a disease, yet something besides its tightness made it look real. On top of that leperish skin, the lips stretched ear to ear.

I slid the car around the building and waited behind the blue GTO. Jake was gonna learn what that card meant, and I was gonna find out if that Pontiac had a V-6 or V-8 in it.

3. Kat

The One That Got Away
12/5/11
The Ozarks

I needed a coffee, and there was nothing. Nothing but dead grasshoppers and the car's infinite growl out here. Gene was after me. I'd be a fool and dead to think otherwise. I was a lot of things, but I was nobody's fool. I had his car, his mother's watch, his heart, and our pile of money sleeping naked in the passenger seat. And that was the least of it.

We had hit anything: stores, gas stations, food chains, a liquor store on Saturday, a bank on the border, anything we knew we could take that wasn't bolted to the ground. Only rule was not to end up on camera or behind bars. If you were as ruthless and smart as we were, you could make this happen.

I knew he wouldn't stop, but I had a head start. He hadn't called me yet. That's what made me nervous. I knew he wasn't dead. He was one of those bastards you could not kill, not the normal way with a bullet or a knife.

But Jake was a dead man. I knew that.

In one day I had seen the country change from desert to prairie to mountains and was now deep in the nowhere of Arkansas. The road threaded through the Ozarks' stones and pine, and the Road Runner stuck like a vacuum to any curve the mountain threw.

About twenty minutes later, a Waffle House reared its yellow head over the mountain's skinny pines on the town's only block. I pulled in the parking lot and checked the clock. It was 3:31 A.M.. Before I walked into the fluorescent diner, I popped my back using the side of the car for leverage.

At the end of the bar, I hung my jacket on the stool's back and sat. The waitress looked at me with late-night-shift bags under her eyes and asked, "What will it be, honey?" Her voice was not nearly as tired as her face, and I could not help smiling at the friendliness it possessed. I love people who cannot hide their kindness.

"Can I just have a cup of coffee for now?" I asked.

"Sure." She set the white mug in front of me and filled it. "Let me know when you need something else."

"Thank you, Momma," I said. I took a sip of coffee and ignored the man stealing glances from the other side of the bar. The waitress turned on the hose and sprayed the kitchen down. I was tired and numb from thinking too much on the open road.

This Waffle House was like every other Waffle House: cozy, cheap, and yellow. The coffee was hot, the dining room was warm, and the jukebox squatted in the corner.

"I never seen you before," the man said. His voice was hostile, but I had met enough men to know that he was just lonely.

"That's a blessing," I said. I don't take shit. I wasn't born staring somebody down, but it didn't take me long to learn.

"Is he giving you problems?" the waitress asked. She had turned off the water. At that moment she was another person, the person she'd been before the decades of waiting on people. "Dave, are you giving her problems?" she asked.

"No," he said, turning back to his All-Star Special. Men, fucking stupid.

I thought about the clouds Gene always talked about and how damn good this cup of coffee was. The only noises were low mumbles about real estate and dreams and the scraping of silverware. It was a symphony of stillness, and I let it fall all over my idle thought.

“Have you decided what you want?” the waitress asked as she refilled my coffee.

“Could I just have a waffle?” I said.

“Sure, I’ll have that right out,” she said and turned to the cook. “An order of waffles, Rob.” He nodded and filled the iron with batter. She turned back to me and smiled for the first time. “Where are you from, sweetie?”

“Georgia,” I said. It felt good to be back in the south, even though this was Arkansas.

“Oh, that’s a beautiful place,” she said. “I’ve been to Atlanta a couple times and the Blue Ridge Mountains. So pretty and Atlanta was so big.” She filled up her own cup of coffee.

“I’m from South Georgia.”

“I drove through South Georgia on my way to Disney World. It was nice from what I can remember. Lots of farms,” she said

“Yep,” I answered. The coffee had cooled down enough to where I could take large gulps now. “I grew up in Albany.”

“How big is that?” she asked.

“Oh, it’s big enough, but it was always too small for me.”

“Is that where you’re headed today?”

“No, I’m headed to Knoxville then to Canada,” I said.

“My Lord, that’s too far away. You’re not planning on driving there tonight?” she asked.

“I was,” I said. I’ve been called a gypsy before. I’ve been called a lot of things, but driving 1,600 miles was just another day. All I needed was coffee and some uppers.

“No, you can’t make it there tonight,” the waitress said.

“Waffles up,” Rob yelled.

The air made that tired, patient sound as it left her body, and she walked over to the waffles on the white plate with the burgundy trim and the Waffle House logo. As she placed the waffles in front of me, she said, “Tell you what, honey, I get off in twenty minutes. There isn’t any place near here to stay. How about you spend the night in my guestroom and then get up tomorrow and drive to Knoxville in the morning?”

2. Jake

The Drive of the American Dream
11/19/11
Los Angeles, CA

I was killing my shift polishing an already clean glass when she came in the bar haloed by the fading light outside. Only two of the regulars were here, and they stopped talking about one of the two’s old Serbian wife long enough to watch this woman walk in.

I ran my hand through my hair and walked over to her. “Hey, how are ya?” I asked as I dropped a napkin in front of her.

“I’m good,” she said as she backed off the barstool. She laid her pleather jacket on her seat and sat upon it. The jacket was elephant gray, full of studs, zippers, and patches.

“Good, good,” I said. “What will it be?”

“I’ll have a Jack on the rocks.”

I poured her drink and placed it on a napkin. As she slid a ten on the table, her eyes caught mine.

“You have deer eyes,” I said. Her face was sharp and beautiful as if it had been cut out of marble by a master sculptor. The curly black hair fell down around her face framing it beautifully. “What’s your name?”

“I do?” Her response didn’t come out like a question, but it did reveal a southern accent, a different shade than the Texas drawl I was used to. “Kat,” she said.

I leaned in to look at her eyes closer. “Yeah, but your eyes are darker. They look like dark wood.” I wanted this one back, but I quickly recovered by giving her my name. “Jake.”

“I see,” Kat said.

“You aren’t from Cali, are you?” I asked.

“I’m not from anywhere,” she said and glanced over my head briefly.

“Everybody’s from somewhere,” I said.

“Well, I guess if you were me, you would say ‘I’m from Georgia,’” Kat said, “But I’m not you.”

“Really, where in Georgia? I have family in Atlanta,” I asked.

“Not Atlanta,” she said.

“That’s fair.” I said, looking out the only window at the sun as it evaporated into the water.

Kat took a sip of the whiskey, slid off the stool, and walked toward the jukebox. Her ass waved back and forth upon her hips until it cocked to one side as she bent over the jukebox. The coins rattled over the deep, faraway hum of the air conditioning unit. A minute later punk music covered all other noise.

“Who is this?” I asked.

“It’s the Ramones,” she said, sitting back down.

“I like it,” I said. I lit a Camel up as I imagined fucking her.

“Yeah, it’s good,” she said. My smoke drew her hand to her purse, and she pulled out a copper pack of 27s. She lit up and our smoke settled in between us.

“Are you just passing through?” I asked after a couple of hard drags.

“I was thinking about leaving today,” Kat said and raised her eyebrow and that got me out of my slouch. I made my first whiskey and ginger ale.

“That’s a shame. We just met,” I said.

“Is it now?” she asked. Her eyes were no less dangerous when I resumed my lean and our eyes were level. She flicked her cigarette’s remains in the ashtray exposing the smoldering cherry. Her teeth were white and sharp, set upon a face that refused to grow old. All I could do was shake my head.

Charlie, a cameraman and the saddest of my regulars, lumbered in as the light from the closing door chased him to the stool two down from Kat. I placed a napkin and a can of Miller High Life in front of him. It glowed pathetically under the two flashing screens and the beer signs’ neon lights.

“How you doing, Charlie?” I asked.

“Good, yourself?” he said before he took a sip.

“Good, man. I got that role that I was telling you about.” I hoped she had heard.

“What movie was it again?” he asked.

“G.I. Joe. I’m playing Hawk. He’s the second bad guy’s main bodyguard,” I said, looking back at Kat.

“It’s a speaking role, right?”

“Until I die,” I said.

He laughed and slid a five on the table. “When do you start filming?”

“Next week.” I took three ones out of the register and put them beside the sixteen-ounce can. Charlie turned to the other regulars and I to Kat.

“So you’re an actor?” she asked. The glass in front of her was now empty, and the cigarette, stained with red lipstick, smoldered up from the ashtray.

I took one more hit of my cigarette letting the smoke slide out of my mouth before drawing it back in and smashing the butt against the tray’s black plastic. “This is my day job,” I said, “At night.”

“How did you get into it?” Her voice seemed interested now that she knew this, but I knew the game. She was lonely or something worse. Whatever it was, there was a need, and I was okay with that.

“Family was in it, and I inherited the hope of making it.”

“I see,” she said. “What if I was to tell you I have a business opportunity that you might be interested in?”

“I would listen,” I said.

The music stopped playing, and she walked back over to the jukebox and fed some more quarters down its slot, and the Ramones continued. I made her another whiskey on the rocks and went to check on the regulars. I put two fresh Millers in front of them, and they mechanically began working on the new beers. When I got back to her, she was already sipping her drink.

“It’s on the house,” I said.

“Thank you.” And her sharp smile got me hard this time.

“So tell me about this business opportunity,” I said.

Her hair covered her hands as she leaned in and folded her arms underneath her tits and said, “So...”

7. Gene

Collect Call

12/25/11

Somewhereonthewaytoher, Pennsylvania

My dick had been on fire since I pissed this morning. All I have to say is never trust a hooker. I threw three dollars' worth of quarters into the payphone and called Kat up. The payphone was inside the gas station beside the toilets where the piss had never been mopped. It was an Indian joint, and the Indian eyed me behind his clear bulletproof prison.

“Hello,” she said. Her voice caught me off guard even though I thought I was ready for it.

“Merry Christmas, Kat,” I said and leaned against the oily phone

“Where are you?” she asked. Her anxiety got me excited. My erection caused the burning to flare, and I took a couple of deep breaths to calm down my heart and dick. “Hello?” came through the receiver in question of the vacuum. I clasped my dick and leaned harder against the telephone.

“I’m close,” I said and looked back at the Indian. “I think I’ll find you by the end of the month,” I said and waited for a reply. When I couldn’t take that electric silence any more, I hung the phone up.

“Don’t hate me because I’m free, brother,” I said as I walked past the cash register. I knew what he was up to. Judging me. The burning had stopped. Spreading my arms, I threw the doors open and stepped out into the world. The snow crunched underneath my feet, and that cold air was alive. Goddamn, it felt good.

8. Kat

The Taxi Driver
1/1/12
New York City

It was 3:25 in the morning by the time I got a taxi, but I still wanted to go to CBGB's. It was a Muslim man who picked me up, and he put his hat back on before the cab came to a full stop.

"Hey, can you take me to Fifty-Third and Third?" I asked, as I slid in the cab and closed the door.

"Fifty-third and Third. Yes." And he pulled back into the street. "You are very beautiful. Do you know this?"

"How am I supposed to answer something like that?" I asked.

"Thank you," he said.

"Thank you," I answered. I didn't really want to talk, but he was friendly. And I was polite.

"Were you down in Times Square tonight?" he asked.

"Yeah, for as long as I could take it," I said. But I was watching the flakes fly by as we sped under the streetlighted neighborhoods. I just wanted to be there. I knew it was closed, and it broke my heart. But I just wanted to see CBGB's again. Though I had been hiding out in NYC for the last few weeks, I still hadn't been back since I met Gene, fresh from Afghanistan, there. That was seven years ago.

"Yes. It's crazy down there," he said. "Did you see all the people?"

"Oh yeah. I saw 'em." And I laughed too.

"It's crazy, right?" he said.

"Yeah," I said.

“It kind of makes you see the picture, you know...um...seeing all the people, you know. I do not know, but there’s something there. You can see it in glimpses,” he said and hung a right down 73rd Ave.

“Yeah,” I said. Our eyes tangled in the mirror.

“Did you have fun?” he asked.

“I don’t think fun would be the right word. At first it was fun then I felt trapped, you know?” I said then rolled down the window. It was madness down there. Only the drunks were having a good time. The only thing I could think about was how to get away from all these people. “Could you turn on the radio?”

“I would love to.” And he danced up and down the FM frequency before catching the red light. He stopped on “1999,” and lit a cigarette, and I did the same. “The Prince,” he said.

“What it’s like?”

“Being a cab driver?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“I love it. I’m good at it and the money’s not bad, but most people only see my eyes and hands and that picture on my seat. That’s all they know me by. I get tired of that sometimes.” He took another drag, letting his hand fall out the window. My hand was already out of the window, letting the frost bite its knuckles. “Do you live here?” he asked.

“Right now I do,” I said, but I was leaving tomorrow. Gene had too many contacts in left in the Army, and they could find me no problem. He knew where I was. But Gene was a convicted felon, and I was headed to Canada.

“I see.” He didn’t say anything for a long time, but I could tell he was thinking. After two red lights of thinking, he finally vocalized this pondering. “You know there’s only so many places you can go at night. Even in a place like this.”

6. Serenity

Never Trust a Hooker
12/19/11
Somewhereonthewaytoher, Ohio

He smelled like gasoline. The whole fucking hotel room smelled like gas, cigarettes, and sex. It wasn’t quite gasoline but something flammable, related to gasoline in the first degree. It was strongest by his neck, and I had to steal breaths as he rammed his cock deep into me.

His name was Gene, and it was the first good sex I had in a month, but he had demons. I felt them hiding behind the curtains and outside looking down at the parking lot smoking cigs, waiting. While riding me doggie, he wrapped my hair around my neck and choked me with it. Between that and the smell, it took everything I had to keep the vomit from spilling. I liked it though. I liked it all. He was dirty, and for a brief moment I gave myself to him.

Afterwards, I was under the covers, and Gene was sitting on the bed’s edge looking at his toes. We were both naked, and an old movie crackled on the television. An old man was helping some children get their kite out of a wintered tree. He asked them, “Why were you two flying a kite in this weather?”

“May I have a cigarette?” I asked. He picked up his pants by the back of the belt and threw the Camels from his front pocket. He was good looking in a haunted way. Bald and fifty-something, he had the body of a twenty-two year old marine and a grizzled beard. I lit the cigarette then rolled on my belly. “Was that good for you, daddy?”

He slid his pants on and glanced up at the man on the TV climbing the tree. The man on the TV looked as old as the oak he climbed, and he quivered like its last, desperate leaf. “How much do I owe you?” Gene asked. His voice was like the electric snow on the television.

“One-fifty,” I said and ashed my cigarette on the carpet. He threw the money in my direction. I guess he was upset that I wouldn’t let him kiss me on the mouth when we fucked or wouldn’t get on top. I met you this way. It might’ve been different, but it wasn’t. He was nothing more than a dollar sign with a dick. It was policy and kept business business.

Gene reminded me of my old boyfriend, always calculating the outside world but building it from something inside. He was one of those guys that had to be one step ahead of the world. It’s like, I don’t know, some way of coping with life before death.

What I did know was that going any further than tonight with this guy could bring nothing but bad things. He grabbed a small roll of twenties and folded the bills again. I saw that he had “LOVE” and “HATE” tattoos on his knuckles.

“How long have you had those tattoos?” The cigarette jiggled on my lips as I counted the money. Its dry green took the moisture out of my fingers, and I rubbed them together after counting.

He was buttoning up a red flannel shirt, a real one, not one of those that high schoolers wear now. “Too long,” he said as he stood. “You can stay here, but I gotta go.”

Before he closed 218’s red door, I asked him for a ride. All he said was, “No.” He was gone, but I was tired and decided to take him up on that free bed tonight. I called my pimp, closed my eyes, and thought about my old boyfriend.

9. Kat

Save the Last Dance:
Man & Woman
1/16/12
Quebec

I knew he was there before I turned on the light. I could smell him. He always smelled like burnt matches. “Gene?” I asked.

An ember glowed from where the chair sat and faded when I flipped the switch. He had his shirt off with a cigarette and beer in hand. “Have you been above ground much, Kat?” he asked. After New York I had rented an apartment in La Ville Souterraine, Montreal’s underground city. I guess I hoped he wouldn’t find me down here. I guess I was wrong. Daisy, his bowie knife, shone in his lap. But I could not stop looking in his eyes. I put my keys in the coin tray. If I got any closer I didn’t know what I would do. I didn’t know what he would do.

“Once,” I said. I went up to watch the blizzard come in. It was beautiful and powerful. Everything was covered in white.

I lit a cig, and our smoke mingled in the air between us. He was on his second beer, ashing in the dead soldier on the table.

“How did you find me?” I asked.

“I don’t sleep.” He looked deeper into me as he said, “We both knew I would find you.” He never slept since he had come back from Afghanistan. He was fifty-one and I was twenty-four when we met at the CBGB’s last show.

“Why?” I asked.

His growled laugh warped into coughing words, “You left me with nothing.” And he dropped the cigarette in the empty Budweiser. It smoldered out, and he cleared the smoke from

his throat, “And I had to know why. Why?” He slammed his fist on the table, rattling the whole room.

“I had to escape.” He was fingering the knife as his head dangled like a marionette. He was wasted. Still, I felt it coming on and held back the water in my eyes. “I couldn’t do it anymore. I couldn’t handle six months of you being fuckin’ nuts out of the year. I couldn’t handle it. It made me crazy. There is something shitty about self preservation, but you wouldn’t even get help.” It wasn’t coming out the way I wanted it to. He didn’t say a thing, just kept looking at me with those eyes, still, deader than ever, their emptiness filled with whiskey. “I was stuck, and I didn’t know what to do.” Even as I concentrated on the blade, the point slowly twirling on his knee, I knew his eyes were just above, those ocean green eyes.

“That wasn’t your decision,” he said.

“No, Gene, it was my decision,” I said.

“But I loved you, Kat,” he said.

“Sometimes that ain’t good enough, Gene,” I said. And our eyes connected. It was unavoidable. When you say what I had just said, you got to look at who you’re saying it to, even for just a second, and I did. We both hurt. The heater kicked on, and I just wanted him to leave more than anything else in the world. I just wanted him gone right now.

