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The Judgments

D G. Basham

Hollins University, dgbasham@gmail.com

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The Judgments

by

D.G. Basham

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Director of Essay: Jenny Call
Chaplain Jenny Call

Department: Chapel

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Introduction

As a culmination of my studies in Humanities at Hollins University, I chose to focus on the topic of reality and its relationship to sin. I started with the concept that perception is reality. If, for example, you perceive yourself as a victim of circumstance for your entire life, then what does your life look like to you? And, in a spiritual context, where do you end up in the larger scheme of things, Heaven or Hell?

I also thought on the topic as I researched subjects that were in the mainstream as current societal issues, mainly narcissism, envy, codependency and addictions, and the perception that more individuals were showing sociopathic behaviors. How did the sociopath grow up? In what reality? And what about the narcissist who refuses to grow up? Or the addict whose reality is fully enmeshed in an addiction that keeps an objective reality at bay?

Sin is difficult to address because you either have a person who refuses to believe they do anything wrong or you get a person who is too hard on him/herself. Also, to talk about sin with

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most people can bring out some hefty disagreements. So I thought about how I wanted to address it and decided to write on things I knew.

The finished product is a collection of eight short stories titled, *The Judgments*. The first seven stories take characters that have a clear weakness with regards to one of the seven deadly sins of gluttony, lust, greed, wrath, sloth, envy, or pride and play out the story of the choices they make based on who they believe they are and who they believe everyone else is in comparison. It becomes evident throughout the stories that one deadly sin will branch out into one or more of the others. The eighth and final story is one of redemption in which one man finally sees a reality other than the one he's created inside of his own mind. This allows him to change and become a better person.

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On the deadly sin of Greed...

"Verily I say unto you, that a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven. And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God." Matthew 19:23-24

Notes to the Reader: Greed was written with the idea of Justice in mind. Money does not make you a better person and it doesn't make you happy, though not having it can certainly make you unhappy. Greed, in its purest form, shows up as someone who has more than enough and yet insists on not using this particular form of worldly power to help others, rather chooses to create an internal world that justifies his sense of self.

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The Life of Hamilton Better

On August 11, 2012 Hamilton Better saw it as official. He was the best dad in the entire world. He felt it. He felt it. He felt it. He felt it so broadly that he wanted to sing it to the world.

And that, he thought, was exactly what he'd needed. He'd needed to hear someone tell him that he was a good man. Yes, sometimes a person just needs to hear that.

Not that he was a bad man. He wasn't. He owned his own little collection agency that was situated in the center of Remy, Virginia. And it had been lucrative. He employed fifty people in total, and so had done his part to keep the economy going. And he'd also finally caved into his wife's suggestion of remodeling the bathroom with some bathroom accessories from the local Habitat store, so he'd also helped the needy, given to the poor. And when Lisa Callings had needed an extra week off for maternity leave, he'd graciously given it her as well, though without pay, of course. He was a businessman after all. But he

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paid her decent, like all the rest of the people in his employ. Ten dollars an hour for the women, fifteen for the men. It was an old standard and he stuck to it. To pay any more than that would be stealing from himself, which he refused to do.

But back to his own happiness at being called the best dad ever. He'd done something really great. Really, really great. His son had told him that one of Hamilton's own employees--a single woman whose breasts had on occasion led him into sinful thoughts--had come on to his son, a married man, at a local restaurant when he was waiting for a client. Well! Hamilton walked right into his office the next day, called Ms. Truffles into it, closed the door behind her, and promptly fired the woman for her wanton behavior.

Well, he may have made up a few things to make it all legal so he wouldn't have to pay out any unemployment, but he'd done it. And he'd given her the evil eye as he did. Shame on her! First for making him stare at her breasts in those tight sweaters she wore and then for having the gall, the utter gall to come onto his own son. Well, technically he was his step-son, but how dare she do such a thing to poor defenseless men. Hussy, he thought.

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Why, just the thought of what she'd made him, Hamilton Better, a good and decent man, think was...sinful! He was married, happily so! And older than her by thirty years. But that just goes to show you that a thirty year old divorced woman would do just about anything to snag a man she considered a "catch," and by that he meant a man with money.

He'd admit he had a lot of money, which he'd worked very, very hard for. Yes, he had one more year to go and then he was planning on selling the business so he wouldn't have to work so hard anymore. He'd definitely earned it. But that was beside the point. The point was that there were a lot of evil, money hungry women out there who would do just about anything to get their hands on a decent man's money! Well, he hadn't fallen for it. She'd deserved to be fired. Humph! And that would be the end of that.

Hamilton glanced up from the fiction novel he was reading in his office to take out a few peanut clusters from the bag and pop them into his mouth. His office was surrounded by golf artwork. It was his favorite pastime. He leaned back in the cushioned padded gray chair and chomped on the clusters. They were the

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kind coated with a caramel peanut butter concoction. His favorite.

But he made it a point to only eat them at work. He patted his tummy lightly. He could use a new belt he thought, looking down at the waistline of his beige khakis. Had to watch the figure. So just at work on the sweets. Moderation, he decided, popping two more clusters in his mouth, was the key. Besides, he'd probably take a half day and join some of the fellows for a round of golf. He'd been working too hard and he'd earned the break. Why, it had been since Saturday since he'd played a game and it was already Thursday. Yes, he nodded to himself as he swallowed the clusters and picked up his can of Pepsi, he was well overdue.

A few weeks later, in September, the oddest thing happened to Hamilton. He began hearing lines of poetry in his head. He thought it quite interesting because it sounded like a little kid was inside there chanting to him and giggling as he did so.

"First his feet fall out

And then he mumbles,

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Then his lights go out
And then he grumbles."

Or at least Hamilton was pretty sure that's what the kid was chanting but he couldn't be positive due to the fact that he only heard the boy's voice in bed at night, when he was drifting off to sleep. He imagined the little boy had cute blonde hair and bright blue eyes like those of the bluest flower imaginable. Maybe Hamilton would take up flower observation when he retired. Right now he was just too busy.

Every morning Hamilton would promise himself to stop by a local bookstore and pick up a journal so he could maybe write down the exact words of the cute little rhyme, but then he'd forget, usually due to his excitement about going home after a hard day at work. Manual laborers just didn't get it, but office work could be truly exhausting. Hamilton shrugged as another day went by and the journal purchase was forgotten. Soon he would have to go to the bookstore anyway because he'd almost finished reading the stack of fiction romance and mystery novels he'd bought last month. He read fast and read a lot, mostly at work because

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office work could be extremely boring when you were as smart as someone like him.

It wasn't that Hamilton didn't have a big workload, he reminded himself. He did. He just knew how to delegate better than most. And he was a firm believer that what you did in the short term was really all that mattered because who could say for sure what would be important to anyone in a few years from now? Work smarter. That had always been his motto. And he was extremely smart. Everyone said so.

In October Hamilton made an appointment for his dentist to have another tooth pulled. Damn teeth. They'd been going rotten slowly since he was...well, oddly enough, it was about the same time he'd left his old job where he and the manager had gotten into the roaring argument about the integrity of Hamilton's work--and nobody questioned the integrity of Hamilton's work!--so he'd left and started his own company. Yes, Hamilton thought back now, grimacing in distaste at the memory of the other man. True evil. That man had been full of it. True evil.

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Hamilton shook his head as if to shake the entire episode out of it. The memory still haunted him. That man, that evil man had made him feel shame and it shouldn't be there. Maybe he'd cut corners on some tax returns but everybody had done that back in the day. It was actually proof of how smart he was so shame on that man for trying to make him feel bad for doing something he was certain the other manager had done as well. That had been well over twenty years ago but the memory still burned. One day, Hamilton thought, that guy would get his just desserts. That's what happened to evil people, he was certain of it.

But back to his teeth, pains in the you-know-what! He was ready to have them all pulled out. But he'd wait. Let them rot. They were just teeth. The rest of his health was just fine. No high blood pressure, no heart problems, no high cholesterol problems, and this at age 62. Yep, he was truly blessed by God.

Or at least that's what he was thinking as he dozed off to sleep that night until the cute little blonde haired boy who was giving him that rhyme in his head turned up again and then suddenly transformed into a cute little fuzzy white bunny rabbit hopping along as he chanted,

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“First his feet fall
And make him mumble,
Then the lights fall;
He lies in slumber.”

How cute, Hamilton thought with a small smile just before he drifted into a heavy snore.

The next day at the office, Hamilton did his usual: he walked in, got a fresh cup of coffee from his secretary, ran the morning reports, perused them for any large discrepancies in cash or recoveries, passed them out to the delegated workers, meandered back into his office, and plopped down into his chair as he opened up the romance novel he'd been reading. His problem, he thought, was that he was just too intelligent. He got his work done too quickly was all. He couldn't help that, he thought with just a twinge of guilt. He swatted it away. Guilt gnats. He hated those. Nope, he should feel no guilt. He was just smarter than most people. God had given him that gift, so it wasn't as if he had anything to feel guilty about. Smart

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people like him naturally had things easier than the dumber people. That was just life.

In November, Hamilton decided it was time to start taking offers on his company. He was hoping for a larger company to buy it. They'd pay more and that was what he wanted. More money. One thing in life he was certain you could never have too much of was money. Money, money, money. He loved money.

In December, various food gifts, nut trays and cookie trays and the like, started coming in from the local bank he used and various other vendors. This was normal. It was their way of saying, "thank you for your business, and please keep us as your vendors." Hamilton preferred the ones who gave him free golf outings, but in December that was a little much to hope.

Besides, he did like the sweets the vendors brought in weekly in the month of Christmas. They brought peanut butter cookies, macaroons, fudge (which he especially adored) coconut cake, red velvet cake. Yum! Come to think of it, he actually did like the month of December. He kept a small fridge, separate from the break room fridge and all the greedy hands of his employees, in

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the far corner of his office for all the goodies brought in to him. He was a generous man though, so he did always leave out one tray of the cookies for the employees to share. This way, he thought, no one could ever say he was a selfish employer. In bed that night with his wife, Hamilton relayed to her the latest gossip he'd heard at work. One of the married ladies, it seemed, was having a little affair with one of the married men. He heard this thru the open door of his office; some of the women had been whispering about it.

"Hamilton, really! Eavesdropping."

"I wasn't!" He denied vehemently. "I can't help it if I have really good hearing. It's a gift God gave me. Besides, I needed a break from work. Being the owner is hard work, you know. It's not like that easy bank job you have." He was kidding of course. Sort of. Owning one's own company was stressful. He was certain his wife was too fragile of mind to handle such a task.

"I wouldn't be spreading rumors if I were you. It's not nice."

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"They aren't rumors if they're true." But he mumbled this so his wife couldn't hear him, and then went back to reading his book.

His wife had been a rescue case. She'd had various marriages, really bad ones, before she'd met him. He'd only had one, but it was bad enough, he supposed, though not half as bad as her horror stories. And to top it off his wife made a measly ten bucks an hour at a local grocery chain office, which wasn't anything when you took into account the bills that came with the costs of her house, not to mention that she'd had two boys to take care of in the bargain. And her exes were all total louses, not like him. Hamilton smiled a little to himself. He just didn't know how she'd managed before he came along. A part of him saw an image of himself as a knight on a white horse saving his deserving damsel in distress. He knew they were meant to be together the moment he saw her. And when he saw her house and tasted her cooking, he'd known without a doubt, she was the one. She was shy. She was petite. She kept her body looking good. She didn't smoke and didn't drink. And she was extremely frugal. He loved that about her. That last thing he needed was another money grubbing woman after him. So he'd decided to marry her. It was both love and a logical solution to a lot of problems.

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Her house was in a good neighborhood and very warm and welcoming. He'd liked that much better than the apartment he'd been living in. His own history included two sons just like her own, but his sons were spoiled brats, which was entirely due to his ex-wife and her bad character. But with Janet, his new wife he'd gotten a second chance at proving how good of a father he could actually be. He liked this thought. He could re-raise a child; bring him into manhood the right way. He focused on her youngest in this endeavor. Yes, that young boy deserved a good father, like himself instead of some deadbeat like he'd had previously. Yes, he deserved a father like Hamilton.

Twenty some years later, Hamilton couldn't be more proud of his step-son. He and Alex played golf together, lifted weights together--rather they would as soon as Hamilton retired and started his new workout routine--and they talked. Yes, Alex had a lot in common with Hamilton. Hamilton liked that. They talked about money and finance and the stock market and well, everything important in life. They were best buddies. And that was important to Hamilton. He knew the so-called 'friends' who were actually vendors of his company would disappear like the wind as soon as he sold the business. No, they weren't true

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friends. He wasn't a dummy. He knew why they gave him food and free golf. Besides, they had nothing much in common and he really couldn't trust them. That's what Alex provided, a trustworthy individual. And that, Hamilton thought, looking back on all the people he viewed as untrustworthy in the world, was a rarity. The world was going to pot. He knew it. You just couldn't trust anybody anymore.

That night the bunny hopped into his mind as Hamilton was thinking that he couldn't wait until spring hit when he could retire and start doing more in the garden. He was beginning to feel like that bunny inside his head, light and airy and hoppy and happy.

“First its teeth rot
And then he mumbles
Then lights go out
In lies and slumbers.”

Hamilton had no idea what that bunny was trying to say, but he did like the sound of his voice and the magical way he had of putting him to sleep in complete and utter comfort.

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January went by so slowly Hamilton thought he'd crawl out of his skin if it weren't for his novels. He was more than ready to retire. Beyond ready. Enough of the work life. He wanted the fun life. He wanted the life of retirement where he could read all day long, no pesky interruptions from distraught employees, or play golf all day long.

He felt like he wanted to live forever. He had plenty of money socked away. He'd hit the million mark a while back so knew his fairly tame lifestyle would get him through until the end, but he didn't want to think about that right now, because right now he didn't want an end, only the beginning called the heaven of retirement.

It so happened that that very week a clumsy employee slipped on a piece of ice outside and he had to file a worker's compensation claim. Events like that really irked him. The irresponsibility of other people. Just watch where you're going, he wanted to say, and you'd be fine. But he knew it would do no good to even try. Wasted breath. People never listened.

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In February, Hamilton thought he might like to go to church. It had been ages since he'd been. He saw all churchgoers as hypocrites. They listened to the sermon then during the work week they practiced all the bad things that hypocrites practice. They lied to each other, they stole from each other, and they cheated each other out of money. But the thought was just a passing one. He decided against it. One thing he really couldn't stomach was a hypocrite.

A week later a warm spell hit and his health insurance vendor invited him out for a round of golf. Hamilton immediately jumped on the offer. The guy may not be a friend but he loved the word free. If it was free, count him in! He promptly called his secretary and told her he had a business meeting and would be gone until tomorrow, then put his book away and headed out the door with a big, 'Yee-haw' inside his head.

The insurance representative gave him some bad news about the insurance premiums going up this coming year. Who cared? Hamilton thought, though mumbled something to act like he did. He'd always been on his wife's insurance anyway. She worked for a large company so it made more sense that way.

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He was sure to hear complaints about how the insurance here sucked and how the premiums were too high. And he was sick of hearing it. They got insurance. That was more than a lot of employers gave to their employees. But wait! Maybe he wouldn't since he could be long gone in the Sweetsville of retirement by then. So, no worries. He'd just keep his mouth shut and see what happened. With any luck, he'd be out the door way before this year's complaints hit.

That night in bed, he told his wife what he wanted to do when he retired. He talked about the vacations he'd take her on, the home improvements he was planning on making, the plans he had for the garden....he would have gone on but he took a breath in the middle of explaining the new garden design for some variegated Hosta plants and realized she'd dozed off on him.

He didn't understand why she wasn't more excited about retiring. It was going to be like an everyday amusement park. It was going to be a blast. She coughed in her sleep and he winced a little guiltily. She'd smoked cigarettes when she was younger and apparently, he'd decided, it had given her a lung condition. Her

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frame was so small he doubted her lungs were an inch big. He'd been lucky. He'd never smoked. Never got hooked on alcohol either. But some people were weaker individuals than him. He just wished he could somehow take that cough away from her. He didn't want to be alone in old age. There was something to be said for a warm and loving woman lying in bed next to you each night as you aged. Nope. She couldn't die before him. Who'd take care of him if she did? Who'd lie there next to him in bed and listen to his great ideas? No, he didn't like the thought at all. He prayed to God about it before he let his mind drift off and the white hopping bunny appeared.

"His feet fall out
And then he mumbles,
Then lights go out
As he lies in slumber."

Hamilton woke up with another toothache. Too many Brach's clusters he was thinking. Then he shrugged the thought off. Nope, just bad teeth inherited from somebody in his family he was sure. He called the dentist and reconciled himself to having another tooth pulled. What did he care? They were just teeth.

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He'd always had bad teeth. But he'd made it to retirement in otherwise great health and he was rich. Who cared about a few bad teeth when everything else in his life looked so sunny?

Finally, in March, on his monthly run to the bookstore, he remembered to pick up a journal along with the dozen or so books he planned to read for the month. He decided to change up his daily snacks too--he was getting a little pudgy--so instead of the Brach's clusters this time around he got a few bags of chocolate covered pretzels.

He turned while in line and saw a little girl in pony tails and a pink dress with her mother. He smiled a friendly smile at the little girl.

The girl looked at him a minute then pointed her arm at him and tugged on her mother's pant leg. "Mommy, look. That toothless fat man is smiling at me."

Hamilton frowned, his face burning with embarrassment, and quickly turned back around. The gall of children these days. How ill-mannered! But he did put back one of the chocolate covered

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pretzel bags. Then he thought about it and grabbed it right back. He wasn't going to let some little prissy girl tell him how to eat. He wasn't fat. It was this darn stressful job that was making him overweight anyhow. He worked too much.

That night in bed he asked his wife if she thought he was fat. She just raised her eyebrows at him, and then rolled over. He didn't know what to make of that. But he was, however, finally prepared when the bunny hopped into head that night. His journal was beside his bed and this time he remembered to write down, however groggily, exactly what he'd heard so he could read it in the morning.

When morning came it was with a sense of excitement that Hamilton opened the journal to read what he'd written the night before. Most of the time he was so tired from his work day, he wasn't sure if he was getting that bunny's words correctly. He knew it was just rhyme and he'd never been anything but a math wizard, but still, maybe something would come of it. Maybe he'd retire and find out he was a grand poet. What fun that would be! Not that he needed the money. He didn't. It would just be fun.