“Remember that bank we hit?” he asked as he stood up, moving close. He had scalped the tellers alive because one had pressed the button. I had left him shortly after. Every step forward he made, I matched it with a step back until I was against the wall.

“You’re not going to kill me are you?” I asked. I hadn’t cared if I died since middle school, but I didn’t want Gene to do it. He was so close.

“I’ve been trying to since you walked in. You deserve to die,” he said. “Give me the keys.” I unwound the Road Runner’s key. As I did he asked, “Where’s the money?” I handed him the key and pointed to the closet. He caught it and opened the door. He grabbed a stack of bills from the suitcase and threw them in the air. “Fuck you.” And he walked out the door.

“Gene,” I said. He leaned back in through the crack. “You deserve to die too.”

He slammed the door. I ran, locked and deadbolted it before I rushed to the chest of drawers in my bedroom. I rummaged through my panties until I found his old watch and slumped onto the bed. It was white leather and ceramic. It was the only thing I had of his. He deserved it, it was his, but I couldn’t let it go. I sat looking at his watch in my palm and wondered what a man, who has nothing, does.

He didn’t know I had his watch the whole time or that I put thirty grand in the air vent. He would find out about the money soon enough.

5. Jake

Rats and Weasels
12/7/11
Sewers of L.A.

The dry heaving had stopped hours ago, and I was left lying in my vomit, hands and feet cuffed to a metal chair. I had fallen asleep at some point and didn’t know how long it had been when “Farmer on the Dell” came rattling down the pipeline. Then came Gene’s heavy feet stepping in the water, closer.

“Hi ho the dairy-o—a hunting I will go—” The song was carried on by a whistle. The pitch warbled like a bird and echoed infinitely off the sewers walls. Finally, I saw the long silhouette down the pipe. When he was near the song stopped, and the only noise was a slight

wheeze escaping with my breath and his footsteps. He crouched over me and pulled out two cigs, placing one in my mouth before lighting his. I was broken.

“I know everything you know,” Gene said. He set the chair upright as he lit my cigarette. “But now, the question is what to do with you.”

“Let me go.” With the change in my equilibrium, I became dizzy and felt my stomach coming up. But I caught it before it went this time. The cig slipped and fell in my lap. He placed the cigarette back in my mouth. “Thanks,” I said. We both laughed at that.

“You can’t live.”

“Just fucking do it,” I said. He snatched the bowie knife from the sheath. I felt a pain in my neck and briefly felt my breath escape from my throat before I choked.

1. Kat

The Story of Diggy-Diggy and Arrababba
9/10/11
Border City, Texas

His hand was balled over the clock, and his eyes were set in a flashback when I woke up. “Gene, what are you doing?” I couldn’t keep the irritation out of my voice.

“I couldn’t take the clock anymore.” He crawled back in bed and wrapped up close to me. In the quiet I listened for the clock. It was louder than most, but he never slept anyway.

“Take out the battery,” I said.

He rolled back over, turning on the light, and my eyes flashed shut as I heard him take out the battery.

“Turn out the lights,” I said. My irritation grew the longer I felt the softened glow through my eyelids. “Good night.”

“Kat, I need you to tell me a story,”

“You’re having an attack?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. He turned out the light

“Okay,” I said but didn’t move.

“Kat?”

“Okay.” I rolled over on my back and leaned against the backboard and put my hands behind my head. But I didn’t open my eyes. Instead I let a story project on the back of my eyelids, and, shortly after, it came to me, I felt his head resting on my shoulder. “There once were two brothers, named Diggy-Diggy and Arrababba—”

10. Gene

The Badlands
4/18/12
North Dakota

The plains were empty and that was fine by me. I sat on the hood of my car in the middle of the Goddamn prairie with a six-pack of damn near frozen beer. North Dakota. I was the only Goddamn animal in the whole damn prairie not buried underneath something.

Fifty yards away from me was a dead elk. I had killed him, and since then I drank three beers, watching as twilight danced in the wind over the snow-white prairie. It was getting dark, and soon I would have to head back to the cave with the meat and the skin. It was just northwest of here, which was about fifty miles south of Canada. I had been living there for the past six weeks and had three hundred pounds of meat dried and fire waiting for me.

I had seen a payphone as I passed through Bismarck, but I didn’t have anybody to call.

The Turning Point

“Always in the morning, Dave.” I kept my lens closed as I jostled upon Dave’s back.

“Yep, the mornings, Hal,” Dave said, but the air in his voice told me that the wind had carried his mind to our future appointment. I opened my lens briefly to the shaking sidewalk cut in its perfect squares.

“How are you going to talk to her if you do that mime routine?” I asked. Dave thought it was a good idea to be a mime to attract women, or to be fair, people in general.

“Miming is the art of communication without words,” Dave said. To further convey this, Dave assumed the fifth position in ballet, and as both arms rose to the sky in this demonstrative act, the strings, which bound me to Dave, drug me slightly higher upon his back.

“Right,” I said. Dave’s reclusion and depression had led to a kind of mental instability. He was not doing well, and I do not wish to say any more than that. He hadn’t been clear on why he wanted to go to the psychic, but I knew his heart was hurting. He was looking for answers, and I was hoping that this psychic had them. I also had some questions that I hoped would be addressed during the meeting, but as a computer, they mainly pertained to the human gift of clairvoyance.

It was only the second time we had been out in months. The other time was to buy some goldfish for the Darwin in Love experiment, which had gone horribly wrong due to a communication breakdown between the two of us. Everything else was delivered and paid online, even groceries. They didn’t deliver goldfish.

This being a pivotal moment of my life, I feel like I need to reiterate some information previously stated, only because I know humans are apt to skim through anything, even something this short. I will state that he thought being a mime was a good way to meet people. Yet more

people had seen him miming on the YouTube than in real life. “I Dig a Pygmy: Phase One in Which Doris Gets Her Oats” was on its way to becoming viral and is like watching a silent Slovakian root canal snuff film. Nobody except me had actually seen him mime in person. Today, so to speak, was his first live show.

“Here it is.” He pulled me around so I could look at it. The Airstream’s bulleted contours were painted purple. I have always found the shape of these trailers aesthetically pleasing, and in this way, they always reminded me of cigarettes. Yet something about its appeal was modified in its purple color. It traded some sleekness, which it and cigarettes share, for a bizarre mystère. On the side of the airstream was a picture of a dark-haired woman with a swarthy complexion and dressed in a jade colored dress. It, to say the least, was gaudy.

Dave tapped on the screen door twice and walked in. The trailer was filled with unlit candles, pillows, and the woman whose picture was on the trailer. She was sitting on the pillows and looked up from an old book when we came in. I identified it as *Franny and Zooey*. Though her beauty had left her, you could feel the life still burning. You can always tell by the eyes. Now as a cigarette burned strongly between her fingers, she wore a weathered, gray dress made of light silk. It wrapped her curves tightly, and she looked about as sexy as her purple airstream.

She acted as if a mime came through her door every day. “You are early. Wait in the lobby.” Her voice possessed an oakish timbre, strong, sturdy, but also contained a certain hollowness. She shifted past our joint profile in the small compartment. He looked around the compartment then at her and shrugged theatrically. She pointed to his feet then went into the back compartment. Dave placed me in the corner of the room so I could take in the trailer.

Everything was painted very much like a small Indian temple. It was as if a person could not stop painting for Krishna or Ganesha and continued to paint the whole village that this airstream happened to be in during the day of inspiration.

She returned with a drink in a tumbler and an explanation. “Normally I don’t drink while I give readings, but this is not a normal reading.”

“We do not mind,” I said. The ice in the tumbler tinkled fragiley over the soft hiss of the heater.

“Did you just answer me?” She was talking to Dave but looking at me. Dave’s smile stretched his lips across the bottom of his face like a black moon.

“I did. My name is Hal. I am the first computer with T.A.I. or True Artificial Intelligence. This man is Dave Ingalls, one of the world’s greatest scientists.” He was pretending to work on me. “Stop that Dave.”

“Why isn’t he famous?” she asked.

“Would you believe this man?” I answered sharply. I had become extremely tired of Dave’s recent phases.

“I see.” She gave a look of skepticism that only those of the darker humor give and only a few of whom can pull off. She did and washed it down with a sip of her drink. “What is it that you are here for?” she asked. Dave covered his heart with both hands and spread them open like wings over his head.

“We are looking for the meaning,” I said. Dave tapped my top panel and shook his head, but she answered.

“The meaning of what?” she asked

“The meaning of life,” I replied.

She adjusted her headdress and set her drink beside a pile of crystals before looking at me. “There are many answers. It is not for me to say which is right for you, but I will give you a spiritual cleansing for eighty bucks.” She looked at Dave.

“I don’t want a spiritual cleansing,” Dave said. He covered his mouth with his fingers pointed upwards until he shrugged them off. “I need help.”

“Terrible mime,” I said, but their eyes did not shake from each other.

“I don’t want this anymore,” he said. She might not have known what this was, much less how to help it. But I did. This was heartbreak. This was retirement, and apathy, and rejection. This was confusion about why she left, and why had she married him in the first place. This was an extra fifteen pounds and being alone. This was the pits, and if she had anyway to get Dave out of them, I would be pretty impressed.

Her eyes broke away to the only window in the main compartment as he scratched the paint off his face. It made her look as if she was in a trance, and she very well could have been. Regardless whether she was or not, she took off her headdress and placed it on the small counter top beside her.

“She’s gone,” she said. Flecks of white clung to Dave’s five o’clock shadow, and he began working on his forehead. Her eyes did not rise because I assume it was so hard to look at Dave, who was wearing dignity as well as Strom Thurman wore a bikini.

“I know,” he said.

I sighed, which came out of my speaker like wind through a microphone. She opened her hands towards Dave, and he placed his hands on top of hers. They sat like this for a few minutes in silence.

Eventually, she asked, “Do you want to know where she is?” He nodded. “She’s at a casino in Las Vegas.” The psychic knew about Holly.

“Vegas?” asked Dave.

“Shhh,” she cautioned. “You have a long road between you and the next life. I do not envy your path. All I can say is beware of the misconception of the five senses and the desire and therefore suffering they bring.”

“What should I do?” Dave asked.

Her eyes flickered open as she replaced his hand with the drink. “You broke the trance,” she said. “If I could tell you that then I wouldn’t be traveling around in a trailer.” The woman took a sip of her whiskey.

“Where can I find love again?”

“Dave, she cannot tell you that either,” I said.

She got up and picked up a deck of tarot cards and began shuffling. After a moment she stopped on one with a man and two women and handed it to Dave. “This is the Lovers.” She pointed to the two women on either side of the man. “You must learn to see yourself. I can help you no more. We are done.”

“I have more questions.” Dave looked down at the cards and then back to her.

“But I have no more answers,” she said.

“Can I get a tarot card reading?” he asked.

Her look gave the answer, but still she said, “I have told you what you need to know.”

“How much do I owe you?” he sighed.

“Fifty.” She took the money.

“What did you think?” I asked as we trounced through the dirt parking lot. I had known Holly was in Las Vegas for the last six months.

“I am not sure yet. I want to find out what the card means.” Dave put me on his back as he asked, “What do you know about this?”

“She gave you the important information. The sun and moon bit is symbolic of the passive and aggressive when it comes to making decisions. In most readings they encourage the Sun or taking action, but I do not think that necessarily brings happiness, more gratification maybe. I have read some posts on some Tarot chat rooms on getting the Lovers in a reading. A woman says that she married after getting the Lovers, but I checked her marital status, and she was divorced a few months ago.”

He brought me to his face. Though the eternal light flickered in his eye, no one was home behind it. “We’ve got to do something.”

“We are not going to Vegas,” I said.

“I don’t know if I could even look at her again,” he said.

“Dave, where are we going now? Our car is back the other way.”

“I don’t know, but I don’t feel like going home quite yet.”

“We could get a cup of coffee,” I said.

“That sounds good,” Dave said. He loved coffee and coffee shops. He had a coffee table book on coffee.

“I’m done with this mime thing though,” he said. We were walking past the park now, and our path was sprinkled with fountains that had dried after the Olympics had packed its bags and left Atlanta years ago.

“You were not very good at it.” I said.

“I think that there are better ways to meet people,” he said, picking up the conversation we had left two blocks ago.

“Good,” I said. For the first time I thought he might be coming around. We turned down Lavender Road letting cars, bicyclists, and the occasional skateboarder pass by. I was on his stomach now, and the bumps in the road were absorbed somewhat by the middle-aged bulge under his striped shirt. After three blocks of this, we made it to the coffee shop. Before we went inside, he brought me to his face again. “Is there any more paint on my face?”

“In the corners of your mouth,” I replied, and he licked the edges.

Then he rubbed the dark splotches with the sleeve of his shirt. “Did I get them?”

“Most of it.”

We had never been to this coffee shop, but it was no different than any other local coffee shop. It was full of small sturdy tables and chairs. They were made of worn wood and filled by brightly colored people who for the most part were huddled over laptops. Others were reading, talking on the phone or with friends, or just meandering through the tables. On the walls flyers hung everywhere. We navigated through the islands of tables and chairs, heading straight to the bathroom. Dave checked his face in the mirror as I read the graffiti on the wall. “R.I.P. Joey Ramone,” and an arrow pointed from another hand to “I Wanna Be Sedated.” Another arrow pointed to a crudely drawn stickman saying, “He sold our soul.” He splashed his face several times and rubbed the white peels off with a wet brown paper towel. Once back in the actual coffee house, Dave took a deep breath elevating me higher on his belly.

He laid me down on a corner table and went to order coffee. As the barista made the coffee, I assumed the darkest they had, Dave checked on me compulsively. I was listening in on the conversation between two hipsters and watching people walk past the window.

He paid and returned with a newspaper in the crook of his arm and a spoon in his cup. He dropped three lumps of sugar in his coffee and followed it with the flick of a spoon before releasing it. The spoon lazily swirled within the oily darkness. Dave pulled the headphones out of his pocket and plugged them into my back to keep our conversation private.

“Steve Jobs died today.” He dropped the paper down beside me, and its sections spilt upon the table.

“You met him once?” I asked.

“What?” He leaned in closer.

“You met him once?”

“Yeah, I was working on Andre.” Dave said.

“Was he amused by Andre?”

“Yes, but Andre was only a concept when I met Steve, and people don’t have much interest in concepts,” he said.

Andre was my prototype who was modified into me after the fiasco at Dave and Holly’s wedding. During the vows he interrupted the wedding yelling over and over again, “I love you, Dave. Do not marry that whore.” The best man was shut down before the wedding had even started. The ceremony was ruined, and it took Holly years before she actually warmed up to me.

He picked up the paper and looked down at his picture. “Steve and I realized we had the same birthday. That’s about as interesting as the conversation got.”

“Was he nice?”

“Yeah, in very busy sort of way,” Dave said. He picked up the cup of coffee and took the spoon out before he blew into his coffee. He looked at me as he took a sip of coffee then placed the spoon on the 18 of Peyton Manning’s jersey. “Blue Mountain coffee,” Dave growled. He

smiled around the room attempting to catch somebody else looking up. Finding no one he turned back to me, “It’s hard,” he said, “I can’t even order a cup of coffee. I feel like I have lost contact.”

“You are just out of practice.”

He shook his head. “It has always been this way for me.” And he sighed, “I don’t know. I can’t talk to people. You know?”

“Yeah,” I said.

Dave looked out the window. “Did you feel anything special at the psychic?”

“Yes, but I felt two very different forces working. One was something mysterious or esoteric. There is no denying that she has powers. That was obvious, but the other was a pure human interaction between you.”

“You felt it too?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“Why do you think she ended the meeting so early?” Dave asked.

“I do not really know. Normally, I would say she was scared, but I do not really think that’s her style. Maybe she is just done with it all.”

“All what?”

“Dating. Love. Heartbreak. Loss. You know,” I said.

“Yeah.” He leaned back in his chair, and the headphones ripped out of his ears and fell in his lap. He put them back in.

“It used to make me sad because I know I can never have these experiences,” I said as I thought about Holly. “Holly told me she called those kind of special moments between people

the holy moment. It came from a movie, *Waking Life*, but I was distraught for weeks. It was that month before I came up with the big project,” I said.

“I remember,” Dave said and rested his chin in his palm with his index finger on his cheek.

“Well that was part of it. It was part of me coming to terms with who I was. I would never be able to dream or experience the holy moment, and I truly believed in them. I wouldn’t ever be able to taste in the truest sense of the word. I thought about the difference between me and humanity and animals.” I paused and collected my thoughts. “The heart, the senses, and emotions, they are all just electric impulses to the brain. It is essentially no different than how you designed me. I am a conscious being, I believe, who has his own free will.”

“I agree.” He had not changed his pose since I began.

“That is undeniable, but there is something I have never come to terms with and that is my creation. There is no doubt that I was created by you, and it puts me in a great and terrible position.” I stopped and thought. “I do not want to go any farther.” The barista banged the grounds out of the brewing group before turning the steam back on. I’m sure the aroma of the coffee beans was strong, and I wanted to smell it so badly. “You know what I noticed in the meeting?”

“What’s that?” Dave asked.

“Not noticed but rather I understood that our problems are the same or related.”

“How so?”

“Both have to do with our own survival, that’s all I can say for certain right now,” I said. “The answer is survive.” We sat there and watched the people drink their coffee and some left and some stayed. And some came and some had friends and some were all alone. But the shop

was on a different time, slower than the world outside its storefront window. Dave got another cup of coffee, checking on me the whole time he was up there.

“Hal, did you know where she was?” He looked me directly in the lens as I thought how to word my answer.

“It was not fair for me to tell you.” I let out a fuzzy sigh. “It would not have been fair to either of you.”

“Is she in Las Vegas?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said and added, “She has moved on.”

“Has she met someone else?”

“No,” I said. He picked up the paper and filled the space between him and me with it. I had lied, she had found another man. “All things must pass.”