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He'd always been smart in math so wouldn't it be a hoot to find out he was smart in poetry also? Hamilton thought so.

He picked up the journal and took it into the kitchen with him. He'd read it while his wife finished making breakfast for them.

"He loses his teeth so he can't speak,
Then he just mumbles.
Then his eyes go out
So he can see his own lies in slumber."

Odd. What an odd little depressing poem. Hamilton frowned and re-read the thing. But what did it mean? And why would such a cute little bunny say such things? A twinge of something not so good feeling hit Hamilton and he quickly shook the feeling off.

"What are you planning on doing today?" His wife's voice interrupted his thoughts. He closed the journal shut with a disgruntled thud and laid it on the table determined not to think another thing about it.

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It was Saturday, after all, and he had big plans today. "I've decided to buy a hotrod."

"Hamilton Betters!" Janet Betters exclaimed in dismay. Then more calmly and a little cautiously, "Do we have the money for that?"

Hamilton shrugged, though inwardly he rolled his eyes. Half of him loved that she was the opposite of his ex-wife. His ex-wife had wanted to spend every dime they had and every dime they hadn't. Janet was different. But different sometimes meant annoying as hell. Janet constantly worried about not having a dime to spend. Constantly. But now was not the time to worry about that. Now was the time to spend the nest egg. He'd scrimped, he'd saved and now they had plenty of money.

"Yes!" And he said it with the force he used that clearly told her his mind was made up about it and he knew what he was doing. On Monday, Hamilton pulled into his company's parking lot in a brand new, shiny apple red, 1969 corvette. It was with extreme pride, and not a little bit of giddiness that he strode into work that day. Unfortunately, an hour later one of his employees

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put him in a bad mood. Henry Woodall wanted an employee loan. Henry said he needed new tires for his car and since his wife was pregnant they had more medical bills coming in and so he just needed a front that he could pay back in a few paychecks. Sob, sob, sob, Hamilton thought in disgust. If people managed their money better they'd have some money to buy new tires instead of having to use his company as a gosh-darn bank.

He thought about telling him no. He really did. But Henry wasn't the type of employee to go away and Hamilton did make a good percent of interest on these employee loans. He charged 20% plus a ten dollar processing fee. So he agreed. Why not? He was such a softie, he thought to himself as he called his A/P department to write out a check for Henry. God would reward him in Heaven for his good deeds, he was certain of it.

On Thursday he got a call from a potential buyer, but the price was way too low so Hamilton mumbled something about having a higher offer and hung up the phone. Whenever he wanted to confuse people or not be bothered he mumbled. It was a trick he'd learned a long time ago. He found people just ended up doing what he'd told them the first time around, or leaving him

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alone. It was nice. Mumbling had also gotten him out of more than a few jams. Besides, mumbling was the same thing as speaking. When you spoke a lie, it was actually a lie, but when you mumbled something, it could have been the truth easily misconstrued on the listener's part.

On Friday he got what he thought was a great offer. He took it. Then he closed his office door and gave a silent Whoop! to the air. Finally, he was almost free.

The first thing that happened to Hamilton after he retired wasn't so good. He woke up one morning and his left leg just gave out on him. It was a scary feeling to have one's body part not do as it's told. He immediately went to the doctor. It was the first reminder he had of his actual age. He didn't like the feeling so much. So far his life had been enchanted and he was certain that meant he was blessed, that he'd done everything right.

But then he had secretly wished recently that he could live forever. Life was too much fun. Maybe he shouldn't have wished that, he decided as he sat waiting in the doctor's office for

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the result of the x-rays. It took a few months but his knee recovered. All bad thoughts were forgotten and living forever remained a possibility but only on the stipulation that his body stayed perfect.

Hamilton busied himself over the next year with home improvements, gardening, golfing, and play time. It was heady. It was feeling like a real man again, no longer stuffed behind a desk all day long, but able to do things, actually do things like pull out a toilet and put down flooring. Man, he liked the feeling of satisfaction he got from that. It had been a while since he'd felt that. And everything just seemed like fun. Every day was full of fun, fun, fun. He was having so much fun he even forgot about the bunny that he'd seen in his head a while back. That guy had disappeared. Hamilton shrugged to himself. What did he care about some silly bunny giving him bad rhymes when his head was now filled with all the fun daily things he was doing? Maybe he'd take up painting instead. Bah on being a poet. Heck with that. They didn't make any money anyway. Not that that was an issue but wasn't art supposed to be profitable in some way? Otherwise, what was the point?

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A number of years passed with Hamilton having a ball with the exception of every so often having to go to the dentist to have a rotten tooth pulled. He was fine with that small nuisance called his teeth. He was ready to have all of them pulled because, what did he care, they were just teeth. The rest of him was still healthy.

His wife coughed every night though, which he hated more and more as time passed, and occasionally he'd hear something about his old company, which he'd shrug off and say to himself, "It was meant to be."

The company had been sold. He didn't know what had happened to any of the employees and really didn't care. They weren't his concern anymore. He'd done his best while he'd been the boss and that was good enough. He did, however happen to spot that single woman he'd fired in the grocery store one day. An overwhelming feeling of something came over him but he couldn't quite peg it. She was alone but didn't look any worse for wear. He caught himself staring at her bosoms and stopped. She must be a witch to make a man look at those even from a distance he

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thought with a grimace before turning away. He told the story to Alex when they met up for their Saturday golf session.

Alex grimaced with, Hamilton assumed, distaste, and asked, "What did you do after that?"

Hamilton shrugged. "Nothing. Remember that, son. Best course of action when you don't know what to do is to do nothing. There's no blame in doing nothing, now is there?" Hamilton thought that very good advice to give to his son, very good indeed.

Another year passed, and another. More teeth left Hamilton's mouth and his mumbling became a permanent thing as opposed to intentional and occasional. He could no longer enjoy his favorite sweets, which made him unhappy but he shrugged it off and went to be fitted for dentures. As long as his eyesight stayed good and he could read and see the wonders of the world he was okay.

A year later his eyes started giving out on him. After the initial fear, he calmed and shrugged. He had plenty of money to have eye surgery, Alex reminded him. He looked up the possibility online.

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Then he scheduled an appointment for it. No use waiting and he had plenty of money to cover the bill. The night before he was antsy. He didn't like surgery, even small surgery but he'd do it. For his eyesight, he'd do it. Teeth he could take or leave, but his eyes they were a different story.

Hamilton was too antsy to read fiction that night so he got online and looked up stories on blogs. One story in bold gold lettering with a bunny rabbit across the top caught his eye and he clicked on the link to read it. He didn't normally read horror stories but he was in an odd mood this evening and so he did. The story was pretty funny. It was about this guy who was a hypocritical, selfish--pardon his language--asshole who ran a company, paid his employees next to nothing, lied, cheated, stole, did all the bad things that Hamilton was quite certain would send you straight to Hell and never, ever saw himself for the man he actually was. What a jerk! He was so glad he wasn't like that greedy bastard.

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Hamilton skipped some pages of the story, yawned because he was getting seriously tired, and then skipped more pages until he found the end of the thing. He read the last few lines.

“He loses his teeth so he can’t speak,

Then he just mumbles.

Then his eyes go out

So he can see his own lies in slumber.”

Hamilton got an odd lump in his throat and quickly shut down his computer. He felt that feeling again that he didn’t like at all, the one that made his breath feel stuck in his chest. He shoved it away. Maybe online stories on blogs hadn’t been such a good idea after all.

Hamilton went into surgery with lots of reassurances from the nurses. It was nothing to worry about, they reminded him, patting his hand. These surgeries were performed all the time. Hamilton felt reassured. He wasn’t going to worry.

When he woke up and the bandages were removed he couldn’t see anything. It was all black. He panicked momentarily, then

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reassured himself that this was some kind of side effect and would go away in a few moments because he was good man and bad things just didn't happen to people as good as him.

He waited a few minutes but still nothing. People were talking all around him in low voices, mumbles that he couldn't make out. It annoyed and scared him. Why was there nothing in front of his eyes? Why couldn't he see?

He felt like screaming but the noise got stuck in this throat as that cute little bunny rabbit from long ago, the one he'd forgotten about but that had nudged his subconscious the night before with the online story, suddenly appeared in his mind. The bunny hopped around for a few seconds, then stopped and fixed those bright blue eyes straight ahead. It was as if he was looking dead at Hamilton. Something burned inside Hamilton's brain at that look. The bunny opened his mouth and said slowly and succinctly:

"He loses his teeth so he can't speak

Then he just mumbles

Then his eyes go out

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So he can see his own lies in slumber."

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On the deadly sin of Wrath...

"-and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation." Exodus 34:7

Notes to the Reader: If you were to paint a portrait of wrath in its purest form, I'd imagine you'd find a very satanic human being. I used the psychology of the sociopath to paint my own portrait of what this sin looks like when it shows up in human form. The argument of nature vs. nurture is sometimes hard to address unless you add past generational behaviors into the equation. And the question of why someone is born without a conscience cannot fully be answered via scientific means. This is where Exodus lends a hand and how the wrath story was born.

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2

The Jack-in-the-Box

Dirk Madding was keeping a good drug-filled high but nothing that would mess up his eyesight when he first saw her. To him, she looked like a shot of some badly needed elixir. Just what the doc prescribed. If he could get her, that is. And he could, because he wasn't just the best singer in Remy, Virginia; he was also the best damn looking singer in Remy, Virginia. Blonde hair, baby blue eyes and a body and a half.

He was cocky on this issue because he worked out hard to keep himself in shape for his gigs and also because he had a string of women in his past to prove his looks. Also, his stardom always got him the women he wanted. The trick was to make them want you first. Then they were flies in a web, just ready to be stung, numbed and destroyed.

The music was what mattered the most to him. No woman had ever compared to the high he got on stage when he sang. Then he was like a god and he loved it. Besides, the loud music blaring back into his ears and the sound of his own voice along with the many

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free beers and shots he got when he was up on that stage kept him from hearing all the other chatter that went on in his mind; faint memories of his dad hitting him across the back with his belt buckle, or else backhanding him a good one across a cheek for back-talking.

"Don't you sass me, boy!" His dad used to roar in his younger drunken states. And always, the lesson to Dirk had been, "You're a piece of shit, and don't you forget it!"

He hadn't. He hadn't forgotten as he'd grown older and more resentful of a mother who stayed scared and away from her husband. He hadn't forgotten every time his dad had broken skin but kept on whipping him with the belt that his mom had looked away, and then quietly left the room. Nope. He hadn't forgotten any of it. He could still feel that intense sting of the belt buckle across the back of his leg. His dad's whacks with that piece of metal went through skin, muscle, and entered into the bone, where they stayed and hummed a constant tune for more than just a few minutes. Nope. Dirk hadn't forgotten those parental gifts at all. They were like tattoos in the back of his mind,

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permanent things that he showed off to the world when he needed to punch his fist in someone's face.

But the lights of a stage, the feeling of being god, hearing his own voice and seeing the laughing, smiling, and drunken ravings of the crowds beneath him; those times he let his own god roar. He let him roar in song. Because then he didn't just feel like a god, or say he was a god; then he was the god.

The Ranch, on the other hand, was the place where he let out his other side, because he certainly did hate women more than he could express in a song. He hated them and yet they always came back to him for more. Flies, he thought again. They were little flies almost begging to be killed. And he obliged. Always, he made them do things they'd never do sober, and then he made them feel shame. Sluts! And after he was done, he always blew a kiss inside his head to his dearly departed mother for being such a piece of dirt that she couldn't even stand up to her old man enough to protect her son.

If he thought hard about it, he hadn't met a woman who was worth more than a pinch of salt anyway, so why would his mother have

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been any different? They were all good for just five things, screwing, cooking, cleaning, hitting, and getting knocked up.

If Dirk had a few runts around town he didn't know about them. The one-nighter Ranch whores wouldn't dare to think they meant anything to him and his regular girlfriend was on the pill. He'd ordered her to get on it after they'd started dating. She should consider herself lucky, he'd told her, that he'd picked her to be his steady, because he was a celebrity in this town, and so, was selective about who he let stay in his life.

But Gina was getting as boring as the many gigs he'd been performing at lately. The seas of crowds all looked like little toy figurines, lifeless and entirely uninteresting. He needed to feel that pulse beat of being a god running hot and new through his veins again, but nothing was doing it for him lately.

Then he saw her.

She was fine too. Damn, if she didn't look like a long drink of water after a drought with those shoulder length copper curls of hers and that heart-shaped angelic face. He'd never noticed

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redheads much before, but he was noticing her. He liked what he saw. She sparkled. Something in her face, her smile, that sparkle, made his chest tighten and swell and damned if he didn't feel suddenly like the engine of a race car revving up for the Daytona 500.

He sang to her. In the crowd of people, he looked right at her as he flexed his biceps and sang a few words just to her. He didn't know if she'd feel the energy he was sending out but damn he hoped she came to the bar after this outdoor park shindig was done. These Friday festivals were held monthly in the warmer months in downtown Remy. They lasted until nine, then the band packed up and headed to a local bar to continue the fun until two. He liked the looks of this chick. He really liked the looks of her. He noticed some other guys checking her out down in the crowd but she didn't seem to notice them. Good. Less competition that way. Then, *hell*, what did he care about competition? He'd win. If she gave an inkling that she was interested in him, he'd win all right.

She didn't come to the bar. But that didn't stop Dirk from thinking about her and comparing her to all the other women out

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there to choose from tonight. It was a letdown, but just a small one. Maybe she'd show up at another gig and maybe she wouldn't. He didn't care much one way or the other.

She didn't show up. But he hadn't counted on his mind betraying him either. And it wasn't letting up. He kept thinking about her. Hell, he'd even masturbated to the picture of her face he'd had in his head a few times. His memory told him she had the face of an angel. Trick, he thought. Couldn't be as pretty as he pictured her. Still, he thought about her, and actually hoped she'd pop up at another gig. Unusual. Normally a woman didn't get under his skin so quickly. But one gig went by and another and another and still no redheaded angel knocking on his stage.

Dirk gave up. Sort of. As luck would have it a towing call came in for him in June and there she was, standing in the middle of the library parking lot in a pair of gray sweat shorts, a ponytail and looking like she was a damn eighteen year old. His heart did double-time as he hooked up her black Element to his tow truck. He kept his face averted and tried to relax. Relax. Keep it cool. You're Dirk Madding, celebrity.

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His body wasn't listening to what he was telling it though and he had to fight hard to keep his hard-on from getting any stiffer. Damn, she looked...something inside of him craved her so badly it hurt...too damn good. It hurt something inside his chest. A few minutes later, she was gone. Dirk breathed a sigh of relief.

If she hadn't been with her dad he'd have, well, he'd have done nothing basically because he didn't want her to see him as *this* guy. As this guy, he was just some normal damn manual laborer, someone who could be overlooked by the likes of her. This guy wasn't the guy who would appeal to her. Instinctively, he knew that. He wanted to be the rock star with her. That guy had it all, fame, fortune, glory. That guy, Dirk thought, looking down at his hands in disgust, didn't get sweaty palms looking at her glossy cupid lips. That guy didn't get hard and think of her head in his lap when he saw her in a pony-tail, no make-up and shorts. That guy had more control over his body than the guy he'd just seen almost make a fool of himself. Nope. That guy he'd just observed a few minutes ago wasn't him. Right there, inside the interior of his tow truck, Dirk put a seed of hate in his mind just for his little strawberry sparkler. Uppity bitch.

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No woman controlled him! He'd see her again. He'd see her again and he'd be in control the next time around.

It took months. Then she appeared like a prom princess in a pink shirt under a pink plaid flannel, blue jeans and black boots. And there was that ponytail again. Damn if she didn't look like a February cupcake in that outfit. He'd love to put his own Valentine's Day lollipop in between those pouty glossed up lips of hers. Seeing her inside of an actual bar as opposed to outdoors for a change, and up close where he could examine her better, well, he liked what he saw a little bit more. And tonight he was in full control. Tonight, maybe he'd get lucky.

He watched her with her friends as they danced. He made eye contact from up on stage, told her to shake her hips for him. She did. She requested a song during an intermission. He made sure to touch her arm lightly and cock his head to the side. He always cocked his head to the side. He'd read somewhere that was supposed to put people at ease, make them feel safe. And she hadn't leaned away when he'd touched her. That was a good sign. She smelled of something sweet and foreign. He liked it. He called her 'baby girl' when he answered her about the song

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request. He heard her say something about recovering from knee surgery. He had the same problem. That wasn't a lie. But giving her her song request was one, depending on how you looked at things. He'd play a Nickelback song but only at last call. She'd have to wait until then to hear it. And then, it would be his turn to do some talking. And something else. He hoped for her drunk. The chicks were easier that way, more pliable.

He was making notes of things about her now, though he'd been doing that already every time he saw her. He was noting that she wore big tops, which meant she was either self-conscious or she actually had a baby belly she was hiding underneath. Sometimes she struck him as being the self-conscious type. Those chicks he loved. Easy pickings. Beautiful and didn't even know it. Damn, but he was hoping she was one of those. Other times, she struck him as a possibly upper crust lady slumming it in a bar across town for the night. If that was the case then he owed it to all the guys out there to take her down a peg or two. He'd be happy to do that one too. Then other times, when she danced front and center and looked directly up at him, he saw this damn promise in her eyes that he really wanted to see if she'd keep. Fuck,

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but she oozed some kind of damn sexuality from those eyes and those lips of hers.

She didn't stay. She left early like some kind of Cinderella. Thwarted, Dirk thought, and felt a cigarette lighter inside of him extinguish itself. He didn't like much of the selection at this bar at 2 a.m. so he decided to call it a night and head home to Gina. She'd do.

But the short drive home made that extinguished lighter turn into something charred and burned. By the time he got to the front door of her small two bedroom house, he felt the need to slap Gina around a bit before he did anything else with her. So he started a fight as soon as he walked in, yelling loudly for her to wake up and fix him something to eat.

When she didn't get out of bed after he'd gone to the fridge and popped open a Miller, he smiled, took a long guzzle, and half-danced his way into their bedroom, then he slowly and pleausurably poured the rest of his can of Miller onto the top of the back of her head. Gina always slept face down. Too bad. He

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would have loved to see the look on her face as the ice cold beer hit it. Would've stung her eyes too.