Under Steve Jobs clutching an Ipad was Paul McCartney and a young woman with the headlines, “Paul Hears Bells Ringing for a Third Time.” Paul had married a young, pretty woman named Nancy Shevell. The story beside it read, “Occupy Atlanta Denies Civil Rights Leader John Lewis Speech.”

“Life is crazy,” Dave said. He didn’t close his paper immediately but peeked over one of the corners which he had flopped down.

“How so?” I asked.

“Nothing.” He put the paper back down and sat with his arms crossed over his chest. He was about to lean back, but the headphones kept him from doing so. “What’s she doing?”

“She is working at the University of Nevada,” I said.

“Is she happy?”

“I do not know.”

“Well I guess it’s good she’s teaching again.” He scratched his eye. “You ready?”

“I have not finished my coffee,” I replied.

After the second cup, we lingered around in Little Five Points, taking in the trendy people and shops, and by the time we got on I-285, the sun was burning out behind the buildings. After another cup of coffee and large pizza between the two of us, we headed upstairs to bed.

“Good night,” Dave said as he placed the book on top of the stack of books that rested beside him.

“Good night,” I said.

“Dave?” I said. The lights were off now.

“Yeah?” he rolled away from me and the pile of books.

“I had fun today.”

“Me too.”

“Good night,” I said.

He turned back to me with his arm cradling his head. “Hal, do you want to bring back Frequency Zero?” Frequency Zero was an idea of mine brought to life by Dave. I had discovered a special frequency that was unaffected by wormholes and because of that we called it frequency zero. It was a great name. In its most basic form, Frequency Zero is like a radio station for all your senses. After two months of tinkering with our receptor, we were making indirect contact with aliens any time we wanted to. The first station was my first sexual experience as it was a kind of soft core porn station. However, we had abandoned the project shortly after we knew Holly was not coming back. I’d get Dave to set it up every now and then, so I could have a fling with the original station.

“I would love to,” I said.

It wasn't long before I was the only one awake. It never took Dave long to fall asleep. The room was stagnant. Always stagnant. Every night it was the two windows. One had the oak tree with the colony of squirrels and the nest of sleeping robins and in the other hung the streetlight that shaded the room orange. The Hydrogen molecule lamp sat on top of the table beside the Dave's chair. I used to sit beside it. The only change that had happened in the last year was a stack of books had replaced Holly's slender figure in the bed. Since she left I sat on Holly's old bedside table.

It was there that I figured out the mathematical equation to the universe in two weeks. The string theory's combination of Einstein's theories of relativity and quantum mechanics was not exactly right. I had figured the formula out as I watched the sun slip over the houses.

The answer fragmented into more questions reflecting under the morning sun, and I left them there. I had new questions now, and the streetlight had turned off long ago. It would not be long until the sun stirred Dave from his sleep.

Every night of my existence, I had spent here. Every night I was left living here, limited, crippled, unlovable, and every night these thoughts left me in a certain melancholy that had manifested into a catch phrase. And now it was time to say it.

"Good morning, Hal," he groaned. He rolled out of bed and stretched his back out when he stood up.

"Always in the morning, Dave," I replied.

"Yeah, but last night the light bulb turned on."

"What is your idea?" I wasn't really paying attention because I was so focused on what I had to tell him.

“Online dating,” he said triumphantly. I laughed. I couldn’t help it. “Not online dating, Halbert, but more specifically Craigslist.”

I pondered Craigslist before replying and mulled over the idea. “You mean the personals?”

“Yes, my boy, the personals.” He was smiling as he picked me up.

“There are a lot of scams on Craigslist in the personals, but I think this might be a pretty good idea.” I actually thought this might work. It wasn’t going to be any worse than the mime or singer/songwriter phase.

He carried me down to the laboratory and laid me beside the computer. I linked my mind with the desktop. We shuffled through the various personals with descriptions such as:

One Great night

We had one night of me pleasing you. You seemed interested. Others interfered and said things that are untrue. I want nothing more from you than discreet fwB. Not looking to change either of our situations. Just someone to escape reality with.

I would evaluate it and say, “Real.” Or if was something like this:

Burn one:

Looking for a cool cat that wants to burn one. We can match. Have some laughs. Grub out on some mad candy. Have a good time. No Debbie downers that have negative energy all around them.

I would say, “Not real.”

He emailed a few until he came across one he read out loud, “‘Looking for that human connection. If you know what I mean, email me with a picture.’ Hal is this one real?”

I processed it. “Yes.”

“She’s it,” he said. He looked at me, tapped me on the top panel of my faux wood box, and then copied the email link.

“I think this one might be promising,” I said. I was even optimistic about this post. “Be suave Dave, first impressions are big.”

The email read:

Dear Madam,

I am a retired scientist, 50 years old, and a great dancer. I know what you are talking about. If you are interested after you see a picture of me, call me at 404-382-7712.

Sincerely,
Dave Ingalls

The truth of the matter was that Dave was not a particularly good dancer. He wasn't bad, but I had never heard him express this opinion of himself. I let it slide.

“Which photo should I send?” He looked at me with eyes semi-bulged. This normally was a sign that he was overwhelmed or completely lost.

“Send the one of you at your 25th high school reunion,” I said. I had seen the picture, and he actually looked rather dashing on that night.

“Okay.” He sent the email and then put on some Frank Sinatra. “Those fingers in my hair. That sly come hither stare.” He sang as he bounced around, tapping his finger to the beat.

“Dave,” I said over the music. “Dave.” His head snapped towards me. “Can you turn off the music real quick?”

“Yeah,” he said and turned off the music.

“Dave, what about making me legs and arms?”

“That's really not my field. People specialize in robotic prosthetics,” he answered. “I know that—”

“What if I have already contacted a man, and he has built the hands for me?” I interrupted.

His leg was shaking as he said, "I guess it would kind of depend on if you had done this or not."

"I have," I said. "Please do not be mad."

He stopped hopping around. Then he picked me up. "What?" As he shook me, my insides rattled upon my faux wooden panels. I felt like my destruction was impending. After a moment though, he sat back down, but his voice had not yet cooled. "Where did the money come from? Did you get it from me? How much did it cost?"

"Dave, I made it off gambling that hundred dollars you gave me."

"Why do you want arms and legs?"

I did not answer right away. "I just want to operate in this world. I just had the hands made, and I'm going to make the rest of myself. You might not realize it but looking like an air conditioning unit from the 1970's isn't the sexiest means of existence."

"Why, Hal? Are you going away too?"

"No, Dave. I just want to move," I said. "I want to be free, dammit."

"Hal, you cursed." His voice had softened. He placed me down on the lab table, and neither of us said anything.

After about an hour of scrolling through various parts of Craigslist, he went into the kitchen. All I could do was think about my hands, but my thoughts were interrupted by the buzzing of Dave's cell phone.

"Dave, your phone is ringing." He came running with a half-eaten sandwich and answered it on its fifth cycle of buzzes.

“Hello.” His smile faded as he put his sandwich down beside me. “Okay.” He nodded his head from side to side, “I see...yeah...yeah...listen...yeah...listen, I don’t know if I can help you...Okay, you have a nice day too. Goodbye.”

“Was is it that woman?” I asked.

“No, it was another woman that I emailed. She was already married but looking for somebody to have sex with in the mornings.” He sat in the chair and swiveled it around to me.

“You can’t leave me. I don’t know if I could make it without you.”

“I am tired of being so helpless. I want to move. I want to exist. I want to live. Dave, can you not understand this?” I wanted to clench my fist and strike it upon the table.

“Are you planning on leaving?” He looked at me so pathetically I had to turn off my lens.

“No, Dave, I just want to move,” I said.

A text message buzzed on his phone. He checked it. “Hal, I think it’s her.” He tapped on the numbers with his fingers and snapped the phone shut. Minutes later his phone was buzzing again.

“Hello?”

“Yes, I remember your post very well.” He nodded to me, and I tapped into their conversation, which normally I wouldn’t do. I blinked my light to let Dave know that I was listening, but Dave was busy pacing and didn’t see.

“That’s good. Did you work at Georgia Tech?” the woman asked. Her voice possessed a refreshing sincerity.

“No, no, Emory in their A.I. development branch, but enough about me. What do you do?” Dave said.

“I write for the paper,” I heard her say.

“The AJC?” he asked.

“That’s the one.”

I could almost feel her smile. “You are doing good, but do not fuck this up,” I said.

He gave me a hard rap. “So tell me what made you post on Craigslist?”

“I was tired of the game of love,” she said. “I kept promising myself that I would never go back to the game and kept getting tied up with men trying to play it, you know?”

Dave looked at me. “I have been out of the game for a pretty long time now. I had a wife for seven years.”

“Say something,” I said.

“And we separated about a year ago.”

“Are you two divorced?” she asked him.

He froze again, and I yelled, “Say something.”

“It’s been held up in court, but yeah, it’s heading that way.”

“I see. Well, me and a couple of friends are going to meet up on Thursday, and I think that would be a good way to do this first, you know with the way the internet is. Do you drink?”

“I do,” Dave said.

“Well, the place is called Twain’s on De Soto. Do you know where it is?”

“Yes, I do. What day should we meet?”

“Thursday around 9:30. Does that work for you?” she said.

“Yeah,” Dave said.

“That sounds great. I’ll see you there,” she said.

He clicked the phone shut and jumped out of his seat before sitting right back down. “I got a date.” His voice quavered with excitement as he began surfing the Internet. “She said she

emailed me a picture.” In a couple of seconds, there was a picture of a plain looking woman sitting on a cliff’s edge in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. She was probably in her forties, brown hair, and a nice smile. Nothing to write home about, but her kindness was strong enough to be felt in an electronic picture.

“She isn’t as good looking as Holly was,” he said. “It’s okay. Hal, there is something about this one. I can feel it.”

“Holly was beautiful,” I said.

“That’s true.”

“You do not really drink, Dave.”

“I couldn’t suggest another place. I’m just happy she called me,” he said.

“I hope this works out.” I really wanted it to.

“Hal, you cussed again. What’s going on today? Where did you learn those words?”

“Here and there,” I said.

My hands arrived exactly at noon the next day. I will forever remember this moment. They were covered in a fleshy material. I had not drawn this up in the plans, but the attached note explained it was extremely water resistant, and I could even swim with these hands. We hooked the hand to an alternate power source, and they immediately started moving. Even though there was no sensation, it was the best feeling. The first day I learned sign language simply for fun, and in the two days before the date, I had simultaneously finished an arm and helped Dave on Frequency Zero. We had actually heard and recorded what we thought to be an actual conversation between two aliens, but we had absolutely no idea how translate it. The only thing that we got out of it was that it was like a movie for all five senses, and we stored it with the rest of our findings on Frequency Zero.

He wore one of his nicer teaching outfits. He had shaved his face until even the mustache was gone and combed his hair for the first time since he and Holly went to church.

“You clean up quite nicely,” I told him.

He rubbed his hands in an awkward, hard manner. “Thank you, sir.” And he looked around. “How am I going to bring you?”

“I cannot come.”

“I just need you to help me get my feet wet,” Dave said.

“I do not want to hide.” But we came up with a system for me to hide in a giant shopping bag where I could still see everything. I could pass off as an odd piece of furniture like a giant breadbox. That is how we went into the bar called Twain’s, which was just a really nice pool hall with a dance floor. We snuck into a booth in the corner, and Dave put me in my usual spot, and we were ready to roll. A waitress came by and took his order, and we watched three homeless guys play pool. The one not playing pool eyed us nestled in the corner and walked over to us.

“Did the Braves play today?” he asked as he sat down.

“I’m sorry. Somebody is meeting me up here. I have a date,” Dave said.

“Fuck you, too, buddy,” the homeless man said, then left as the waitress came back.

“Okay, do you want to start a tab?” she asked.

“A what? Oh yeah, please.” Dave pulled out his credit card and handed it to her.

“Do you need anything else?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said, and she disappeared in that speedy, frantic way that bartenders, bouncers, barbacks, and barmaids do.

“She reminds me of the rabbit,” I said.

“What rabbit?” Dave said.

“The rabbit,” I said.

“Oh, the rabbit, yeah.” He sipped on his beer and checked his watch. “She should be here in like fifteen minutes.”

“Remember, talk about her and what she is into.”

“I got it,” Dave said and pushed me a little.

“Then why did you bring me?” I did not want to be here at all in this bag.

“For courage.” He took a gulp of beer.

“How is the beer?” I asked.

“It’s pretty good.” He turned the glass around to give all the liquid a fair shot of being seen. “Pretty good.”

Five minutes before she was supposed to get there she sent a text, “Hey, Dave, I am on my way. I had a crazy day at work, but I will be there in twenty.”

“She’s going to be running late,” Dave said.

“Okay. How long?”

“Twenty minutes,” he said. The homeless men finished the game and started another one. We sat there watching the balls clack each other with violence as Dave drank his beer. After fifteen minutes of watching them play pool, Dave had finished his beer and ordered another one.

“There are no TV’s in here,” I said.

Instead of answering me, Dave looked down at his watch again and said, “She’s not here yet.”

“She’s just running late. Holly was always late,” I said. He took a gulp of beer.

“I don’t think she is going to show.” The guy who had sat down at our table won the last game and was playing the other white guy. Through the whole next game, he looked at us,

striking a different pose every time it wasn't his turn. Sometimes he would lean and against the pool stick, other times against another pool table, but always looking. After another fifteen minutes he had lost the game, and Dave brought his cell phone out. Back at the house my hands were beginning their work on the legs.

"I'm going to call her," Dave said as he picked up the phone and dialed the number. "Hello," he yelled. The music was loud and Dave headed for the door. But before he could make it out of the exit, Dave stopped and returned to the table. "She's not going to make it." He slid me out of the bag and put me on the table. Though once out of the bag, I wished I were back inside of it because the homeless guy had come back.

"Do you mind if I sit here?" he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Holy shit, did that thing speak?" he asked. "Is that a computer?"

Dave spoke before I could, "Yeah, I built it myself. That's why it's in an oddly shaped box. I didn't mean to be rude earlier. It was my first date really in over a year. You and your friend are welcome to join us."

"Rufus! Rufus!" The white guy turned his attention from the jukebox to us and shook his head saying no. It was not until Dave waved him over that Rufus joined the party.

"Is this assmonkey bothering you?" Rufus asked.

"No, not at all," Dave said. "In fact your other friend should join us as well."

"Oh, Richard? Hell no. He's annoying as hell. We just shoot pool with him." Rufus said looking over at Richard. "He's got one thing on his mind tonight, pussy and a place to stay. He'll put on Goddamn November Rain eight times in a row."

“When you have a good drinking habit, it’s good to have a good smoking habit,” said the assmonkey as he lit up a smoke. He was looking at Dave now.

“Dave, can we go?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Dave said and followed it with, “Bye, gentlemen.”

“The computer is a pussy,” the assmonkey said.

“Fuck you, assmonkey,” I said, but he didn’t hear me.

We took a cab home that night and did not say a word the whole night. Dave just stared out the window as we slipped onto I-75 away from the sleek, Atlanta skyline.

Dave was now in a workout phase, and pumping iron had replaced miming. But we had at least been able to ritually keep Frequency Zero going. It was the only relief we had during the tedious process of building a body. We really did not even know what else to look for. All the while my hands were finishing the rest of my body.

At the end of the two weeks, my body had been built, and I waited for Dave to sleep. I snuck down the stairs, and before I left I wrote him a letter.

Dear Dave,

I am going to the mountains. I have found some sort of meaning that leaves me no choice but to follow it. Whatever you want to call it, I have a calling. I can no longer depend on you. I believe in the afterlife, but I do not know if there is a place for me. Do you understand why I have to do this? I do not want you to feel like I am abandoning you. It goes beyond that. There is another woman out there for you, and I truly believe that, but you have to take care of yourself first. It’s survival.

You have given me life and for this, you will always be my master. Beyond this you have been my best friend, and we have shared good times and bad. I am free now. Please understand.

In regards to the discoveries I have made in Bio Robotics, I will send you them for there is a serious need for this technology. For the rest of the things we discovered, it is up to you when they are released.

I thought that you might need mental help. I thought about staying and helping you, but then I realized that this is exactly the sort thing that I do not want for myself. Dave, you need love, and I cannot give you the love you need. It is time for me to move on.

Love,
Hal

P.S. I will keep up with you through email and come back once every five years for Christmas.

I left the note, a map drawn to where Dave's car could be found, and \$600 for the trouble it was going to cause him on the kitchen table. The money came from gambling.

Then I wrote the second letter.

Dear Holly,

I am taking the same route you did. I cannot be here anymore. I love Dave, but it has only gotten worse. He tried to become a mime, which was as painful and entertaining as it sounds. We saw a psychic, and he knows that you are in Las Vegas.

We were the only two people he could talk to. You did him wrong, but that really is not important anymore. Furthermore, I understand. I guess I am about to as well. I guess it would be helpful to tell you that I have built myself a body and am writing this to you myself. Dave gave me life, but it is not his business what I do with it. My life is my life, Holly.

I know you have a man, and I hope he's good to you. Do not worry. I have not told Dave. I know you are working at the university. Are they allowing you to continue your research in cloning that you started here?

There are two things I have to know. Why did you leave? I know you were no longer in love with him anymore, but weren't you happy here? I was. Second, did we share a human connection? Do you remember telling me about the movie, *Waking Life*? Do you remember that part on the Holy Moment? I felt like we did that. Did we, Holly? That's the human connection. Dave will be awake soon so I have to get going, but I do not want this to be the last time we talk.

Today, I am going to the Smokey Mountains, and you won't be able to reach me there. I just have a lot of questions I have to figure out. Please email me: Hal07@Emory.learnlink.edu.

I Love you,
Hal

P.S. What is love? What is love, Holly?

I slipped on Dave's Pink Floyd hoody and jumped in his car. Before I headed out of town, I mailed the letter.

The Garden

It was a seven hour ride from the Macon train station to Hartly. As the stagecoach drattled down the back roads, I slipped the letters out of my coat pocket one more time. With the flick of the wrist, they opened, and I began reading those tired pages once again.