She jumped up quick enough, yelling and hollering, as he knew she would. And she was too busy cursing him out to notice the fist that came up and connected to the left side of her jaw or the brief smile that hit his face right before he hit her.

"Fuckin' cunt!" Dirk said loudly. "I told you to fix me somethin' to eat. Damn, girl. I'm fucking starvin' from workin' all night and here you are just pretty as you please, snoring away." He jerked her by the elbow and dragged her into the small utilitarian kitchen, then shoved her towards the fridge. "Now fix me something to eat!" He looked down then at the old beige linoleum floor so she wouldn't see him silently snickering. She was shaking she was so nervous, and holding her jaw like he'd done something serious to it. Hell. It was a bitch-slap that he knew with absolute certainty didn't break anything. She was such a damn pussy.

She made him some chicken and fries though and brought a plate out into the living room to him twenty minutes later. He was

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flipping thru channels and drinking another beer but took the plate of food and ate with relish, then pretended to apologize for hurting her. He knew the right lines. Gina was so gullible.

"I'm sorry, honey." He said as he wrapped his arms around her. She scooted away from him. Her eyes were doing that funny nervous blink thing they'd been doing since after the first time he'd hit her. He tried not to laugh but he secretly liked it. Blink, blink, blink. It was annoying enough to make him hate her a little bit more each day.

"You poutin'?" He said, thrusting his lower lip out, mimicking her. Then when she didn't look up at him, he used his palm to hit her on the back of her head.

"Dammit, Dirk!" She screeched at him, trying to jerk away. "Cut it out!"

Then the usual happened. She fought him. He teased her some more, taunted her, before she stomped off to bed. Then he came in behind her and they screwed. Because that's what he did with his women. He screwed them. Over and over again. And that's all

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he'd ever do with any woman because, he thought again, closing his eyes and thinking of the pouty princess' pink shiny lips to keep his dick hard, that's what they were really good for was a screw. Either they screwed you or you screwed them. He preferred the latter.

The redheaded princess showed up again four gigs and exactly two months later. Damned if she wasn't starting to remind him of a damn jack-in-the-box. She was wearing deep purple this time and had on a pair of jeans that made her look like she'd lost weight. Her hair was down and glistened like a sunrise in July on a beach somewhere and damned if he didn't feel that hard streak of desire for those lips of hers to be wrapped around his dick. And damned if he didn't feel out of control again, like he had the first time he'd seen her. But that could be the meth he'd taken earlier. His mind was racing down tracks faster than a June-bug in an open field and he knew why. Yeah, it was partly the meth, but it was partly this chick too. He'd been on the lookout for her at his gigs, hoping she'd show up. She intrigued him and until he figured out just how she ticked she would probably continue to do so.

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But at this gig, he knew the chick she was with and so he believed he now had her figured out, boxed and wrapped in a neat little package. She was hanging out with Shannon tonight. He and Shannon had had their own little night together one night at the Ranch after a show a few years back. He'd given her some meth and had directed her and another chick in a little porno flick one of the other guys from the band was nice enough to put on video. Oh yeah. Shannon was in his right pocket because he had a shame button on her that he could press whenever he wanted to do so. Hell, he could show the world what she looked like inside and out. Dirk loved nothing more than having this particular kind of power over Shannon Watts at the moment because she had an in to something he'd not only decided he wanted but now he'd decided he was definitely going to have. And that would be one little copper-haired, pouty lipped jack-in-the-box with the longest damn legs he'd seen in a while.

She'd looked up at him with such wonder when he was on stage tonight that he was certain she was star-struck. She'd do anything he wanted her to do and damn that sounded like just the right note after feeling too many highs and lows related to her. He wanted her. He'd have her.

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This time she stayed until the last call. He kept his eye on her as he made his way nonchalantly thru the smaller last call crowd, saying a few thanks as he got compliments on the band's performance tonight.

Look at me, he thought to her. Just look at me. Look at me now. He had his head cocked to the left slightly. Look at me. I'm harmless, he thought getting irritated. But he kept up the body language trick. He had lots of body language tricks because he'd studied them, was a master at them. They helped him get what he wanted. They helped him make people see who he wanted them to see.

She looked at him, made eye contact, then looked away. Internally, he roared in frustration. He didn't get this woman. He really didn't understand her. If she was like Shannon, she should be over here, by him, trying to talk to him. He was a rock star! He was somebody!

Dirk decided not to go home to Gina, tonight. He needed a boost, so he went with his boys to the Ranch, had a few easy lays with

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some groupies, women who actually knew how they were supposed to act in the presence of a famous guy, women who knew how to kneel and do what he told them to do. He was a good guy. Women loved him. This chick should be drooling all over him because he was actually giving her more than a passing glance. He didn't care. Really. She was just another cunt like all the rest.

That sentiment would be most helpful without the many replays that kept popping into his mind of her dancing for him, jack-in-the-box with the copper curls and pouty pink lips that made a man's mouth water. He was beginning to hate her more for all the many replays that kept rolling themselves over and over inside his mind. She was a damn witch!

Dirk started talking to his band members about her. He started asking around about her. He had guys on the lookout for her at the gigs. The doorman was supposed to give him a signal if she showed up. She did show up. Six months later at another gig downtown in spring. There she was, and this time she wasn't wearing any big shirt that covered up her waistline.

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"Damn," he said under his breath as she breezed by in dark brown shorts and a black and brown graffiti t-shirt. He gave a look to his guitar player that said, "I want that for this evening's dessert."

They may not have said more than five words to each other in a two year period, but once he got up on stage and sang, they were in synch, because she was right there at the front and dancing for him. When she danced, he no longer hated her for messing with his mind on off nights when sneaky little replays of her snuck into his mind. Her dances put him in a state of full-out body pumping adrenaline rush. Just her presence in the bar did something to his blood that made him feel like one hundred and twenty percent male. Tonight, he thought. Couldn't it be tonight? But there was the voice he didn't like coming in to intrude upon his semi-euphoria. That voice wasn't the completely self-confident guy he normally knew. That voice wasn't cocky cowboy who could sing rock just as good as he could belt out a country tune. Damn, one thing he'd never tolerate was a woman screwing up his mind.

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Then she left again. Early. Back to the other schedule of leaving before midnight. So he cut her out of his mind--for good this time--went home to Gina, brutalized her some before apologizing like he always did, then made it up to her in the bedroom. He decided that if he got a sign, any sort of sign with regards to this redheaded chick, then he'd try to pursue something. Otherwise, he'd be sure to let her know what he felt about her making his blood boil with those damn hip dances then leaving him hanging to deal with his own hard-ons.

It was a month later that Dirk decided to check out a new, and cheaper, gym in town. As he was walking out of it, the redhead walked into it. Dirk did a double-take, though he was sure she hadn't seen him. Gotcha! He thought, glancing down at his watch to catch the time, as he walked the short distance to his jeep. There was the sign and now he was going to reel her in to him, nice and slow. Then out of his mind she'd pop, just like a jack-in-the-box.

The next day he showed up ten minutes earlier than he'd left the day before. There she was, in a pair of small dark blue gym shorts and a t-shirt, no make-up and hair in a ponytail. He

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stayed out of sight so he could watch her work out. The way a person worked out said a lot. The street clothes she'd walked in wearing said business woman, confident. Reading a book while using one of the ARC trainers told him she tuned out the world. She was here to work out, not converse. So she was serious, athletic. Then she attacked some weight machines and did some squats and that told him something else, how she'd look from behind without those shorts on and damn, he shook his head as he watched her then observed the other men in the gym. They noticed her too. All of them noticed her in some way or another. The faithful ones with girlfriends or wives looked quickly, then looked away. But there were a few others that kept glancing her way. She seemed completely and utterly oblivious to all of them, even him. Interesting, Dirk thought. He'd never met a woman who was so out of tune with her surroundings, so immersed in her workouts that no man got her attention. He kind of liked it. But he'd never seen it before. So was she with somebody then? Taken?

That didn't sound right. He'd never actually seen her with anyone but chicks. He asked around some more. He'd mentioned her to Shannon but she'd been evasive, non-informative. This chick was different though. Somehow, he knew it and he wanted that

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'different' for himself. It never hit him until he saw her face to face, and then that same feeling hit him again and again, that rev-it-up-I'm-king-of-the-world feeling. Eventually, in a year or two, odds were for her becoming dull and boring like Gina. But for now, he really wanted to play some real cat and mouse with this redhead.

A break came shortly thereafter from one of the other local band members. Finally, he was getting the info he needed on this woman. She'd been married to a buddy of a buddy once upon a time, a heavy drinker who'd moved off to the beach after the divorce. Tough family, all drinkers, brawlers, sounded similar to Dirk's. But the wife, the redhead, had always stayed away from the parties, kept to herself, studious type. Dirk liked it. She'd been loyal to a man for twenty years who'd seriously screwed up a really good thing. Dirk liked that a lot. And apparently she was good with money too. According to his source, her ex had been a well-taken care of individual. Dirk's eyes saw stars at the thought of a woman who could take care of the finances. Dirk rolled it all around in his mind one more time. She didn't sleep around, had been married twenty years to a man who liked his liquor as much as Dirk did, had no kids, and she

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kept to herself. There. That's what he kept seeing that was different about her. She kept to herself *except* when she was dancing and drinking. But when she was out drinking and dancing, she was different.

She was *shy*, Dirk concluded with a wide grin. Unless he'd gotten dumb with age, the many looks she'd given him when they'd made eye contact when he was up on stage told him she dug him. She'd danced for him. A woman that danced like that for a man was telling that man that she was unequivocally attracted to him. All he had to do now was hook her. Dirk had another day at the gym, waiting just for her. He kept his body stance so that he was facing it. If she came into the gym today, he'd be there waiting.

Just come in a little bit closer, baby, he thought. Even as he thought it, he watched her breeze thru the front door and head into the women's locker room. Now she was here, right here within his grasp. How did one go about getting her attention away from her work out and her books and onto him? Dirk thought about that as he headed to the men's locker room. He wasn't ready to see her yet. Tomorrow he'd have a plan.

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And he did have a plan. He showed up and made a point to position himself on one of the recumbent bikes that were not only right in front of the locker rooms, but also faced the mirrored wall opposite so that she couldn't help but notice him when she came out of the locker room.

She did. He watched with humor as he saw her look directly in front of her as she walked out of the locker room, pause, look left then right like a mouse in a trap, then head all the way to the other side of the wall and plant herself down on a stationary bike. Hahaha. Gotcha. And now he knew. That reaction could only be nerves. Man, she seemed shy as hell. He was going to love introducing her to some of his own brand of reality. She was a form of purity that was rare in a forty-something year old. Not only did he like it, he craved to own it for a while, take her from her fairy tale world and show her his own. So his goal was set. He'd time it so that he'd be done working out about the time she'd be done on her bike. Then he'd walk past slow and easy and she'd come over to him and say something. Probably just hi since she seemed nervous. That was good. He liked her nervous. But she'd talk. She'd speak first. Because

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that's the way it had to be because that's the way it had played out in his head. Reel her in, he thought again with a smile.

That's just what he did. He walked up to the water fountain. She walked up to the water fountain. Their paths intersected. She stopped right in front of him, a little out of breath and...said nothing. She walked right on past and refilled her water bottle. Then she continued her workout far away from him, in fact, completely ignoring him. And now, he was pissed! That was it. That was the last straw. She wasn't shy. She wasn't nervous. She was...a fucking bitch!

Dirk high-tailed it into the men's locker room before he really lost his cool. What kind of a damn game was she playing here? That was it. Last straw. She'd toyed with his emotions. Somehow, she'd gotten into his mind and played games with it--she screwed with his mind!--and now he was ready to cut somebody, namely one little redheaded jack-in-the-box. She dared to play a game with him? She'd lose. Nobody played head games with him. Nobody!

He dared her to come back to the gym after that. She didn't. But she dared something else though he was ready for it when it

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happened. Hell, he'd been hoping for it, counting on it. And there she was, fifteen minutes before last call at the Hisser's bar with a group of girls and, this time, guys too.

He wondered which one of the losers she was with. Was she there flaunting that she'd managed to tease him, make him hopeful, and then not follow thru? He had her number, he thought shooting a rifle at her head in his mind. He whispered something to the guys in the band when she came up front to dance, drunk as two skunks too. This would be priceless if he wasn't so pissed off he could barely think. He began to belt out the lyrics to "Man In The Box."

He was telling her she'd best get out of his sight because now the only thing he wanted to see her do was turn black and blue under the pummeling of his fists in her face. He'd love nothing more than to see her crippled, deformed, mutated, in some kind of a wheelchair. She'd dared to make him feel humiliation and shame? She'd dared to try to make him feel something he hadn't felt since he was three with his dad's belt buckle playing a tune on his back and his legs? Fucking cunt!

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Then he calmed. As he sung the lyrics and looked down at her dancing, rubbing it in his face that he could never have her, he calmed and became the guy nobody knew on personal terms but him. His eyes turned to blue ice as he felt that guy take his hand, felt the hate inside him chill into something sharp, icy, deadly.

After the song, a hunting buddy came up behind her. She rested her chin on the guy's shoulder as Dirk told the guy he was ready for hunting season to start so he could get back to his real life. He didn't look at her again. Had he done that, he would have acted on the ice he was feeling and twisted her tiny throat in two. He did, however, end the night there, then walked over to his band members to talk. From that standpoint, the one she couldn't see him from, he turned glacial blue eyes on her back and dared her to stay after the show. He dared her silently to get left behind from her group.

Be dumb enough to come up to me now, he thought. Please. I *will* kill you. I'll pass you around to all my band members, maybe feed you some meth, pass you around some more, then I'll beat that pretty little face of yours into a pulp and leave you naked

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in an alley somewhere for the dogs to find you. Make me feel shame again, bitch! I am god!

Two weeks passed. Then three. He saw her at the gym once more. She passed him on her way to the bathroom. This time though, the naïve, wide-eyes were gone. They'd been replaced with such pure rage that he bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment of it. But he also replied with some heavy hate of his own as he eyed her upper thighs. Cunt thought she was special.

Did she know how much he hated her now? If she could read his thoughts she wouldn't have dared to glare at him. He wanted her scared of him. Be scared little princess, little miss jack-in-the-box, he thought. He dared her one last time in only his mind to ever set foot near a stage where he was performing again.

Shortly after that Dirk hunted. He hunted deer and imagined the redhead as the target, pieces of her flesh would splatter all over tree trunks and leaves if he shot her right. Or maybe he'd do it clean with a bow. Then he could stick a knife into her lower abs and gut her like the pathetic thing she was. He had fun imagining the various death scenarios. He had so much fun,

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until finally, she was dead and out of his mind, for good he hoped.

She didn't show up at any of the downtown gigs the next spring. He knew she wouldn't. He'd threatened and made it out loud. Then he'd taken a knife to his middle finger cutting an inch off of it, down to the first bend of his knuckle, to show his boys he was serious about causing pain to one little redhead if she ever showed her face around him again. Dirk was a man of his word. Once he made a threat, he didn't back down from it. Rock star or not, he wasn't a coward. He changed his image from all orange and yellow shirts to full out black attire. He made sure the band's photos no longer showed him with his head cocked to one side, but instead full on and straight ahead, hands at his waist, legs spread, ready for war.

He let the beast inside have full reign. Where there had been adrenaline before, there was pure rage at the world, pure hate. It was better than the adrenaline the fiery redhead had caused to pour into his veins. The ice made him sing tougher, with more energy. The audiences loved it. They loved him. They fed off his hate and he fed off their adoration. He made sure to find a few

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redheads, unsuspecting things, and cause them some shame, some humiliation. But there weren't many around to shame. But oh, how he wished there were. He'd kill them all with his bare hands if he could.

The next year came with something black attached to it. He'd used more meth, drank more liquor and smoked more pot than he ever had in his life in these last months. It had been a rush, a high like he'd never felt before. But something in that ice inside of him was cracking, breaking, becoming too brittle, making him lose his edge. He felt it more with each gig. He upped his drug dose to offset the feeling. But it was still coming; this dark, black thing hovering just above his head, out of reach; a shadowy black bat with glowing red eyes. He saw those eyes in glimpses, then not at all. Then he saw himself, torn and ripped, body parts in a cave, a bloody mouth with razor sharp teeth feeding on him. It screeched. The chalk white and bloody thing screeched this insane high-pitched noise. It found him in his dreams at night and the sound never stopped. Dirk took more drugs to calm the growing, screeching thing, but it began to haunt his days as well as his nights.

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Not long after Dirk Madding was found dead at the Ranch on the morning after one of his gigs. The picture of him lying on the wood floor of a bedroom inside the Ranch was an extreme contradiction to how he'd seen himself in life. Vomit had spewed from his mouth as he'd died, and now, it lay there attached to parts of his chin and his throat, this sticky, brownish black glaze with chunks of regurgitated food speckled here and there. His limp body, once so hard and taut from workouts, was the color of a burnt yellow-black watercolor. And there was a smell attached to it that told the story of his death to any creature that didn't know it. His blue eyes, normally so full of rage and hate, now shone wide and stared straight ahead. Permanently fixed inside of them was an expression one could barely describe. It was haunted, vacant, and full of something that would make even the hardest of men feel fear, for it told the story of Dirk's last moments on earth: terror.

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On the deadly sin of Gluttony..

"For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, and slumber will clothe them in rags." Proverbs 23:21

Notes to the Reader: Gluttony came about as I read on co-dependency, worked on collages, and learned how to use the potter's wheel.

The addict chooses his or her life based on the reality he or she believes to be real. The co-dependent so wants to help the addict to change that they will buy into the fiction of, "they can." According to research, there are statistically more women than men who fall into the role of co-dependent with more males in the role of the addict.

The fiction of the mind tells us that one person can save another. The reality is that you cannot change a person who does not want to change. Period. An addict who says they are "trying to quit" does not count. Believe them only when they "do." Actions speak louder than words.