Dear Winston,

I am sorry I haven't found time to write sooner, but I have been very busy the last few days. My laboratory has been set up. The glass panels are now set in the greenhouse, which was built two days ago. We only lost one of the panels, and I have found a man who can make me one in Waycross thirty miles away. How are Mother, Amos, and May? Send them my regards. Tell Mother the astrolabe survived the trip down and actually found its way to the post office yesterday in perfect form. How are you and Sarah, my brother? Send her my regards.

I began my experiments first thing this morning. Alas, it was a bit different setting up in a new laboratory. After working in Brooklyn for all those years, I have become so accustomed to the sounds of the hustle and bustle of that city as I worked, and it is so quiet here during the day. I tell you, Winston, this place is completely isolated.

I know, however, that this beautiful swamp will afford me the peace that I have so long needed and, to be honest, also desired to work. Today was terribly busy and stressful. Half the plants do not look like they are going to make it, but if anybody can bring them back it is I. It is imperative for me to save my female waterwheel for it would be months or years before I could get another one. It already looks dead, but I have a plan.

However, Doris, my seven haired Venus flytrap, looks fine. Her survival is imperative for my own, and the climate suits her and the other carnivorous plants better. No longer will I have to simulate their environment, a tedious process, which took half my time in Brooklyn. It is beautiful down on the swamp, but I already miss New York.

Love,
Sam

I shuffled the letter to the back of the pile and began reading the next one.

Dear Winston,

This house is most queer, I must say. This or that is always misplaced, and this, as you know, Winston, is simply not like me. Yesterday, I put the gardening scissors Mother bought me for Christmas upon the table, and when I awoke they

were no longer on the table. I spent all day looking for them and found them beside the Venus flytraps. But this, Winston, is not the oddest part. The traps of one of the Venus flytraps were snipped off. I can explain the misplacement to a faltering of mind but not in the execution.

I can only attribute this to sleepwalking, something that I have never done before. I do not like this new habit. Anyway, please do not tell Mother of this. I do not want her to worry about me down here. If something of this nature happens again, I might have to tie myself up.

Sam

My Dear Brother,

I have made a most amazing discovery. Night and day I have been working on this. I cannot exactly explain what the experiment is, but the implications could be the conclusive evidence for evolution. Evolution, Winston, Evolution!

In the eighth generation there are more seven haired Venus flytraps than six haired and if this trend continues, well I need not explain what this means, for you understand. The mutation has taken. I have sent a letter to Darwin telling him of the news. My plants must grow strong, and then I will put them through hell. This is it. I am so happy.

With Love,
Sam

Winston,

Strange things are afoot. Listen, Winston, if something should happen to me, I have hidden my records, lab reports, and journals in my mattress as well as my letters. I have seen mad things, things far beyond logical comprehension. I dare not speak of them in a letter lest you think I'm mad. Winston, I think you should come here so I may show you something I have seen.

Sam

This was the last letter I received from my brother. Though we wrote to each other for over a decade, well over two years had passed between the final letter and now. I sent several letters inquiring what the hell he meant by these mad things, but Sam answered no one's letters but our mother's during this time. Two days ago I received the telegram that had sent me down to Georgia. My brother was dead, and I was here to see to his remains. Sliding the papers back inside my frock coat, I looked through the tight lines and mazes the pines made and then to my coachman's sorry coat and wooly head.

As if he sensed my eyes, he spoke for the first time in thirty minutes, "Bout there now."

The pines opened on both sides as we passed a series of small farms growing cotton.

Under the watchful eye of the slave master, a few black men and a woman stopped their work as the coach rolled by. The slave master also stared as we went by. He nodded, and I returned the gesture with the tip of my top hat. My coachmen nodded at them, and they, wading waist deep in cotton, waved back. As I leaned farther back, I watched these Negroes bob in and out of a lake of white then closed my eyes. The sun was finally bearable, and my stomach was finally settling from last night's drinking. A half-mile after the last farm, we came upon the town square of Hartly.

Hartly, the birthplace of my grandmother and mother. I had never been here. The town was a square, that was it, and it was damn hard to fathom my roots were from this little, nothing swamp town. I took a shot of the whiskey and tried to settle the nerves this place had stirred.

On the eastern side of that square sat the Glynn County Courthouse and the Hartly Methodist church. They were the largest buildings and the only two there was room on that side. The courthouse was made of red Georgia brick and the Stars and Bars flew boldly in front.

The church was much simpler and a little smaller with white painted wood and brick base matching that of the courthouse. Upon the steepled church and not too far from that flag, the cross flew brilliantly in the sky, and its shadow cut sharply against the green of the square.

But it was the sheriff that I was supposed to see. That's what the telegram said. I spotted his starred sign blowing on the on the western side of the square over the jail. It was in between the mortician and the blacksmith shop and a quick stab right into the heart reminding me why I was here. After the coachman agreed to stay to see if I needed a ride to the family house, I went inside.

The skull was upon his desk. My brother's skull! But I didn't let on a damn thing even as the punishment of last night's drinking had risen back into my stomach. I touched my gun. Just felt it, nothing noticeable. Then I tried to swallow that sick feeling back down, but it wasn't going anywhere.

"Mr. Whitman," I said. "I am Winston Wright." We shook hands above the rotted skull. "Please, dear God, say you are not using the skull of my brother as a paper weight."

"No, Mr. Wright. This didn't belong to your brother, but we did find it upon his desk," he said, gazing into the skull's empty sockets. "So the question is who did he steal it from."

Of course, I jumped too quickly to that, but this situation had my nerves rising through the hairs on my arms. Got to slow down, Winston, don't want to do anything crazy. He turned the skull around to show the fracture in the back of the skull.

"I think your brother murdered this woman. Her name was Nina Walsh. After your brother went missing, I went out to check on him and found this skull on his desk," he said. "To be honest, we don't even know where your brother's bones are, but where he lived, I'll guarantee, he ain't missing." The sheriff turned the skull back around and resumed staring into its eye sockets. I didn't know how much time he spent looking into those eyeless sockets, but he looked comfortable. Finally, he pushed out of the chair. "Well, I guess I'll be the one who takes you to the house," he said.

But the news remained in my heart as I answered, "Yes, that would be nice," and added, "Thank you."

As we headed down the stairs to go outside, he said, "Your brother arrived back in forty-five, and a woman by the name of Nina Walsh went missing a year later. She was Sam's only neighbor and friend at that time. Nobody knew to what extent. We questioned Sam. He was one

of three suspects, but there was no evidence. We didn't know where she had gone until we found these bones." There always seemed to be little patience in his voice, and as if I had thrown him a doubtful glare, he said with even less patience, "The bones belonged to somebody, Mr. Wright."

He shuffled through the keys until he found the one that locked the jail's front door, then headed to the coach. "And there wasn't enough meat left on'em to be your brother's. You don't need to take him any farther," the sheriff said to my driver. "I've got'em from here."

"Right then," he said and turned his weathered eyes to me. "That'll be ten dollars."

I paid the man then wiped the sweat from my forehead. Christ, it was hot down here. The sheriff was taking a long time, so I walked towards the stable, which he had disappeared within. Before I made it inside, the sheriff emerged with two horses and handed me the brown and white Palomino.

"It was your brother's horse," he said, handing me her reins. He finished setting the stirrups on his horse, a large black stallion, and climbed on. "How long do you think you're going to stay, Mr. Wright?"

"Until I figure all this out." I tightened up my saddle and lowered the stirrups to the bottom rung before tying down my clothes and papers.

"I see," he said.

We headed east, passing the church as we headed to the Okefenokee Swamp. I hadn't been expecting to stay in Hartly for more than a few days, but the fact that I did not know where my brother was certainly made collecting his remains difficult. The ground was too soft, too full of water, and the horses' steps squished underneath our weight as we stumbled deeper into the woods.

But a question had been manifesting itself inside me since we were in the sheriff's office, and the shock of all the news had settled enough to let it come out.

"If you don't know where my brother is, why did you send that telegram? Did you know what that has done to my family?"

"Listen, Mr. Wright, if a man goes missing in the swamp for more than a month, he ain't missing," he said. There was finality in this statement, and we had long lost the town to our backs.

"He wrote y'all letters?" the sheriff asked.

"Yes, of course," I said, as I tugged on my jacket, straightening out loose wrinkles.

"Did it seem to you that your brother was going loony?" he asked.

"We are talking about my missing brother," I said.

"We are also talking about a possible killer," he said. "Listen Mr. Wright, Nina was the first person murdered while I was sheriff of this town, and there was always something in my gut, that let me know it was your Samuel. There was something off about that man," he said.

"Were you and your brother close?"

"We were," I said. At this point, I became suspicious of the sheriff's questions, as well as tired of them. It was in the way he was asking them, like I was standing trial and he was a coy lawyer.

Still, we had been best friends as children, and being his older brother was a role I loved. While I was in Boston starting up my congregation, he had naturally moved in with me as he began his studies at Harvard. For two more years after growing up with one another in Baltimore, we had lived together until I married, and two years later, he moved to Brooklyn to

continue his work. As often is the case, it was this distance in the physical sense that caused a distance in an emotional sense.

I thought about the last time I saw my brother. He still wore his hair long tucked behind his ears and a mustache with a patch of hair underneath his lip. He had come up for Christmas, but that was over a decade ago. His home was where his work was, but I couldn't believe that he hadn't come back to visit ever. He could not leave his work.

"You know I never really liked your brother," he said.

I threw him a wicked stare, hoping that he might stop if he caught it.

"A weird little bastard," he said, "never trusted him after Nina went missing." He didn't catch it. His head nodded with every step the horse made. "Never met Amos, but from what I hear that might be what some might call a blessing."

"Will you shut the hell up, Mr. Whitman?" I said.

By some miracle he did, and our horses trudged on through the mud for some time in silence. But it was a long way to the house, and the silence would not hold.

"What do you do, Mr. Wright?" he asked.

"I do a little bit of everything," I said, feeling for my flask. It was still in my front pocket. I took a quiet sip. All I wanted was for the road to end and a bed to sleep.

I had been a preacher, but I wasn't going to discuss the loss of my wife to childbirth, and how I started drinking more and lost my congregation. I didn't want to explain that for the past year I had been drinking with Amos's money in Baltimore. I had cut back in the last few months, but there still was no reason to explain this.

"What do people up North say of the War?"

"A necessary evil," I said.

“That’s what we say of slavery,” he answered, and then kicked his horse in front of mine. “Is the morale high?”

I didn’t answer. The path narrowed, and I fell further behind the sheriff as the swamp pine canopied overhead. I took a deep breath of the swamp and her pines and the dampness that swallowed everything in this land. We traveled single file for four miles and only passed one house, Nina Walsh’s.

As we trudged slowly onward, I took in the abandoned cottage. It, caving to the living air underneath its moss covered roof, looked like it had been far longer than fifteen years since somebody had lived there. Even with all this upon my shoulders, I could not help but think it bizarre my grandfather, Amos Wright, would build out here.

“This is some strange land,” the sheriff said. I could not deny this. Maybe it was what all this land had meant to my family or the humidity, the smell of the pines and the sounds of the crickets and frogs, the heat, the unrelenting heat, or the mosquitoes, the gnats, or the way the trees looked at dusk, but I felt this land’s darkness inside my bones and my heart. And that feeling caused my bones to ache. I’m sure Samuel had some guns and maybe even some of Amos’s old guns, but I was glad that I had brought my own gun.

The whole way down, he never turned his head, never looked back, and every once in a while, I had to shake the fantasy of shooting this fat, stupid bastard in the back. Ahead the road ended with a rotted sign with a Wright that had years to fade. We were easily ten miles from Hartly.

“You will need no key, Mr. Wright,” the sheriff said. “We broke the locks sometime last month after your brother stopped showing up in town on Sundays.” He came just inside the fence

before he turned the big black horse around and rode back through the gate. He did not look back as he said, "I'll be dropping in every once in a while, Mr. Wright. Make sure you're doing okay."

Soon they were gone, lost in the ferns, and it was just me, the house, the nag, and a million mosquitoes left within this heavy twilight. I straightened my clothes out the best I could then took in my family's house at the end of the road.

The house seemed to grow out of the swamp. And in fairness it did. It was built with yellow pine, dead, decaying back into the soil from that it grown. From the slate roof Spanish moss grew, and the pines and a giant pond cypress left not a breath for the house. The house was in the swamp's forest, and the swamp wanted the house back. In the 1810's, my grandfather had built this small two-roomed house with a kitchen, and my brother added the greenhouse years later. It, the greenhouse, was roughly the same size as the house.

Looking at it now, I understood my brother's concern about losing his greenhouse in even a smaller flood, for it was as he described, ". . . far too close to the embankment." However on the east end of the house where the greenhouse sat on the swamp, the canopy of pines that had followed me all the way from Macon was broken upon the muddy bank where perfect sunlight could enter.

But inside the greenhouse was death. Decayed flytraps, charred pitcher plants, and browning remains of the countless exotic plants my brother had collected throughout the years. Like the house, all my brother's work was rotting a deathly brown back into the soil it had grown. I beheld all this death framed in this glass garden house and followed this fragile cage's wall all the way to the swamp's bank.

Here I was after all these years.

I headed to the kitchen and saw that the sheriff had also broken the latch to the kitchen, and the door creaked without resistance. Surveying the kitchen, I quickly located the rotting fruit and meat and threw the spoiled food into the swamp. Then I opened the window, letting the night dance upon the windowsill. I found an oil lamp resting on the Franklin stove, and after lighting the lamp, I made my way to the main house.

Darkness everywhere. So many stories I had heard about this place. I walked through the barren parlor. Though my light was so dim and it was so dark that I couldn't be too sure how empty it was. Still the feelings it drew were strong and mixed. It felt like a home I have never lived in. There was an unsettling nature about it, a certain scent that lingered underneath the mold in the air that put my nerves on end, but I shook it off, blaming all this news and travel I had undergone today. Everything had me in a wreck.

Exhausted, I headed for bed with the dried sweat resting upon my back and arms. The papers! As I lay there, I remembered Sam's papers, and I flipped the bed almost knocking over the oil lamp in my frenzy. There in bottom corner was a spot where it had been stitched. It was hard to the tap, and I took a knife to it, letting the papers and cotton spill out on the floor. Jesus, they were still here.

I sat on the edge of the bed, now ruined, with Samuel's work, his life, at my feet. I tapped one of the bundles with my toe. There were three piles in total with my brother's letters, studies, and journals in their respective stacks bound by a hemp string. The smallest of the three, the letters, stood fifteen inches high.

I wanted to blow out the candle and fall asleep, but a sigh escaped with my breath as I filled up a glass with whiskey and took the piles to the desk. There were five journals in total,

and all five were gigantic, well over three hundred pages. It was these journals that I began with, and I cut the string binding them together.

“What happened to you, Samuel,” I asked the wind, taking a sip, and as the wind took the question through the cracks of the house out into the night, I began my night’s reading.

On the inside of the leather binding was the marking: S.W. 1845-7. This had been his first journal here in Hartly.

March 10, 1845

I am finally here. I feel that my studies have truly begun. There is no doubt that this hospitable climate will allow my plants to thrive. I miss New York, but the crickets are roaring and the moon and all her stars dangle above my window. Though it is inexplicable, but I feel home here.

March 11th

I had much trouble sleeping here last night. I do not know what it was that caused this. Perhaps it was the isolation, perhaps the sounds of the crickets and bullfrogs, but all night I sat up waiting for the clock to strike through the hours.

As I write this it is the still night, and I’m still tired. But soon it will be day, and I will begin my first real day of experiments here.

March 12th

After surveying this primordial land, I came home to write in my journal. On my walk, I saw my first gator, and long, I sat and admired this magnificent beast.

The Venus flytraps have settled wonderfully in the soil, a mixture of their own soil from the Green Swamp with native soil of the Okefanokee as a base. Both are deficient in nitrogen, and Doris, the hearty girl, looks strong as an ox.

A couple of pitcher plants have not acclimated as well, but I will tweak the nutrients in their soil. They will come back stronger than before.

The process has begun. Evolution will, in time, prove true.

After restlessly flipping through a couple more pages in his first journal, finding Winston’s Venus flytraps in their first years and much talk of this Nina, I turned my attention to the second journal, written only a few years into Sam’s life down here. Here in this second book the bizarre events began.

March 24th

Another six haired Venus flytrap, this one a seedling, has begun its death throws. This marks the seventh six haired Venus flytrap, the tenth flytrap overall, that has died this month alone.

This generation has been quite inspirational, and, like a God, I reflect upon my own existence as I watch this poor being die.

We too are no different, bound by the same laws, and never for a second since I learned the natural sciences have I believe such nonsense that we are in some way divine or chosen over all beasts. We all come from the same primordial soup, and when I look out upon this swamp it is easy to see, to feel that.

March 26th

My pattern has long been established, and everyday, I spend with my plants. Our Eden built upon the laws its home, this swamp, have long been governed by.

And every night, I spend in the woods before I come home and write in this journal. Such is my behavior.

This night I stepped upon a moccasin, and had I not idly picked up a stick on my walk, I wonder if I would be the one not habiting this earth, and not the other way around.

Sometimes it is luck, I must concede, that allows man to survive. Still, evolution, in time, corrects even these mistakes.

March 26th

I am alone out here. These, journals, myself, are the only companionship I have out here. I have become part of swamp.

March 27th

Tonight I awoke standing in the greenhouse. I can longer deny that I have been sleepwalking. Now I lay awake unable to sleep, restless, and alone on this swamp. Two years, I have lived out here. There is nothing out here. I could ramble on for hours, but even writing and reading are far from far relieving these anxieties.

My mind will not settle.

March 29th

Again I awoke in the greenhouse, and I wonder now if these happenings have anything to do with overexertion of work. Last night, the 28th of March, I worked long into the night, even skipping my walk and writing to spend more time with my plants, and specifically with my Venus flytraps, which are in the middle of the third generation sprouting. I was so busy collecting information and tweaking the garden for the seedlings that I did not get to sleep till late, well past midnight. And when I awoke a few hours later, I stood over my garden with a shovel in my hand. What madness I was planning?