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Glutton for Punishment

The reason Hank loved Shelly so much was because of all she did for him. He never put his exact thoughts into words but his love was based on an if/then statement. "If you do all this for me and keep doing it, then I love you." But what he always said to her was, "I love you because of all the things you do for me." It was really just a matter of semantics. And, he reminded her when she complained about his drinking so much right after they got married, "You knew I was an alcoholic when you married me." That was his "out" clause. Because everybody knew you couldn't change a man who didn't want to change. And why would he want to do that? He loved his life just as it was.

He did love Shelly, of course. He loved her because she did take care of everything for him. She washed his clothes, did the dishes, vacuumed the house, made sure his life was easy. He liked his life now. He liked it a lot. He'd been one step from homeless before he'd married her but now he was living the good

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life. Shelly worked. She worked hard for him. All he had to do was complain about something and Shelly would fix it.

Hank told her the problem and Shelly found a way to fix it for him. She'd done it very well countless times. When they'd first gotten married, Hank had complained about not having a TV and then had argued that she could put it on a charge card because, unlike him, she was lucky enough to have a job. She'd done it. He'd complained about not having any clothes so she'd gotten a second job to buy him some. He'd complained about not having any furniture so she'd bought them some on store credit. He'd complained about not liking to paint the house, so she'd done it. He'd complained about his basement looking like crap, so she'd painted it and spent a few weekends putting down floor tiles, while he was out "piddling" around town. And when he'd complained about the steep slope on the side of the yard, she'd paid for a load of gravel and shoveled the gravel down on the area. He remembered drinking a beer as he watched her shovel gravel that day and saying sweetly, "I'd help you, honey, but you know I have a bad back." That was the normal pattern. Hank complained and Shelly fixed. And that's how he liked it. All he

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had to do was complain about something and she would fix it for him.

Easy street was what he called his marriage to Shelly. Every man needed a good woman, he thought to himself as he popped open a beer one night on his couch and turned on the TV. Then he picked up the steak he'd just gotten out of the oven and took a sweet juicy bite. Two things he loved the most in life were beer and a good steak.

After drinking twelve, Hank ran out, so he yelled up to Shelly to go get him some more. She complained. She mentioned that she thought he'd had enough. He ranted a bit. Just enough to keep her from studying her school work. She sighed and went to get him more beer because that's what she did. She did what a good wife should do. He'd married her hoping she'd never change because he liked things just as they were.

Most of Hank's weekends were spent drinking and hanging out at bars with his brother's gang. His brother always ribbed him about being married but Hank didn't care. Besides, what the wife didn't know about when he went out wouldn't hurt her now would

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it? Most of the time he got too drunk to mess around much with other women anyhow. If he had his pick between a woman and beer, the beer would always win. He loved it. He loved the way the top sounded when he popped open a can. He loved the coldness of it as it poured down his throat. He loved the taste. He couldn't get enough of it.

He drank on weeknights too, but once he started working he tried to keep the weeknights down to a six pack a night after work. Sometimes he slipped and drank twelve. But that was nothing compared to what his brother could drink. Damn, Buddy could drink a twelve pack and a fifth of Jack and still come into work the next day. The guy had a gut of steel apparently. Hank was jealous of Buddy on this count but not on anything else. It was he, Hank, who had a house and a stable home life, thanks to the wife. And whenever Shelly brought up his drinking habits, Hank always made a point to bring up Buddy's drinking habits, for if you compared him to Buddy, he looked like a saint.

Hank went out more and more with Buddy as Shelly studied more and more. But as he got a little bit older and his beer gut got a little bit bigger, he felt more comfortable just hanging out

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in the basement of his house with Buddy and a case of beer between them. They watched movies and got drunk in "the man cave" and talked about old times.

Damn, he missed his twenties, he thought when he hit thirty. Where had the time gone? Shelly was out of school by then and still looking for a better job. Hank didn't care one way or the other. He bought what he wanted to buy when he wanted to buy it and didn't worry about consequences. Shelly always took care of that for him.

Hank was thirty-seven when a hotel manager found Buddy dead in his hotel room. That was a turning point for Hank. Buddy was his partner, his brother, the guy he partied with all the time and now he was dead. He couldn't take it. Hank had never felt such pain in his life. He drank more beer but that didn't help. He drank liquor, but that didn't help either. He was angry at God for taking his brother away from him and he prayed to whoever was out there to bring him back.

He sat in his basement and drank and all he saw were memories of Buddy and him drinking and laughing together. He got put on

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valium first, then he tried anti-depressants. Nothing helped. And Shelly became a constant reminder of what he'd lost. He began to look at everything she'd taken care of and decided it wasn't enough. Here was something she couldn't take care of and he hated her for it. He wished to God it would have been her they'd found dead in that hotel room instead of Buddy. He'd rather have his brother than her. Buddy had been his best friend, his drinking pal and he wanted him back. Dammit, he wanted him back!

So he drank more. Shelly went on some South Beach diet kick so he let her put him on it too. What the hell. Maybe it would help things. It didn't. He drank more and more. He drank a lot of liquor too. He drank and he thought on his brother and how he wished he would've let him move into this house with him and Shelly. Maybe then he would still be alive.

He worked too, but not as much as he used to work. All he really wanted to do was stay in the house and drink and watch TV. He wanted to be that young guy again with no worries and no death in his future. He wanted out. That's what Hank wanted to do more than anything. He wanted out of his life. He drank even more

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when he found out he had to have his hip replaced. The night before his surgery he turned up a beer to God as if to give him a big, "Fuck you, God, for giving me this shit in my life."

He went thru the surgery okay but something had changed inside of him that he could no longer hide or ignore. Actually, maybe nothing had changed but Shelly. Shelly had changed and he didn't want her anymore. She seemed completely unaffected by what had happened to his brother, his hip, his life and he wanted her to pay for that. He wanted her to die really. Somehow killing her would vindicate him with his dead brother. He needed that.

So he'd get drunk and threaten to kill her if she ever left him. He wanted to get a reaction out of her like he used to get. He wanted to feel the drama he used to feel when she thought she needed him. He wanted her to feel again like he was her protector instead of how she looked at him now. Now, she looked at him like she used to look at Buddy. He saw it. He saw disgust in her eyes, felt it when he tried to have sex with her. She still took care of him, still bought him beer, still cleaned and did all the maintenance stuff she used to do, but she didn't make him feel good like she used to make him feel. And for this,

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he wanted her dead and buried, or else out of his sight for good.

So he threatened her more and more often. And when he wasn't doing that, he made snide comments about her house cleaning. Then he made some comments about how the neighbor's son was checking her out when she was bent over in her flower garden. He said it to be lewd on purpose, to make her feel uncomfortable. Then he said he actually liked that the neighbor's son was watching her. He saw the look of revulsion on her face and went back inside to drink more beer.

Then he threatened her more. Finally, she got the hint. Finally, she left. Good, he thought. And good riddance. He got the house, he got the dog, and got to keep most of the furniture. He didn't need her, not if she couldn't make him feel good about himself anymore. All he needed was his beer and his dog.

The bills ran up and he quit his job. Then he applied for disability and got it, but it didn't stretch far enough, so he sold their furniture, letting everyone know his brother died, his hip broke and now his wife had left him and wasn't life one

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grand piece of crap? He wanted to shout it out to the world. He wanted them to feel his pain. He wanted the world to know he'd been struck by lightning and it wasn't fair.

He called family members constantly, in drunken states, and whined about not having any food in the house. He drank more as he reminded them that he was the victim here. He'd done nothing wrong. His wife had given up on their marriage, not him. She's the one who'd suddenly up and left him out of the blue, not him. Then he complained again about not having any money to pay the electric bill. They all helped him at first. His aunt bought him groceries. His mother bought him groceries. His sister moved in with him for a while until she found another lover, then she moved out to the country again.

He drank more and called more people wanting to keep singing his woes to the world. But after a few years, the world was no longer listening. "What the fuck ever!" He said out loud one night in his basement, tearing up yet another bill from a collection agency. He was drunk, he was naked, and the house looked like crap. His bare stomach juttet out to the edge of his downstairs coffee table. Disability barely paid enough.

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He guzzled another beer and crumpled the Busch Light can in his right hand then threw it in the general vicinity of his trash can, before lighting another cigarette. Briefly he noted the ashtray looked like an overgrown colony of cigarette butts, thought about walking over to his trash can to empty it, then decided he'd rather just get another beer.

He got up slowly, his back hurting from the weight of his stomach, and ignoring the stench of the repercussions of sitting on one's couch naked all day, every day for three years and got another beer from the white stickered mini-fridge.

Two beers left, he noted, slamming the door of the mini-fridge shut. Two damn beers! He began to shout up to his wife to go to the store and get him some more beer, then remembered she'd left him.

He didn't care. This was his fucking life: shit. He tipped a beer up to the air in a sarcastic salute to the world, then guzzled it.

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On the deadly sin of Envy...

"A tranquil heart gives life to the flesh, but envy makes the bones rot." Proverbs 23:17

Notes to the Reader: Envy, more than any other deadly sin, is a sin of thought as opposed to action. It creates inaction in the person who envies others, which in turn, creates a life nobody would envy. The envious never see their own talents because they spend their entire lives trying to prove they have everyone else's talents. Envy says everyone else got the shiny piece of candy but I got the dirt.