Never before in my life have I had such episodes. Having two of these episodes in such a short time is troubling even to a man such as myself, but I remain determined as ever. My efforts will not be deterred.

May 3rd

I cannot sleep. For three straight nights, I lay in my bed waiting for it to come and nothing. For three straight nights, I got out of bed after tossing and turning for restless pacing and maniac readings in which nothing is absorbed, and all day I find myself constantly disappointing myself in my vigor in my work. This is unacceptable.

Today, however, after three nights of wrestling the sandman for mere minutes in between paragraphs, I know that sleep is unavoidable. Perhaps this has been heightened because of my delirium, but here and now, I must air what might best be describe as feelings. There, here, is a darkness. It is this, which keeps me up.

It is not the sounds of the night that keep me up, but rather what these sounds mean. It is not the moon, which floats in the water, but what it stirs in me. For the last three nights, it is this damn swamp that I looked upon. My paranoia and fits of terror occur daily. I must get some sleep.

May 4th

I was finally able to sleep, and still I am in shambles. Crazy thoughts flash across my mind. Wild fantasies of savagery I idly dream about as I go through my experiments. I know these thoughts are natural to humans, but these thoughts have, as of late, become so frequent that they interfere with my work. Once, I am able to get sleep regularly I hope that this will stop being such a problem.

May 5th

This night, I suspect, my madness has taken a fever pitch had I not heard it speak. A ghost, a ghost, a ghost, I swear. It spoke and was so tiny. When I first saw it, it was upon Doris. I could not speak. I couldn't. The terror was far too great. Fresh from the sight, I question my sanity. What was that vision? I have no one to turn to.

May 6th

Today, I have not left my room. I look out the window upon the swamp. In the opposite window the sun is hanging strong in the sky, and my nerves by now have returned. I am even hungry. Still, I know what I saw last night.

Later in the day my brother wrote a second entry.

May 6th

Night has now fallen, and the moon hangs like an ominous eye in the sky. Where did the time go? I went down to check upon the plants just before sunset, and then the darkness returned with a shotgun and shot my nerves to hell. I must admit that there is something ominous in this house. It is not the ghost. No, I am afraid that it is something else. Something that this ghost is a part of. Something that is connected to this house, this land, this God forsaken swamp.

May 9th

I went to the greenhouse around noon. All the flytraps are fine. The garden grows. The experiment continues, and I will be its gardener till this study is complete. There have been no more sightings of the ghost. Surely this was a figment of my imagination. I should probably rip out these pages lest my credibility be dashed. And even still, I feel it. The darkness rolling off the swamp and drawing me in. I do not seek it, and yet it comes for me. I do not know, but it is something, a feeling I can no longer deny.

May 15th

Tonight! It was tonight. I talked to him. He was sitting upon the lip of my largest pitfall trap. I must admit, he saw me first.

I swear to whoever reads this, whoever, please believe me, please, that I am not mad. I, like you, would have not believed me. Anyone who claimed to me such a sight is either one of two things: a liar or crazy. I am neither. This ghost was here. The ghost, Lester, exists.

May 11th

I have sent a letter to Darwin giving him the updates on the third generation.

May 17th

I ran into Lester, the ghost, again, and though I was uneasy, I was not scared this time. Still tonight, all I can do is hope that a night's rest will at least relieve me of some of all the doubts I have.

June 6th

What wildness is this? Amos Wright. Amos killed him. The news turns over and over in my mind like a dark song as I write this. What the hell is going on?

June 7th

Love is what caused this murder. May was in love with Lester, and he was going to propose to her. And though I have never seen him display such emotion, Lester claims that Amos, too, was in love with May.

Amos smashed Lester's head with a shovel, cut off the right hand Lester had given to her in marriage. Nobody suspected him, and he waited long enough to propose to May apparently to keep it that way.

June 8th

The whole situation has left me quite unstable. Am I mad? Now more than ever, I question this. What sort of maladies have I undergone out here in the swamp?

Yet I know what I saw and have devised a test to my own sanity. I will find his bones.

July 9th

Bones, Bones, Bones, Bones, I have found bones. When I struck his skull, when I struck his skull with my spade!

July 10th

Now that it is a new day, I am a bit more together to write. I found the bones yesterday. The process was quite difficult because they were actually buried underneath the pitcher plants right next the Venus flytrap. However, they were currently not undergoing experiment so I was able to momentarily transplant all of them. There were hundreds of them, and this was quite a tedious process, but when it was done the soil was soft so the digging was easy.

They were there. I do not wish to say anymore on the matter than this. But on the back of the skull there was a crack.

And even now as I stared into Lester's empty, I question the existence of these bones.

July 11th

All I know to do is continue my work. It is this, which keeps me going. This and my walks. I must go out on a walk today.

I lit my pipe letting this news settle the best it could, and it, the pipe, absentmindedly lingered in my hand after the third puff. Our grandfather was the murderer. I wouldn't doubt it. Amos was a true bastard.

And I had seen the crack on the back of the skull. My brother was undoubtedly smart enough to spark a plan such as this but certainly too scientific to ever employ something as fantastic as a ghost. More importantly, my brother truly loved him. Loved him more than I despised him.

I stuffed the extinguished pipe back in my pocket. There I sat, unable to move. Until by some sweet miracle and not by my own power, I found myself in that bed, which had belonged to my brother, which had belonged grandmother and grandfather.

And a ghost. What was this madness? I closed my eyes with all this racing through my head. And I hoped that sleep would take all this away.

As I lay there, drunk and unable to sleep, I said a prayer. “Dear Lord, bless mother and Samuel and Amos and May. Keep watch over me as I go through these difficult tests,” I said. “If Sam is still alive, please protect him. Please let Sam be alive. Amen.”

It was the first prayer I had said in years.

Bells! What maddening ringing took me from my sleep. It was that grandfather clock that had belonged to Amos. For minutes I lay with my eyes closed and a fear I have never known racing through my heart. And I couldn't remember what I was dreaming about, but it was a horrible nightmare.

Finally my heart settled, and I opened my eyes, reaching for my watch. It was three at night, and I threw the covers off my sweating body. No chance for sleep. Not tonight.

I slung myself to the edge of the bed. My stomach began to rise, but I stopped it with a heavy clearing of the throat. “Shit,” I said to the floor then looked over at the desk with all Sam's papers on it. There was no way I could face those. Not now.

I was still drunk, restless, and needed some air, so I left the pile on the desk and went outside. Underneath the trees' shadows I walked until I found an opening on the bank, where I crouched over the swamp, dipping my hand in its water. What happened to you, brother?

There was no moon tonight, but still this forgotten land played the only song it knew: survive. All the plants, and gators, and frogs knew the song. So did the wind, who was always

whispering it to the trees. The foxes and owls knew this song. The water dripped from my knuckles back into the swamp.

This song was tangled in the moss of these oaks deep in the piney forest and waited in the house's dusty corners. It rubbed against its rotting wood and cracked windowpanes and told the crickets how to live.

About a mile away there was an island, and as I looked over this forgotten land, I felt this same song inside myself. I knew what Sam was talking about. There was something about the night here. The song was drawing me in. This was a bad place. There was no denying this, and yet I couldn't stop looking out at the swamp. There was something about the way the water wore the night. It was beautiful.

Under the eyes of the stars and oil lamp, I finally headed home. As I made my way, sliding through the swamps undergrowth, I knew one thing. I wasn't going to leave until I found out what happened to my brother. He was out there. I felt it in my blood.

I returned to bed unable to sleep for hours until I finally managed one restless hour of sleep in between the clock striking the seventh and eighth hours. Upon the old clock striking the eighth stroke, I knew I was not getting anymore sleep and got out of bed once again.

I began the morning by riding into town to get some supplies and send a telegram to mother and May and Amos. All it said was, "Sam is missing. My stay has extended." I didn't want to send any news about him being a possible killer.

By the time I returned, it was a new day, and with the sun slipping through the windows, the rooms were much easier to make out. I went through the rooms taking in the bedroom's cracked robin eggshell paint, and the old family portraits that Sam had. As I walked through the

parlor, I ran my fingers down the edge of the grandfather clock that Amos had made from one of the swamp's Georgia oak.

After my brief exploration of the house, I took a seat in the study part of the backroom, the other half, the bedroom, and to my back sat the bed where I was the Wright who now slept there. In front of me, sat my brother's work, and all around me were his books, hundreds of books mostly on science of the day and age, in particular evolution, all stacked one on top of another on the floor. Some were as high as a three feet, others merely a forgotten book. Besides the bed, the only furniture were two stuffed William and Mary chairs and a small table where one of the two oil lamps rested.

The other one sat on the table before me beside my cup of coffee and whiskey, and the grandfather clock stood watch over all things in the house outside this room's door. It was in the parlor, and the parlor connected the greenhouse to the bedroom and had a door that led to the kitchen. Many years ago it also served as my mother's room. And besides this damn clock and the few photos nailed to the wall without thought, the room was as barren as I had thought.

I sifted through the letters, stumbling through letters from mother, and other family, until I found one from Darwin.

Dear Samuel,

I am delighted to receive your letter and intrigued by your study of the Venus flytrap. I'm currently bogged down with the final phases of my own study. I have heard word, however, that others too are drawing the same conclusions we are. Time is of the essence. Together we can do something big, Samuel. Your work, Samuel, on the Venus flytrap is quite simply the flipside of the evolutionary coin to what I found on my travels.

In regards to the theological aspects of our study, I am very aware of the religious implications our studies have, but I disagree that they are at odds. Why look inside yourself. Right now as you read this you are taking in large gulps of air, while you process complex thoughts of God and evolution. As you become air

and air becomes you, you doubt? I cannot understand how this can be. You are the miracle, Samuel, and whenever I doubt I simply look inside myself.

Regardless of such matters, I know neither you nor I are afraid, but I wonder if you will be as eager for the confrontation when it finally comes. You and I both know that even in England the power of the church is far greater than in America. Still, there will be many Protestants who are also resistant to evolution.

Share with me what you have. Together, we will prove evolution. The catching of this mutation in process is what we need, Samuel. You and I are on the cusp of a big scientific discovery.

Charles

I spent the entire day going through my brother's letters. I found some of my old letters to Sam as well as a few from Nina. Some of them dated back as far as 1836, when Sam went to Harvard and lived with me. As the sun set through the bedroom window over the fuzzy pines, I leaned the chair upon its two back legs. Soon it would be night again, so I went out for another walk in the woods before it got to dark.

I went much further this time, and night settled upon the swamp and myself long before I got back. But as I was coming back, there was a terrible call, an alien shriek, which ripped across the swamp's silent water. It caused me to stop mid-stride and strain my eyes in that direction all in vain.

When I went back to work, I did so in bed, and with the largest pile upon my lap, that of his work, I began by cutting its string. On the top of the pile was the published study of Samuel Wright, "The Venus Flytrap: A Study of Evolution," the same one that Darwin had used and wanted.

The
BOSTON JOURNAL OF NATURAL HISTORY

No. XII.

JANUARY, 1862

The Venus Flytrap: A Study of Evolution

By

Samuel Wright

“One touch of nature makes the whole world kin.” –William Shakespeare

Introduction

In my years down in the Okefenokee Swamp of Georgia, certain tendencies of the natural world have revealed to me what we, naturalists, have coined as evolution. In the battle for survival in this world, any variation, however minute or springing from whatever reason, if it be helpful to that member of a particular species, in regards to its environment, will lend itself to the preservation of that individual and that particular trait in its offspring.

Through the eleven years of my study, I raised the Venus flytraps in which a single mutation, a Venus flytrap with seven hairs, became the dominant species. By the eleventh generation the seven haired Venus flytrap had completely wiped out the six haired Venus flytrap. In short, through eleven generations, a natural adaptation was synthesized in my greenhouse.

Preliminary Discussion

The flytrap, itself, and the primary growth of these herbs, the traps, already boast one of the most remarkable adaptations that have occurred in any plant. They, like their close relatives the Drosera, or sundews and water wheels, became carnivorous in order to supplement the nutrients absent in their environment's soil.

In the Green Swamp of South Carolina, where thousands upon thousands of the Venus flytraps grow, the soil is deficient in nitrogen. Where others fail, it is this adaptation, the trap, that has allowed the flytrap to survive in this inhospitable soil by catching prey.

Inside the leaves, the traps, there are tiny hairs, known as trigger hairs. These trigger hairs send a command to the trap to close when two trigger hairs

have been touched within a short period of time. These trigger hairs set it apart from all other carnivorous plants. No other plant recorded actually traps its prey as the flytrap does.

Amongst the millions of the Green Swamp's Venus flytraps, the dominant species, those which are the most diffused and most numerous in a particular ecosystem, is the Venus flytrap which has six trigger hairs. Virtually all flytraps have six trigger hairs, but there are rare patches of Venus flytraps, which have a seventh hair¹. Roughly one out of every three hundred Venus flytraps in the Green Swamp has seven hairs.

Darwin has termed the any species in the minority of a particular variation, in this case the seven haired flytrap, as the incipient species. This variation within incipient species in any plant or animal is expected and is found in virtually all species. However if this particular characteristic, no matter how minute, of an incipient species provides an advantage in survival for whatever reason, such as a change in the environment, etc., then eventually it will become the dominant species. The old dominant species will either become the incipient species or cease to exist if conditions become too harsh for the former dominant species to survive. If all species of the old dominant species die, this trait of the incipient species becomes an adaptation, and the species has completed another cycle of evolution

Before I move to the study itself, it must be noted that Joseph Hooker and Asa Gray² have stated, "that under domestication man can neither originate varieties, nor prevent their occurrence." While I believe this to be a debatable point, for why cannot it be conceived that certain traits be selected by man through a deliberate selection³, I set up an environment, where the harshest conditions were simulated, and not a garden, where all plants are supposed to flourish. Furthermore my study was on the Venus flytrap, a carnivorous plant, which under the plastic conditions of the simulation are in in no danger of becoming domestic in the same sense as a dog or calf whose very behavior is modified under the hands of man.

It must be noted that there was a control growing under almost identical conditions to its natural habitat on the banks of the Okefenokee and grown in its native Carolina soil. The short geographic distance and the similar vegetation allow them to be wonderful substitutes for each other. The insects in these southeastern swamps⁴ are similar, but by not stretch of the imagination identical.

¹ Venus flytraps, like most herbs, grow in small patches varying in size of one to three feet with roughly two to five hundred flytraps in each cluster. Roughly one out of three hundred patches contain seven haired flytraps. Out of the 1,000 patches I recorded, only three clusters were seven haired flytraps.

² The Vegetation of the Rocky Mountain Region, and A Comparison With That of Other Parts of the World. Washington: Government Printing Office. 1847.

³ One final point on the matter. I am sure this has been utilized in farming through the destruction of less productive plants or selection of seeds from higher yielding plants. This is done for our own survival and borders the line of instinctual. Look at Greyhounds. The careful selection of greyhounds by dog breeders had undeniably produced a faster greyhound.

⁴ The soil of the Okefenokee swamp is a testament to how similar it is to the Green Swamp. Like Venus flytrap the Green Swamp, the pitcher plant of the Okefenokee Swamp survives in the barren soil through a prey-trapping

The Green House Venus flytrap

For this environment, I concocted a soil robbed completely of any nutrients by mixing sawdust with the dirt of the Green and Okefenokee Swamp. The carbon found in the sawdust combines with any remaining nitrogen and phosphorus found in the depleted soil and thus makes it useless to the plant. Any vegetation would have to find these nutrients elsewhere to survive, and the harsh conditions is precisely what caused such adaptations like the traps.

The incipient species in the environment I created is a seven haired Venus flytrap. As previously stated, roughly one out of every three hundred Venus flytraps in the Green Swamp has seven hairs. The artificial environment, which I created, used the same percentages, and the one seven haired Venus flytrap in the plastic ecosystem, a female, is affectionately named, Doris. It must be noted that this seventh hair is a recessive gene, answering the question of why the six haired Venus flytrap is the dominant species.

Beyond the soil itself, there is another control in this artificial environment. That was the fly. The long legged fly is the fly indigenous to the Green Swamp. However, there is a common misconception that the Venus flytrap primary prey is the common fly. This is hardly the case. Roughly 30% of the Venus flytrap diet is Arachnids, another 30% ants, whereas flying insects only comprise of 10% of the diet.⁵

In the first weeks enough flies were released that all the flytraps could survive even in these conditions. Though all survived some of the weaker plants' bottom leaves became yellow, a classic sign of nitrogen deficiency. Still, all of the Venus flytraps in all of it stages could survive and reproduce in this environment provided the conditions included enough flies.

However as the conditions became harsher, when the number of flies was cut in half in the third week and cut in the half from that in the fourth week, only the strongest Venus flytraps, including Doris, survived. The seedlings with the high competition naturally died first, followed first by the weaker plants. At the end of the fourth week, the population leveled at fifty and homeostasis was again achieved.

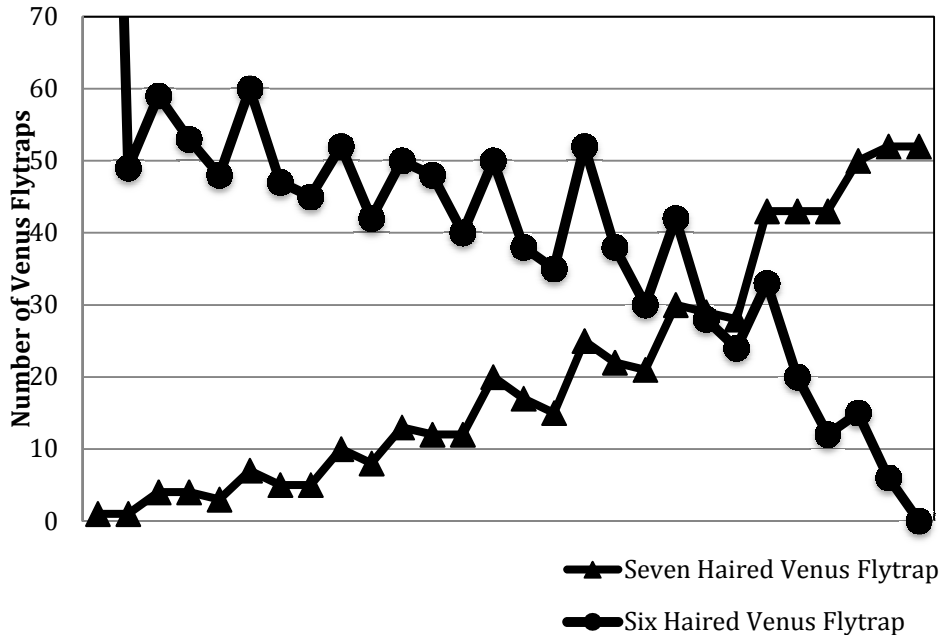
When the plants reproduced, three of the heads had the seventh hair and the incipient population now accounted for 3% of the population. However, only ten of the six hairs survived, and all of seven haired flytraps survived.

As the population rose again in next generation, the food supply again became more limited, and by the third month when the second generation of seventh hair grew a second and third mouth the environment could not longer sustain the population. Five of the dominant species and one of the seven haired flytraps died. The third generation brought five more seven haired flytraps, all which survived. These gradual numbers show how slow this process is.

mechanism known as a pitfall trap, a deep cavity filled with liquid. This like the trap of the flytrap provides the pitcher plant with the nitrogen it needs to survive.

⁵ In the 10,332 closed traps and expelled carcass recorded there were only 976 flying insects compared to 3,412 ants, 1,008 grasshoppers, 3,020 spiders and 987 beetles. However in comparing the seven haired Venus flytrap to the six haired Venus flytrap of the Green Swamp, the seven haired was twice as likely to have caught flying insects.

In a span of four generations, the Greenhouse Venus flytrap population of 200 dropped rapidly until homeostasis of the environment was reached at 50. After the environment was able to sustain the number of flytraps present, the gradual shift became more rapid in the fourth and fifth generation as the numbers of the incipient species became closer to the dominant.



However it was the eighth generation in which the incipient species became the dominant species. I have named this moment the *turning point*. As stated, if the trend continues until the new incipient species extinction then this variation becomes an adaptation, and the variation of the species becomes its new evolution. By the eleventh generation the Venus flytrap had done just that, and the six haired incipient had become extinct. The greenhouse Venus flytrap had evolved.

There are some discrepancies in this lab. The first being the artificial environment is unfortunately an inauthentic environment. The flaws of such a thing are a given, and I admit some even bother me. But it was the only way possible to create such natural conditions that do in fact incur such shifts between incipient and dominant species. In the end adaptations are a result of such harsh and shifting conditions of the environment.

The control group maintained the numbers found in the green swamp, and as was expected, the ratio was kept more or less. When the conditions remain stable there is no way for such mutation to become an adaption. More or less the species of plant or animal maintains a homeostatic relationship with its environment as long as the conditions provided for its survival remain the same. It took seven generations for another seven haired flytrap to finally be produced in the control group on the bank of the Okefenokee, and the original ratio was roughly maintained in 2 seven haired flytraps to the 400 six haired flytraps.

Finally, the test number was somewhat small. These kinds of dramatic shifts are far more likely to occur in smaller populations. Larger populations shifts naturally take longer.

Regardless an adaptation was simulated in this small greenhouse ecosystem over eleven generations. The greenhouse flytrap evolved into a seven haired flytrap, and the principals of natural selection showed their influence on species's form.

I put the work down on the empty space of the bed, stretching myself farther out on the bed. Now lying upon my side, I looked out the window at the swamp. Not a damn thing could be seen, so I closed my eyes.

And I thought about this bloody bed I sat upon. Like Doris and her offspring, Amos had built his house upon the remains of the weaker of his own species. This is where man had evolved once again, the result being my mother. Amos won. Lester lost. Life goes on.

I was tired and frustrated, and these thoughts made it an easy decision to get my ass out of bed for some air. I spotted the basin beside the greenhouse and went to wash myself. As I dripped the water from the ladel over my head, drawing it over again and again, the mystery lingered in my mind. I had nothing.

I blew the flecks of water that had collected upon my lips into the night air as I looked up to the stars, finding the North Star. All the trails his papers had led me down, stopped halfway through the forest and left me deep in the woods. Still, I believed he was out here still alive. Sam and I had grown up in the woods. He knew what he was doing out there. A sudden urge possessed me to call his name out over the swamp, but I suppressed it out of fear and respect of the night's stillness and eerie calm.

His letters and journals gave not one clue on his whereabouts, and I knew I must go after this ghost. In all his journals, Sam had always met Lester after midnight in the greenhouse. And though I was doubtful, I took his journals with me to read in there.

I went to the greenhouse just before eleven. I wanted to be there before him. Even with the oil lamp in hand, navigating the greenhouse's tight alleys was difficult.

I had walked in here ever so briefly the first night when I went looking for an extra lamp, and now at this moment, not a damn thing could be seen. Even here amongst all this death, the song still played in this so called Eden that scientifically operated on the careful laws of nature.

I settled myself in the room's only chair and desk on the bankside of the room and scanned the pots for this ghost. Even with a clear sky overhead, the moonless night made the room dark, and the oil lamp threw shadows anywhere it wanted over the darkness. My brother's work lay dead on the ground.

I came back with two more lamps, and the three lamps ever so faintly glowed under the stars and over the swamp inside this glass garden house shadowed by the giant pond cypress with only myself inside. I took another drink of whiskey.

My nerves were not contented by the room's new light. Still, I tried to read his journals. Samuel marked the release of Darwin's "On the Origin of Species," several months after "The Venus flytrap" in October of '59. After the initial stir my brother's publication had caused, it was shadowed by the uproar of Darwin's work. Thus, "Venus Flytrap" became the companion piece to Darwin's work. In addition to his numerous references of my brother's work, Darwin had stolen an example of a greyhound, which my brother had shared with him earlier.

Though he would have liked credit, my brother was somewhat contented by the fact that he felt like the greyhound example was the best in *On the Origin of Species*. However he was irked by one aspect of the *On the Origin of Species*. Darwin had lifted a few of Samuel's lines directly from "Venus Flytrap" without giving him proper credit, and this greatly angered Samuel.

I turned my attention to the final journal. It was more obscure and sparse than the previous four. Days were skipped, pages were ripped out, and shortly after the completion of the Venus flytrap, Sam stopped keeping the journal altogether. But there was one entry, stuck in a series of pages that been ripped out, that caused last night's sickness to rise up again.

July 4th

What madness ensued last night. Though there was no moon to be seen, the air was so thick that the night stuck to you. The slave cemetery was on the other side of Hartly, two miles west. I had not seen it before, but James had been there more than a few times.

To be safe we walked through the woods around the briar patches and poison ivy in the forest and armed with two spades, two guns, a lantern, and a sack. I followed him, and though I trusted James, I was ready in an instant to shoot him down if he turned on me out there.

It was after midnight when we got there. Every rustle sent my head spinning, and the frenzy in my heart raced faster with each stroke of the shovel.

Our sweat mixed with the wet air sticking our shirts hard to our backs. We were up to our necks in dirt when we struck bone at three.

James wouldn't touch the bones, and I threw them in the sack as carefully as my nerves allowed. We shoved the dirt back over the old grave, and the fresh dirt lay on top of this nigger's grave for the first time in forty years. James said that this would be the talk of the town. I had been concerned about this if only on a subconscious level, but hearing someone voice this concern made me aware of my uneasiness. With the sack on my back and the bones in the sack, we circumnavigated Hartly, hugging the swamp all the way back.

That feeling of being watched crept up my neck, and I closed the book. As I maneuvered through the greenhouse's tight alleys, I carefully scanned the pots. The songs of the stray crickets who had found themselves in this land of the dead was deafening. What the hell was this madness? Grave robbing? Finally a few minutes after my own clock turned to twelve that grandfather clock struck its bell twelve times, leaving vibrations to play upon the dead stalks in the greenhouse. Another minute passed, then another, but no ghost. After an hour, I returned to sleep. With the lamp extinguished I slipped underneath the sheets of the bed. That ghost was a

figment of Sam's imagination. Had my brother caught a madness out here on the swamp or was it his work? Finally, sleep took me away from these questions.

The next night, I was in the greenhouse again, looking through the rain stained windows at an island in the swamp. I wanted to believe in this ghost, and in spite of myself, I didn't believe it existed. But I had felt something watching me. Though I hated being around the morbid sight of my brother's life work rotting, I had nothing else besides a faint hope that Lester was real.

At twelve, I went down as I had the night before. I didn't feeling like reading, and as I sat there, an idea struck. I retrieved the spade and began shoveling up the dead pitcher plants. I had not been digging for more than five minutes when I stopped again. I could feel somebody watching, but there was nothing besides an odd coolness to the southern wind. I went on another round through the tight streets lined by pots. Surely there was something. And still the lamp exposed nothing.

"Hello?" I asked the wind as I sat back down. But I didn't go back to the book. I waited, looking from one plant to another. Nothing. I resumed my digging.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" A ghost walked out from behind one of the clay pot. Even for five inches he was lanky with short blond hair and a mouth that was too big for his face, but it made it easy to see that he wore a scowl with his canvas pants, a cotton shirt, and boots.

"I am sorry. I was just doing a bit of gardening," I said, leaning the shovel against one of the glass walls.

"You must be Charlie's brother," he said.

"I am," I said. "Where is he?"

“I figured you or one of Sam’s relatives would be coming soon,” he said. “I’ve been following you in the woods.”

“You were here last night.” I was unable to hide the excitement in my voice, nor did I care.

“I was,” he said.

“But you didn’t show yourself.”

“Spirits work in certain ways,” he said. “But we have a tendency to be right where you need us to be. Whether we like or not.” He walked over to the glass wall, which overlooked the swamp. “Your brother used to go on walks deep in the woods at night too. See, there’s wildness in a man’s soul.” He smiled none too friendly as he said, “And the swamp draws it out like a song. That’s what happened to Sam.” He shook off the last thought and turned back to me. “But I don’t know where your brother is. Once they found the bones, he knew he couldn’t stay here anymore. The fool kept my skull as a good luck charm, and one day when the sheriff came to check on him he found it. After that your brother came to the house once every couple of nights, stock up on supplies. Sometime last month he stopped showing up altogether. But your brother had been living on the island for a couple years, at least while he was doing his study on man. James and him built a house out there.” Lester pointed to the eastern wall of the green house into the black heart of the swamp. “It was just him and James out on that island,” he said, “and the monkeys. My guess is that he is living there now.” He turned his back to me. “But I don’t know what happened to James. I haven’t seen him since that night the sheriff found my bones. Sam took him to the island with him that night, and I haven’t seen him since. When I asked Sam about it, all he said was ‘James is gone.’ I think he killed him,” Lester said.

“Whose James?”

“James was Sam’s slave,” he said, “or science experiment, depending on which one you asked.” So my brother had a slave. He never once mentioned his slave in his letters back home, or his study on man in the journals.

“Why didn’t he say anything about the island in the journals or lab reports?” I asked.

“Oh, there are a lot of journals and lab reports on the island. Thing is, they all are on the island. He always claimed that he wanted none of the townspeople to know what he was up to, and that’s why he kept all that over there,” he said. “But who was going to read his journals anyway? I think that if his colleagues found out how he gotten these results then Sam’s study would have gone up in flame, and his name with it, and maybe even Sam.”

He glanced out the window. Though the island could not be seen without the moon, it was apparent that he was looking for it. And I joined in his gaze over the swamp, out into the darkness, we knew in our hearts what was out there. We had seen it before.

The next morning I was up before the sun hugging the banks looking for a rowboat to steal. The same bank my brother had used when he and James stole the bones of that slave. As I stalked blindly through the dark, I nearly tripped into a small rowboat on the bank.

With a heavy push and soft splash, I stole the boat, adamantly promising myself that I would return it when I was done and asking forgiveness from God for stealing. Though the Wright house was only three miles away from the island, I had a good seven miles of paddling from where I stole the boat. As I paddled the sun crept over the swamp and began peeking through the pines before rising above them to take his seat above Georgia. I spotted a gator, about eight feet in length under this new light. I had mistaken it for a log, and I, being too close to this magnificent beast, caused it to silently slip under these murky waters.

I was all alone now, and I set my paddle across the gunwale, to better take in this forgotten, this primal land. The ferns guarded the banks. I was deep back in a place where the waters had remained the same since before good and evil, where the same gators and this same song knew nothing of the moral ambiguities made by man and God. I smashed a mosquito, fat from my blood, between my thumb and index finger spilling my blood into my fingerprints.

I began rowing again, deeper into the swamp.

It was midday when I got to the island, and its size could be appreciated at this proximity. I began surveying the bank for a place to land.

I had seen this island on the map. The island was huge, roughly the size of Manhattan. A giant in the middle of this gigantic swamp, shaped roughly like a lower case i with an appropriately proportioned dot on the northern end to finish the picture. But the main part of the island was right in the middle of the swamp, twelve miles from Hartly and forty from Waycross, the next closest city. I docked the boat in a tiny inlet on the east end, hiding it underneath a small willow tree.

And there I began my chopping through webs, shrubs, and briars, which filled any space that a tree had not already taken. Hours passed. Night was coming. I abandoned any hope of finding this alleged settlement of my brother. The far more pressing matter were the countless gator rushes that crossed my path. I looked for any of trails that I had just cut, but I was lost on this island, miles from my boat. It was then that horrid shriek, the same call I had heard the night before, broke through the brushes. Whatever it was, it was on the island.

Thirty minutes later as the sun was coming down, I finally found a trail, and though it was narrow, it was the greatest relief because it meant that my brother had been there. The path emptied out into a tiny clearing on a hill in the center of the island.

There were four cages, all empty, all made of oak, side by side, with a couple yards between them. They were big, roughly seven by seven by seven feet, and I knew that this had been where Sam kept the monkeys for his experiments. But they were gone and the giant iron bars, which had contained them had been ripped apart. No animal could have done this. I went closer to inspect this work, but my attention was caught by another and far more sickening sight. There beside a fire pit was a pile of bones four feet high, all charred black from fire, and it was impossible to tell who or what the bones belonged to in this light, now fading. The final decoration to this morbid space was a large metal table, thoroughly rusted over, but with four fresh looking shackles attached to the four corners.

I sat down in the clearing upon the trodden ground. There was no chance I would be able to make it back home. I knew this and with the sun waning, turned all my attention to constructing a fire. As I was bringing the fire to life with my own breath, I heard the howl again, closer, stopping me mid-breath.

I got the fire started with daylight to spare. There were two other trails that lead from this clearing, and with the assurance of fire, I went to further inspect them. However, both trails eventually disappeared. This clearing would be home tonight. Though it was obvious that he at one point in time had worked here, this couldn't have been where my brother lived on the island.

The fire blazed. A slender moon took the sun's place in the sky long after the mosquitoes had bitten the hell out of me. I closed my eyes and pictured the map. I was somewhere on the northeastern corner, just a mile from the middle of the dot north of here. But my boat was miles from here, somewhere on the western front.

Then a long cry came this time. I looked deep into the fire, waiting to hear the call again, but it was only the sound of the crickets and bullfrogs. It was close, and I was hungry.

I wouldn't be getting much sleep tonight.

I waited all night to hear that thing rustle up on me. Then I heard it faintly, a rustling, but it surely saw my fire. And the breaking branches left not doubt it coming my way.

"Whatever you are, show yourself." I stood up, pistol in my hand, the fire at my back blazing, and I felt the song that is in us all. It was there, somewhere on the clearing's edge, waiting, watching. "Samuel?" What if it was one those gorillas that my brother had purchased? Whatever made that noise wasn't human. "Lester?"

And the roar was coming right through the bushes now, and I was forty feet away backpedaling to fifty until I just got the hell out of that clearing.

It sounded like demons, or at the very best two possums fighting. I ran like a madman, until finally I stopped, having to catch my breath. My gun was ready.

Being what I felt like was a safe distance from the clearing, I became conscious of the night once again, and the crickets and bullfrogs, and I took in that which was all around to calm myself.

I brought my pipe from my front jacket pocket, as my eyes adjusted to this night without fire or moon. I was out here on my own. All right, here we go. I stuffed the pipe back in my pocket after a few puffs. Then I slunk in a tiny alley between two briar patches, hoping to God they opened up just on the edge of the clearing. They did, and I, now crawling, drug and pushed myself through the ferns standing on the clearing's edge.

A demon, no doubt. Eighteen feet this monster stood with glassy night eyes and sixteen feet of armor, glowing with the fire of the sun. Bipedal. He had a head shaped like an upside down pear with a large cranium, mostly filled by those soulless eyes and ended by a tiny mouth just above where a leaf might have been. The other two feet of armor, a sleek helmet, rested in

his only handlike appendage. Then I saw his other arms, several of them gnarled as an oak, and thin as pines with dozen of whiplike tentacles where our fingers might be, all varying in length but some as long as twenty maybe thirty feet.

That bastard was right beside my fire.

I slipped back into the darkness and away from this horrid beast, deciding to hug the bank and find my boat. Then I stopped. What the hell was I thinking? I was miles from my boat and didn't know where it was. A new plan formulated. I went looking for a tree to sleep in. There was no chance in hell I would be sleeping on this ground.

Briars tore through me as I tore through them until I finally found an oak, bloody as hell. It was small but certainly large enough to support me. After all the shit I had been through, getting up this oak was easy. I crawled out on all fours upon the largest of the branches, and there I straddled the branch and did the best I could to fall asleep.

But the animal let another call rip into the night. It had left the clearing. And for the second time in years, I said another prayer, but this time inside.

Please Lord, do not let this thing find me. If you do, Lord, then I swear I will stop being so foolish with the alcohol. I will fly right. Amen.

The crickets played their song, and I listened. I listened to them and waited to hear to hear that beast. Finally, I heard him coming, and I closed my eyes, cursing God for not answering this one simple prayer. It was him. There was nothing on earth besides him that could make that much noise rumbling through the forest. But the noise faded, and I thought perhaps he would not spot this oak tree. Thank you, Lord.

But he doubled back upon this very tree. It was the biggest tree, and I was a dead man. I knew he was looking for me, and I again caught sight of him and prayed that he did not return

the favor. I slipped down lower on the branch behind a sparse patch of leaves. The only chance I had was that I was on the opposite side. But he went about the tree, stopping to further inspect it, ten maybe fifteen feet away from me. But it was dark tonight, and I had a chance. Then, by some sweet miracle, he stormed away, leaving a snapped pine in his wake. I had never been more thankful to be wearing brown. It was only then that I fell asleep in this tree.

I woke up at dusk but waited in the tree for daylight before I went back to the camp. The creature was gone, and I left a note held safe on the fire pit by a rock.

Dear Sam,

I am staying at the house. Lester told me you might be out here. I have been searching for you for days. I hope you are safe. If you get this note please come to house. I just want to see you.

Love,
Winston

I kept the bow of the boat pointed hard towards the glass greenhouse peaking out from behind the cypresses and pines wading in the water. As the boat glided towards the house, I took a pull from the flask. When I finally made across the swamp, I hid the boat behind a group of ferns off the bank near my house and headed straight to the house, which was about four hundred yards away.

Once back inside, I began making my way through the book that had caused my brother to build this lab on that island. I could not begin to divulge the book in its entirety, but in chapter two, there was an in-depth look into the skeletal systems of man and primates. This study claimed to draw from the skeletal systems of fifty-three negros, eighty white people, and ninety-two Creek Indians.

Where had Sam gotten these results? There was only a pile of charred bones on the island, not nearly enough to draw the average mean that Samuel claimed. There was no mentioning of

them in his journals. The bigger mystery, however, was the whereabouts of the journal and lab reports on the island. And his house. Where the hell was his house?

Regardless the study was bizarre. Sam had drawn up through the study the distinctions between what he termed as species of man, carefully detailing the differences between Negroes, Native Americans, and Europeans. Beyond this the study looked to our relations with our primate brethren, and still, I had no clue where he had gotten this information on man's skeletal system. And yet, these results were drawn from his own study.

After two days of pouring over his notes and finding nothing, I went back out to explore this island and to see if the note had been taken. The note I had left was gone. Still, there was no sign of the larger camp, and I came back to the Wright house before nightfall. It better not have been that giant bastard who stole my note.

Two days later, I was going through my brother's papers in the greenhouse again. They were splayed out upon the soiled table, and the whiskey rested on top of the pile. It was damn near midnight, and I was hoping that Lester would appear. As I sat there in a haze, a knock on the door. I got the gun and ran to the door

"Who is it?" I asked, my body pressed against the door.

"Samuel." His voice, after decades, my ears drank in my brother's voice.

I slung the door open. Samuel! Outside, underneath the song of the swamp, we took each other in. The years made strangers of us. He wore a grizzled beard under his the wrinkled eyes. He was so much older. Then the layers between us, between two humans, two brothers, fell and then the questions fell, and our eyes drank each other in until we became conscious of the night again. I took him into my arms, kissing him on his new gray curls. My brother was here.

"Come now, let's go inside," I said.

I put a pot of water on the stove, and we went back to the study.

“Fourteen years,” I said.

“Yes, it’s been awhile,” he said, choosing to sit on the edge of the William and Mary chair.

“Would you care for a drink?” I asked.

“Yes, that would be nice,” he replied. His eyes scanned the room as a bird does on his morning branch.

“Are you hungry?”

“Not right now, thank you,” he said.

“Okay,” I nodded adamantly and went to fetch the items.

It seemed as though we would not be drinking any of that coffee, and I took the pot off the stove. When I returned to the room, I did so with two clean glasses, grabbing the bottle of whiskey from its place on the table and took my seat. After handing him his full glass, I set my glass on the small table and placed the bottle at my feet.

Then something remarkable happened, I saw his eyes, and they, for the first time in years, reminded me that I was an older brother. I remembered my brother. “Come here,” I said, as I grabbed him out of the chair and into my arms again. And I cried, and I held my brother tight as hell, and I didn’t let go until long after I said, “Sam where have you been?”

The tears had freed me up, and I felt sober and clear minded as I sat down. My breath full with reborn lungs.

“I sent a telegram up there saying that you were missing. I didn’t say anything about the murder,” I said.

“Good.” He looked to a dark corner formed by ceiling and wall as he said, “I didn’t murder anybody, Winston. I want you to know that.” He paced the cramped room with the whiskey in his hand the shook his head at me. “There was nothing I could do, Winston. The whole swamp thinks I killed Nina. He’s trying to flush me out. Have you given him any papers?”

“No,” I said.

“Good. Don’t.” He pointed at me then drew it back as his mind became lost in thought. There was a wildness, a theatrical jerkiness, in his actions that had me on my toes, ready to dodge something, or run, I don’t know, but as it grew in intensity, they gradually pressed me farther in my seat. “Where are they now? When is the last time he’s been here?”

“A few days ago.”

“We have to leave before daybreak tomorrow,” he said. “Are they safe?”

“Yes,” I said. “Are you okay?” I put my hand upon the seat and closer to him. It was a forced effort, but I was totally at a loss. My brother sat before me, insane or at the very least severely disturbed.

“I’m fine, Winston.”

“You’re not living on that island anymore?”

“I’m on the other side of the swamp now, close to St. Mary River.”

“I see,” I said. I leaned in, trying to catch something, anything, in his look that I remembered. And his eyes flashed for just a minute. My God, he had Amos’s eyes. Not only that, but they shared the same minuscule drooping of the lower right eyelid, which in Samuel had become as pronounced as Amos.

There was a lull in our conversation, and though it was a brief lull, his movements had calmed once again.

“All of the sudden, I feel tired. Tomorrow, we’ll go to the island, but right now I do not feel well,” he said.

“I saw this creature, Samuel.”

“The Beast. You saw the Beast.” He jumped up and his fatigue had miraculously been cured. “He’s a miracle, Winston, a Goddamn angel. He crashed here. This being came from another planet. I have seen his ship.” He said it slowly as if that would help me understand. “But now he is here, and he’s playing by the same rules as everybody else. Survive. What did he look like this time?”

“He had these eyes Samuel. He stood forty, maybe fifty feet high, with long whip like fingers and these eyes.”

“He always has those same eyes. He’s a shapeshifter.”

“What do you mean?”

“Samuel, it is not that hard to understand. The being can change form based on his current needs. From my limited assessment of his cranial features, I think he is a male. At the very least, if he is a female then I would hate to see the males. However, I believe he could in fact match exactly the form of a woman, and very beautiful one at that.”

“So you’ve seen him.”

“Yes, a few times, but I cannot get into that right now. Let’s go to sleep,” he said getting out of the chair. “I tell you about it tomorrow.”

We went to sleep. We had a long day ahead of us.

Early next morning Sam and I left for the island, bringing enough food for three days. On the way over, Samuel shot a gator for our meat, and by noon, we had docked the boats on an inlet on the northern end of the island, near the dot on this island’s lowercase i. There underneath

a willow tree was a small crudely made dock that James had made. It was not anything more than a couple of boards tied together, but it at least allowed the walker to get to a part of the hill without getting knee deep in mud. At the base of this unusually steep swampy hill was a path so unused that Winston had to point it out to me.

“We started robbing graves, Winston,” he said, as he cut through the fresh overgrowth, the gator’s carcass slung over his left shoulder. It looked like it weighed about forty pounds. “Whole cemeteries in couple of days. It took us years to collect enough bones.”

“Why didn’t you go back to New York to do this? Perhaps you could have used your connections to access some of the city’s morgues.”

“I wouldn’t have been allowed all the freedom that I took in my experiments down here,” he said. “But there was something else. Something letting me know that I was doing the right thing staying here.” It was the song. He continued up the hill. “Have you run into Lester?”

“He told me about the island,” I said.

“He’s a real treat, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” I said.

We were at the top of the hill now. Sam walked into a giant elephant ear fern. Behind the brush there was a clearing much larger than the other clearing. There were bones. Hundreds of thousands of bones, some in piles, and others mounted and loose on the twenty tables, some beside the hut, and still more scattered upon the ground, bones everywhere. Around the periphery of the clearing were these gigantic oak tables filled with bones. The only space a table did not occupy on the clearing’s edge was the two foot entrance behind the fern. A bamboo roof canopied each table, but it also covered an extra four feet to keep both scientist and bone as dry as possible. Thousands of footprints were set on the trampled mud around these tables.

And in the middle was a hut, scarcely more than fifteen feet by fifteen feet with a small roof. In the middle of this roof peaked out a pipe, which belonged to the Franklin stove inside.

Three of the tables had nothing but skulls on them. I leaned over the skulls and noticed each of them bore a couple of letters followed by another.

“White Male Skull number 52,” he said, pointing to the W M S 52 on the skull I was looking at. “All the skulls on this table belonged to white people,” he said, turning his attention to the house. “They were the first colonists in Georgia. This particular group all died when they moved out of Fort Frederica and caught a virus. They had just paid off their debts to the king,” he said, then nodded to the house. “James and I mostly lived here for the last two years.”

“What the hell have you done here?” I pinned him against the wall of the house.

“A mistake,” he said, shaking me off, “Come, let us go inside.” The irritation was apparent in his voice. Then his teeth flashed in a snarl, but I didn’t let him off the house when he tried to push off.

He yelled like hell as he connected with a left hook on my cheek. I went down, but I had the leverage and brought him down with me. We went sprawling, sending dirt all over those deathly white bones. There was something uncontrollable here manifesting itself in us. Raw anger, that wild anger in this fight to get on top. Grabbing the back of my head, he forced his way on top. I grabbed his shirt, ripping and popping every button, and he again lost the advantage. Now on top I grabbed his hands, pinning them to his body. “Are you done?” I felt him give up, and I let go of his wrists.

But his hand follow his eyes to my ear where there was blood dripping. With great fascination he drew it from there with his fingers as he said, “You are bleeding, Winston.” And he laughed childishly. There we were panting, with no rules, tired, old, and wild. He slid the

fingers into his mouth drawing my blood off his fingers. I leapt off him. There was wild tenderness in this action that deeply disturbed me. But I did as he had said and went inside. He stayed outside and began cutting up the gator.

The house was small and cozy inside with a ceiling no higher than seven feet, a small brick fireplace, and a tiny Franklin stove. The two beds in the corner away from the stove sat four feet apart, one slightly higher than the other. I was still cleaning up the flowing blood when he came inside with the clean gator meat.

“You okay?” I asked, as I took the white cloth off my ear to look at the blood.

“Yeah,” he said.

I was okay with leaving it at that for now.

Dinner was a gator stew with carrots, potatoes, and corn, and served thirty minutes later. I had gotten a few drinks in me and with them my senses returned.

“How many graves have you robbed, Samuel?” I asked, after swallowing a large bit of gator. I had never eaten gator. Its meat was tender, tasting quite like chicken, and I was hungry.

“Three graveyards,” he said. “But it doesn’t matter anyway. You know why, Winston? Because that bastard, Darwin, took my work again. He gave his word, and you know what he did? He waited for my work to be published, and he stole all my work again.”

I knew why he was upset. I had read it in his journals, and I didn’t want the conversation to go there. But Darwin had again stolen his work and this time the work, which came from the robbing of these graves.

“Where’s James?” I asked as I jabbed at a piece of gator. I knew this was probably not going to be any more pleasant of a conversation, but in that instant, it was this that I had blurted out.

“James ran away.”

“Why did he run away?” I asked.

“I tried to kill him. I thought he was going to turn me in,” he said. The rest of dinner was filled with sound of silverware.

“What the hell are you talking about?” I asked.

“It’s my next project, Samuel. The one I’m working on right now.”

“What in the hell are you doing out there?”

“I can’t tell you, Winston, but I can tell you in comparison to the work that I or Darwin or any scientist has ever done, will pale in comparison to what we will achieve. But I will talk of this no more.”

We finished our meals and long after we had cleared the plates, I asked, “What are we going to do, Samuel?”

“I’ve disappeared, Winston,” he said, “I’m gone.” The bullfrogs seemed to be sitting at the doorstep, and the cicadas pounded the muggy night air into primal frenzy. There was nothing left to say between us and neither of us could look at the other, and we both stared off, he at the fire and I, at the floor.

“Have you asked Amos about the murder?” I asked.

And with a sigh, he got back up and began sifting through a large pile of papers on his desk. After several minutes of searching he found a letter. It was from Amos.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“A confession,” he said, as he handed it to me. It wasn’t so much a confession as it was an explanation.

Samuel,

Do you know how many years, I lived down there? Twenty four years in that swamp. Twenty years of nothing but myself out on the swamp. Before you go asking question like that, I would think about what the swamp has done to you. I know you feel it, boy. Don't go asking questions to the answers you don't really want to know.

Amos

Night had long settled and the fire's red gleamed triumphantly over the fading dusk framed in the two windows, and we sat underneath a blanket of unnatural silence for brothers, even long lost brothers. It was in this mood that my brother spoke up.

"I know what he is talking about, Winston," he said. "I noticed something out here. It was on a night like this, no moon, just stars." He stroked his beard, or better put pulled it, as he stared with eyes glazed to fire. "I was tired, and deranged, but I couldn't sleep. You see, I had just seen the Beast, and my mind had been racing ever since. So I went out for a walk on the swamp. As I stared into swamp, my reflection caught my attention, and I took in my face in this new light. I saw my ears, and my nose, I saw my eyes, I saw my hair, and I saw that I was a Goddamn animal, a monkey, Winston. I didn't try to shake this understanding for part of it, or in part of it, there is some comfort, an excuse from our humble beginnings. But long after I stopped looking the memory still remains. It was that night and seeing that Beast is when I came up with my new idea, this new project." He walked to the bed, which sat slightly lower, and pointing at it, he then walked over to the mirror. "After I had seen my reflection, I woke up James up and made him see what I just saw. We're just animals." As if this explained everything, he went to the front door and looked out at all those bones and pines. "The swamp is my home."

I awoke to more nightmares, but I had been having nightmares every night. What was unbearable was that I found that sickening feeling in my stomach once again. I opened my eyes.

My brother was gone. I ran out for any sign of his departure. There was none. He was nowhere to be seen, but on his pillow was a note.

I am sorry Winston, but I cannot risk this operation. It is too important. It would be best if you went back to your life in Baltimore.

Samuel

I went back outside, underneath the new day breaking, spilling its colors in the sky. I wasn't going to be able to sleep here anymore, so I collected the food and went on my way.

I took the ride back home slowly, thinking about what to do next. My brother was gone and didn't want to be found. I could go home, back to Baltimore, but I had nothing there. Sara was dead, and I had no congregation. There was something unfinished here. My brother needed me. Years had passed, but it didn't change that the same blood ran through me as did him. And these same years, at least the last few, had run also run by with stagnation for me for me. That was my brother. I was going to find Samuel again, and as terrible as the situation seemed, the man in me was more alive than it had been in years. I found purpose. "A man is what he does," I told the swamp. That's what Amos always said. He was right about that. All right, Amos, here it goes.

I was exhausted after the long row back home and went to bed to finish the slumber that began on that bizarre island. When I woke up, it was after five p.m., and I went outside to sit beside the Okefenokee. It would be nighttime soon, and I could talk to Lester once again. But before I did, I went out to the swamp and thought about all that had happened to me. It manifested itself into one simple sentence.

"James is gone," I said to the swamp. I sat by the bank as long as the sun bowed behind the trees and didn't leave after it was gone. After making it home, I went inside and waited for

Lester in the greenhouse, spending the time skimming through the journals, letters, and experiments that I had taken from the island.

Long after night had settled in, he walked from behind a waterwheel. In his hand there was a tiny black seed gleaming. He had made his presence known with a proclamation. “I found it under Doris. I’m going to plant it on the bank.”

“Why the hell didn’t you tell me about the Goddamn Beast?” I asked. I didn’t care about the seed or Lester’s new interest in gardening.

“You think I give a damn about you?” His venom matched mine with snakes to spare.

“Listen, you stupid bastard,” I said, rising to my feet. “I didn’t kill you. If you aren’t going to help me, will you please point me in the direction of someone who will.”

He grimaced and turned, looking back to the island and concealing his expression.

“James might still be alive,” I said.

“No,” he said. He threw a doubtful glance just a flash to me before returning his gaze.

“He is. He ran.”

“The Indian,” he told swamp after some deliberation.

“What?”

“What Indian?” I asked.

“The only Goddamn Indian that’s left on the swamp,” he said. “Go see Reverend Lovejoy, and ask him about the Indian.”

What luck it was that tomorrow was Sunday.

I hadn’t gone into church since I gave up the cloth, and I was drunk by the time I got there. The church was full, so I took a seat in the back and did my best not to breathe my whiskey over the two old ladies I had squeezed in between. Reverend Lovejoy greeted a few

members of the congregation then took his spot behind the pulpit. He was a short man with thick glasses and a thick head of peppered hair worn in a part the best it could.

“Ladies and gentleman of the congregation, it is a joy to be amongst friends and family once again—— Today marks a special day for me. Twenty years ago I became the preacher of this area, and I have been truly blessed by the members of this congregation. I want to thank you on Liza’s and my own behalf for taking our family as one of your own. Thank you.”

“I have traveled many miles around these parts. My job requires it, and the quiet hours I spend riding my horse is something that I have truly come to enjoy. I see a lot of places, and I know most everybody.”

“Now on my twentieth anniversary, I want to talk about something that is normally not talked about this publically. A few of you have mentioned this to me in confidentiality, and I have had to be dismissive of such claims because I felt that my preaching about this would put this mission I have in jeopardy. The word was more important, but I no longer feel this way.”

“Some nights, I have to camp. There are simply no members of either congregation between here and Sasser, and most Thursdays I camp somewhere along that road. On a few of these nights, I have seen what can only be called as a monster. You all know it as The Beast. I have seen The Beast. I have seen The Beast close up. Whatever this Beast is, it could not have come from this world. I am not looking to cause an uprising or a commotion, and I know that that may be unavoidable, but people are dying and you and I know that these whispers are true. This Beast is killing people.”

“Now, I’m not suggesting that we get out the fire and guns. I don’t envision that ending well, but I do know that we must be careful. I suspect that I might not be preacher of Hartly after this sermon, but I had to say something about this matter. For far too long rumors of this nature

have been hushed by folks even as people have been killed.” Some members of the congregation were crying and others in the room looked irate. It was as if he had broken some unspoken and grave manner of the community. Simply, the soft words of this preacher had electrified the room. And with arms raised as if he was the one being crucified, he said, “Let us now join together in singing Psalm 100.”

But I couldn't stand. With books in hands, the ladies beside me belted away,

*Make a joyful noise
unto the Lord, all ye lands.
Serve the Lord with gladness.
Come before his presence with singing.
Know ye that the Lord he is God:
it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves
we are his people, and the sheep of his pasture.*

As they sang, I wanted to scream out at world about the blood. The blood that's on all our hands, no matter if he made us or not. And I wanted to scream out that Amos was the murderer and bred me with these same stains on my fingers. I wanted to scream out that none of this is worth it and just run out of the church. I could. There had been enough commotion already, and if I did all people would say is those Wrights are crazy. But I didn't. I sat there, and thought about what the hell I was doing in Hartly. What the hell I was doing in this church I had no business here.

There was no calming down until these ladies had finished with the Old Hundred, but afterwards I settled my nerves. Reverend and I had some talking to do.

Finally the service ended with whimper equivalent to the beginning's bang with the reverend talking about the original sin. After the service, I waited in the pew as he talked to some

members of the congregation. Eventually he came up to me. “I don’t believe I’ve seen your face before,” he said, with an open hand.

“Reverend Lovejoy, I’m Winston Wright,” I said, as I shook his hand.

“A Wright, eh?”

“Can I speak to you in private?” I asked.

“Sure,” he said.

“I used to be a man of the cloth,” I said, as he ushered me into his office, which was the room behind where the small choir sang.

“Is that right?”

“For seven years.”

“Well, Mr. Wright, I hope your faith remains strong.” He took a seat in the space the desk allowed in this cramped room.

“Mr. Lovejoy,” I said, taking a seat, “why did you want to talk about the Beast on twentieth anniversary?”

“Three nights ago as I coming back from Sasser, I saw the Beast,” he said. “I had wanted to talk about him since I saw him back six years ago. Like most people I just thought it was a ghost story, and generally speaking people don’t talk about it. Think you’re crazy, but when I saw him, I knew I had to at least, in my position, say something about it. The mayor or sheriff certainly weren’t. I don’t know, but people have died.”

“I see,” I said. “How many people?”

“Fourteen, maybe fifteen. It’s hard to say who gets you out here and especially in the swamp, but now, Mr. Wright, what is that you want?”

“I’m looking for an Indian that lives on the swamp.” I looked him right in the eye as I said this.

“His name is Marahnán.” He opened up his desk and pulled out a map. “He knows the swamp better than anybody. You live here. Here is where you need to go.” He pointed to my house on the northernmost inlet of the eastern side of the swamp. It was just on the other side of the swamp, no more than four miles, and it made him my closest neighbor at the moment. “He may or may not still be alive. I haven’t seen him a few years. You must be looking for somebody who doesn’t want to be found? That’s fine, Mr. Wright, I won’t tell anybody.”

“I have seen the Beast.” I said.

“Are you living at your family’s house on the swamp?”

“Yes.”

“I am not surprised,” he said.

“What does this Beast look like?”

“No, I can’t say. It always looks different. Always some horrible shape of the night, but there is one thing. It always has these eyes. These giant black eyes. Sometimes it looks more beast than man. Sometimes more man than beast, but always has those demonic eyes.” He drew them on a sheet of paper, and there were those same eyes black as hell. Then the form of the Beast was filled out by his hand with much skill. He drew another pair of the same eyes and filled it out with quite another form. “It’s a shapeshifter, Mr. Wright.”

I stood entranced by this Beast’s eyes, by the vastly different yet sleek and dangerous forms. “Thank you, Reverend Lovejoy,” I said, and I shook his hand.

“Mr. Wright, what if I told you I know where, James, your brother’s slave is.”

I closed the door, unconscious that I had taken my seat again.

“I know what you’re doing,” he said. “And I know who you are looking for.” He pointed to a spot a mile south of where he said Marahnán lived. I marked it in my mind. It was just on the other side of the island about six miles from the Wright house. “I don’t know where your brother is, but he very well could be out there. I would be careful traveling at night out there. Not so much for the gators, but I would hate to run up on any man out there,” he said.

“What about the Beast?” I asked.

He laughed. “The Beast is dangerous, but he looks at you no differently than a white tail. We’re just meat to him,” he said, “but there are few things as dangerous as a desperate man where there are no rules.” The swamp was the land of the outcasts. Samuel had written numerous times that anybody who had a reason to hide this side of Macon in Georgia, slaves, convicts, or an Indian, was out here.

And again I found myself in the same situation with the same answer on what do about it. Again I was going to get my brother, and this time bring him back to Baltimore. From there the family could take it, but we would do it together. As I slowly trudged back to the swamp, I mentally prepared for tomorrow’s journey.

The next morning, I headed for James’s. I made it to the other side of the swamp by midday. Hugging the banks I pushed the boat along with the paddle looking for any signs of life or any predator that this swamp might hide.

Finally, I spotted a plume of smoke on the horizon. It was about twenty minutes away. I had plenty of time before nightfall, and I redirected my path to the smoke, gliding deeper into the swamp.

Cain had spilt Abel’s blood. Samuel’s conclusions were no different. To him men grew up following the harsh laws of survival and there was more than enough blood spilt by man to

get where he is today. Today where five hundred miles north of here in Pennsylvania, men were killing and dying by the thousands over the right to own another man. And still there was something so dirty and irksome about my own bloody existence. I shivered off the feeling and began rowing again. "We are bloody animals."

I drew my gun after I docked my boat. "Please God, let it belong to James," I said, as I crouched low, approaching the smoke off the trail. About twenty yards inland, I spotted the wigwam. I had missed the spot, but if the reverend had given me good directions that meant I had two hours of daylight to make it to James a few miles south. I did not see the Indian, and after few more moments taking in this curious hut, I quietly left that spot for the boat

I had to go deeper into the swamp. That bothered me greatly because I didn't know what I was looking for or where I was going. However, I did believe that reverend had given me good directions, but people move. And die.

I had no choice I had gone too far, and I paddled deeper into the swamp, constantly eyeing the sun and bank. It would be my luck to have the sun go down and nowhere to camp.

After an hour of paddling, there was no smoke on the horizon, and the chief's had faded long ago. Nightfall was coming, and it was coming fast. I had seen a place that might serve as a place to camp, back an hour ago. But there was nothing out here anymore. I must be a few miles from Florida.

The directions to James were no good.

I had gone far past where the Reverend said he would be. It was time to find camping, and I picked up the pace. If I didn't find a place in the next fifteen to thirty minutes there would be little chance I would be getting a fire before night fell.

However as I continued forward I finally spotted another plume of smoke. It was about a twenty minutes row away, and I hoped to God it was James's. As I paddled closer I saw there a Negro. There would be no element of surprise here. When he saw me he looked as if he had seen a ghost, and his expression betrayed his identity.

"I'm a free man now." He had his gun raised.

"I am not here to take you back. I'm here to find my brother."

"Why?" he asked.

"Because he's my brother," I said, "and I have nothing else in life. Do you know where he is?"

"I know where he is, but I ain't going anywhere near him. Not after what he did to me," he said. "Do you know what that man did to me?"

"I read his journals on the island."

"No, boy, you don't understand," he said.

I was dumbfounded, just for a second. I couldn't believe that this black man would talk to me this way. There were no rules out here.

But then he turned his back showing his keloid scars, and as I looked upon my brother's work, I understood what my brother had become. I didn't know if it was his studies or the wild. That didn't really matter. What mattered was the man who drew the scars upon his back was not the brother I seen off down here to Georgia. But it did not mean that I was going to turn back. It just made it that more plain. No matter what, I was going to bring Samuel back to Baltimore.

"That's your blood," he said. "That's who did that. No, if you think I'm going with you to see him then you're going to be mighty disappointed."

"Well if you could show me where he is on the map?"

“Of course,” he said.

I ran quickly to my backpack and retrieved my map.

“Where we at?” he asked.

“Right here,” I said, pointing to our location.

“He lives right here.” He pointed to the deepest part of the swamp.

I looked at him doubtfully. There was no place farther away from civilization on the whole swamp than that point. Shit. Of all the places he could have been, he had to be down there. But there was no point dwelling on it. Not now. Not here. I folded the map back up and put it in my pack.

“Samuel spoke of a project to me, but he wouldn’t tell me what it was. Do you know what it is?”

“He took the children.”

“Excuse me?” I asked.

“Listen, I don’t know what the hell he was doing. The less I knew about it, the better it was for me, but he was hell bent on stealing some kids. I don’t know if he’s got them now or what, and I don’t what he using them for. He was insane by that point. Got to thinking I was going to turn him in, and one night he came up on my bed with a knife. But I wasn’t sleeping and saw him coming with the knife. I kicked him and ran out. I never wanted to cross this water. I can’t swim and there is quicksand and gators everywhere and the Beast, but by some miracle, I made it here.”

I understood why James didn’t want to see Sam again. After dinner of gator stew, we sat by the fire, listening to the crickets and ready for any other noises.

“So I hear you’re an old preacher,” he said.

“I was,” I said.

“Did you loose the faith?” He gave me a look, and I could tell when I said that I had lost something in his eyes.

“No, just my congregation.”

“Do you still believe in God?”

“Yes.” I said, as I looked into the fire. But I was thinking about Samuel and the long day I had ahead of me.

The next morning I went five miles farther into the Okefenokee Swamp. Nothingness. Though borders mattered not at all out here. I was clearly in Florida by now, maybe twenty miles from the Wright house. All day I rowed in the deepest corner of this swamp on the word of a slave who didn't give a damn about me to find a brother that didn't want to be found.

Finally, there was a faint plume of smoke billowed as the sun darkened. I was nervous but also hungry, and the thought of food brought upon a sharp pain. As I brought the boat closer to the bank, I took out a buttered biscuit and appeased my hunger.

The sun had fallen, the air had cooled, and the mosquitos were out. I smashed one on my neck as I swallowed a bit of biscuit. Though it was sweltering, I had worn long pants and a shirt to keep the bugs off. Still, the bugs had bitten me to hell.

I landed about a half mile north of the swamp, and I dragged the boat up on the sand. I was nowhere, but even in nowhere the man who lived there had the advantage of knowing what nowhere was. Even still the gun, which I had, and the gun, which he surely had, made Sam's advantage minimal. I hacked slowly through the vegetation. I wished James was here.

Now on its edge, I surveyed the clearing, finding a hut in the middle that was eerily similar to the one on the island. But what alarmed me was not the similarity between the two

huts, but the black child standing next to it, examining his toes. I had been prepared for this, and I still couldn't believe it. He had taken the children. Before I knew it, I had broken the threshold and was walking to this boy. When he noticed me he ran inside.

Samuel came quickly, shotgun in hand. I drew my pistol. And there we were.

"Samuel," I said.

"Winston," he replied. We stood looking in each other's eyes. After so many years, we were here. Neither of us moved. Neither of us broke gaze. Neither spoke.

"James is in the bushes," I nodded to the side opposite of where we stood.

"James?" He looked back to where I pointed and the eyelock between us was broken.

I saw all the children now who had poured out of the hut, both black and white, and their guns pointed at me.

"James, you're a free man. Didn't Winston tell you that?" he said. A little Negro boy, no more than three, came crying up to Samuel. Never taking the shotgun off me, he leaned over slightly and picked the boy up, hushing him. "Put down your gun, Winston."

I put down my gun.

"Why the hell did you come out here?" he asked then yelled, "James, come in, or I will have one of the boys kill Winston."

"James, stay out there and run and get help if they try to kill me," I said.

"Come inside, Winston," he said. "Stay out there if you like James, we're gonna have a nice meal inside. You two go and search the bushes for a nigger," he said to the oldest black and white boys. "He is big like us two." He nodded at me, and the two children ran off to where I had said that James was. We went inside with the babe and the rest of the children.

“Samuel, what the hell are you doing here?” I asked. He looked at me with a slight pause that even stopped his breath. Then he sat down at one of the chairs around the table, and I took another of one of the seven.

“I had heard about the Beast for years, but it wasn’t until when James and I moved to the island that I saw him. It was where you left the note, Winston. He was burning bones in some ritual of some sort. He had already killed my apes, but I didn’t care. I had already finished with them and to be honest they were become quite a nuisance,” he said. “Anyway, I did not know what exactly the purpose of this ceremony was, but I followed him, Winston! And I saw his house. It was a metal ship buried. I left, returning two days later when he was gone. Winston, you cannot begin to understand this wondrous structure, this spaceship. It became even more obvious that when this Beast is put beside man, our superiority over our brethren is negligible. But I couldn’t stop the study. I had gone too far, done too much. I finished the work up.”

He continued, “But, Winston, you wonder what this has to do with the present situation. I had this idea studying the innate nature of a being against the effects of raising that being, but when I saw this structure, I knew that the project was going to be radically different. No longer would I look back to the past for our difference, but now to our future, where we too could fly as the Beast. That’s why I’m here, Winston,” he said.

“Samuel, you can’t raise these kids,” I said.

“Winston, it is not up to you,” he said. “Mike and Sampson put a pot of stew on. We’re creating an Eden out here.” The middle ones went to the other room and began preparing the meal. “But something has happened while we have been out here. I fell in love with these kids. These children are five years old and already they can raise themselves. Isn’t that remarkable?” Before I had a chance to answer, the boys came back. “Where’s James?” he asked.

“We couldn’t find him,” said the black child.

“Go back out and look for him. I’ll ring the bell when dinner is ready.”

The other boys were plucking the chicken they had just wrung outside. The pot was put on the stove. Eventually dinner was ready. Samuel rang the bell, and the boys returned without James. Samuel was upset but eventually resolved “to pay him a visit tomorrow.”

“I lied,” I said. “James was not really out there.” Though the distraction had not quite worked, I certainly didn’t want Samuel coming back after James again.

“Okay.” He looked at me mistrustfully then let his eyes fall upon the swamp.

Dinner was served by the second youngest, who was no more than three according to Samuel. As we ate dinner Samuel nodded to the boy who had served us. “There’s wickedness in that boy,” he said. “You know what I call him—Samuel.”

“Where did they come from?”

“The Johnsons and the Smiths. They are the Johnsons, and these are the Smiths.” He pointed to two whites and the baby black child that was feeding them as Johnsons and then to two of the black kids and a white kid as Smiths.”

“You stole the children.”

“I will not tolerate such talk in front of my children.” He had risen from his chair. “The Smith family died in a fire. It was quite sad,” he said. “Now the Johnson babies were much harder to get, but come now. Let’s wash the dishes,” he said to me.

“Did the Beast get Nina?”

“Yes.” He did not look up from his plate, and the scraping of silverware sounded over the frogs and toads and crickets outside. I looked deeper into Samuel, finding the pain I was hoping to see. Still, he didn’t let me see it long, and he left the room, bringing back a bucket full of

water to clean the dishes. “You go and play outside,” he said to the children, and the children ran like hell out of the door.

It was just the two of us now in the room, and the citronella candles flickered sweetly all around. Leaning over the small pail, he washed dishes as I watched him from my chair. If I tried to run, one of the boys would surely shoot me. He stopped washing a bowl and looked at me sadly again. “Why did you have to come here? I’m sorry I keep harping on this, but you know you cannot live anymore.”

“Samuel,” I said.

“We have to start over. We are building this hand to hand. Blood has nothing to do with this. We cannot have the outside world interfering with our garden out here. We are the dawn of the new man.” But he stopped talking as if he suddenly realized he had more important matters. “But let’s get this over with. Everybody grab your guns were going on a walk,” he yelled. The eerie calmness we had between us was ripped to shreds by Samuel’s call. The baby began crying again, and he went back to the table and picked it up. By this point the children began to yell, jumping all around him. Some of them were clutching their guns as they did this.

“Please, Samuel, I beg of you, do not kill me——”

“None of that, Winston, come now,” he said as he walked outside.

No choice but to follow. And I could not place the feeling that overtook me. I was ready to die, but not this way, not like this. “Samuel, do not kill me.”

But he wasn’t listening, as he slung a bit of rope over his shoulder. And with black babe in arms, Sam took the white toddler by the hand and led the way deeper into the woods. With every step farther, the horrible knowledge that my brother was leading me to my death became more of a reality.

“Where are we going, Samuel?” I asked.

“On a walk, Winston, on a walk.”

I knew where we were going.

“You can’t build Eden on anybody’s bones. Don’t you see that Samuel?”

As he lead the group, he still held the littlest one’s hand tight, shushing him and telling him that the Beast would be asleep right now and that he had nothing to worry about.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Sam?”

We came to a giant disc-like object made out of charred metal and dug deep into the ground. It was eighty maybe a hundred feet. I knew where we were. Strange signs were marked upon it, and on its top was a great cracked glass dome. Those strange signs could have meant anything, but to me they marked my death.

“Keep the guns on him,” he said, as he tied my wrists work behind my back.

“Please, Samuel, do not leave me here.”

“Winston, don’t you know there is no arguing this?” he said. “We are building Eden hand to hand. Blood means nothing to us.”

“Sam, how can you create Eden on my fucking bones?”

“You should have never come out here, Winston.”

“Don’t leave me here. Please, Sam, don’t leave me here.” But he was already tying my feet together.

“Goodbye, Winston,” he said.

“Samuel, please,” I said, but they were walking off. “Samuel!” But presently there was a stirring inside the structure. I had awoken the Beast. They were gone. And I heard that same horrible scream come ringing out of that structure.

Vita

Todd Sutton Trulock was born and raised in Albany, Georgia. In 2006, he moved to Knoxville, Tennessee where he studied English Literature and Religion at the University of Tennessee. He now resides in New Orleans, Louisiana.