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The Magical Green Gravel Goo Ball

At eighteen, Bob Newberry, average-looking guy with an average car thought he'd rule the world. He'd moved out of his parents' house, out of the small rinky-dink town he'd grown up in and away from all the people he hated, which was pretty much everybody. They all seemed to see themselves as better than him. That's what he saw while growing up in the grand small town of Stanley Town U.S.A. He'd show all the people who'd ever made him feel dumb and inadequate (which was pretty much everyone) that he was somebody!

The person Bob detested most of all in high school was Alicia Starwell. She wasn't that much of a looker, with long auburn hair and non-descript brown eyes, but she always knew the answer to everything in class. It seemed to Bob that God had wanted to thwart him by putting her in every single class he had. Chemistry. English. Algebra. He hated her. She was always raising her hand or touting to the rest of the group that she knew the answer. She ruined grading curves and she never let you cheat from her papers. She also seemed happy *all of the time*.

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She made him feel extremely angry when she smiled. He used to imagine he had a deadly Goo and Gravel-filled Green baseball and he'd throw right into that smile of hers that looked so much like a smirk to him. Her lips and teeth would be bloody from the hit. Maybe a tooth or two would get knocked out in the process of his socking her one with the Gravel Goo Ball. Yes, a toothless bloody mouthed Alicia Starwell worked for Bob. But everyone else was just an inch or two below her on his hate scale. He'd imagined all of them at some point in various states of helplessness due to the magical Green Gravel Goo Ball he'd made up in his mind. Give them a taste of their own bitter medicine.

So Bob moved. He struck out on his own. Good riddance, he thought as he loaded up his dirty white Volkswagen and hit the highway. He had a plan and he'd stick to it. He was going to make it big in sales. He was going to get a job selling stocks and bonds. He was going to be a day trader. Everyone knew those guys made great money. So Bob headed off to the capital of stock trading, capital of the world as far as he was concerned, New York City. He'd make it big there, he just knew he would. He only had one pressed and neatly hung gray suit to his name, but

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he'd get more. Yes sir, one day he'd come back to the tree lined streets of Stanley Town and rub his life in everyone's face.

A year later, Bob was no longer in New York. It had been a short-lived dream and he'd learned that New Yorkers were mainly idiots who couldn't see a true genius when one slapped them in the face. Now working in a strip mall in Arcadia, Tennessee, Bob looked at the store clock as it slowly ticked towards noon, then watched two women walk into the store he managed. It was a small jewelry store and the pay sucked, but there wasn't much out in the job market to choose from at the moment.

He snuck bites of a baloney and American cheese sandwich with mayo that he had hidden behind the counter, making sure not to get any mayonnaise on his gray suit. He had five but he didn't much like the dry cleaning costs, not when he was saving up for his retirement, so tried to keep them looking and smelling good for as long as possible. One of the perfectly manicured, caked-on made up faces of the Barbie doll looking women looked up from her perusal of the glass encased diamond necklaces and smiled at him.

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I know her type, Bob thought, with an inner grimace because he knew people. She was a petite well-kept woman who had a rich husband in the background somewhere and was probably on her lunch hour from a cushy bank job with oodles of money to spend. Bet she wasn't forced to eat meager baloney and cheese sandwiches in order to survive. He was stuck here. He was stuck managing a damn jewelry store and having to deal with women like her all day and he was getting fed up with having to deal with people like her. Her life was a strand of pearls, while his was a cheap flea market fake gold chain. He smiled back at the woman with his mouth, as he took out his magic Green Gravel Goo Ball and turned it into razor blades. His green eyes blazed back at her, but with a well-practiced smile affixed to his mouth, one had to look closely to see the green hate blazing in his eyes. They shone with slivers of razor blades cutting first the right side of the woman's maroon painted mouth, then the left side of it.

She ended up looking like the Batman's Joker in his mind. He needed a change, a move to another state, perhaps? He was certain he could make more than what he was making at this damn jewelry store. His goal was to retire at age fifty. Then he'd

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live it up on a beach somewhere. He saw himself in a yacht maybe, in a white suit, like *The Great Gatsby*, sipping on a mint julep in a lounge and just enjoying the sea breeze as it whipped thru his hair. His birthright had given him crap. That was the birthday present he'd come to know. Well, he'd been determined growing up that he'd give some crap back when the time came. He was ready to do that. Show them all. Become number one.

Bob moved again soon after that. His career thus far looked like this. He'd lived New York for about a month before he'd wised up that a stock trading job wasn't going to happen. They wanted people who knew a lot about math. He knew math, sort of. He knew it enough to sell some stupid stocks, he'd thought during the interview, but had crossed his legs and kept a straight face as he imagined his Goo Ball turning into an invisible virus and making the male interviewer ooze snot from his nose. "He was certain," he'd said, "that he could prove that if they hired him for this job." They hadn't hired him. And he was smart enough to know that he couldn't afford to rent a closet on his meager sales department store job at a toy store in downtown New York. So he'd moved to Tennessee. That had now proved to be another

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dead end. Besides, he had a personal beef with this state. All the women in Tennessee were petite, ultra petite and wore gobs and gobs of make-up. They were all "kept" and if they had jobs, it wasn't because they needed to work. Bob knew these women. Nobody had to tell him who they were. He was no different from any other man, he wanted sex and home-cooked meals too, so a wife was on his to-do list, but not a short, spoiled brat who worried about gobs and gobs of make-up and felt she had to be "kept" by a man. He wanted a wife who would show him to be the spectacular man that he was. He wanted a wife other men would envy.

Eight years later, Bob found himself in the small city of Remy, Virginia. His anger over the unfair twists and turns of his life had ballooned. His Green Gravel Goo Ball had ballooned as well. He felt its weight on his shoulders each day. He felt it in his chest. He felt the Goo getting so big and out of control as the ball expanded inside him that it leaked into his insides and was eating him alive.

He began to play the lottery. He'd changed his retirement age to fifty-five. He dreamed of winning the multi-millions in the

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lottery. There would be no more long daily drives to and from all these stupid neighboring cities. Nope. He'd be able to order people around for a change. People would have to suck up to him for a change. Hah! He loved the thought. He loved the thought of all those smirking bigwigs having to bow down to him for a change! He'd like to see them do his job half as well as he did it. And they were the ones making big bucks! Right. They didn't know the meaning of hard work.

Every time Bob walked into an office building he noticed things about other people that he was certain no one else on the planet noticed. For instance, he noticed that some Vice Presidents wore sloppy clothing, jeans even, to work. Some had shoes that looked ten years old. Some were complete dimwits. Actually, most were complete dimwits. The dimwits were getting younger too. Some of them were almost as young as he was. Some of them were women. Bob's nostrils flared at the thought. Women in men's positions. A position he should be in!

Those men weren't any different from him. They dressed in gray suits like him. They had haircuts like him. They had mannerisms like him. The only difference was that he was in sales and

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they'd lucked out and gotten bigwig office jobs. Oh, and, he was smarter than they were. So why was he, Bob Newberry, the seriously observant and smart guy, stuck selling insurance while these guys had it on easy street in nice cushy offices with big windows and leather chairs? Bob's Green Goo Ball swelled inside his chest and made his heart jump into overdrive. To say out loud that it wasn't fair did nothing. But it really wasn't fair. The pickle of it all was that Bob knew, he just *knew*, he'd be better at their job than they were. The main difference between those men and him was that they'd been given a golden opportunity while, he, Bob had been given more crap. Just one damn door opening to easy street and he'd wipe the road with all of them. Bob's Goo Ball expanded more and he felt the Goo ooze into his brain making him light-headed. Then it oozed into his chest until it was so tight with hate it hurt to breathe. Just one damn door! He'd show the world what he could do for a company then. He'd take it all the way to the top.

More years passed with Bob going about his life, using the magical powers of the Green Gravel Goo Ball to mutilate people in his head as he smiled, sold insurance and dwelled on how much better he'd be at their jobs than they were. The Ball could

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change into anything he desired. It could become a machete, a huge rock, a knife, a chemical substance, anything Bob desired. The more Bob dwelled as he aged, the stronger and meaner the Goo Ball got.

Bob managed to keep sucking up to the many dimwits at age forty, but it was getting harder to pretend he liked these people, much less respected them because he didn't. He should have a CEO job. He was qualified. He may not have a degree or years of sitting on his butt in an office somewhere but he had the grit that you only got from the school of hard knocks. He had that. He knew how to sell anything. And he'd done it well.

This, Bob thought again as he managed a fake smile at the CFO sitting across from him. Briefly, and with extreme disgust, he noted the two college degrees hanging on the wall directly behind her desk. She looked like an eighteen year old. And how had she gotten such a cushy job? Bob imagined she'd slept with her boss. Or maybe she was related to someone really high up. He doubted, even with an MBA, that she could be all that good at the job of a CFO. He didn't have any degrees and he was certain he could beat her at it given the chance. She kept smiling at

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him as she listened into the earpiece of her phone. Didn't she know how rude it was to answer a phone when someone was sitting right there across from her, wasting valuable time listening to her tell someone what to do about a company problem? And somehow, that smile looked like a smirk to Bob. Bob stared more at the degrees nailed neatly on the white wall behind her desk and put the pieces of her life together as he saw them. She was from a rich family, gone to school on daddy's dime, hadn't had to lift a finger to actually work to get them. She had a perfect fairy tale life. Everything was all roses with women like this. It always was. He got the manure. She looked dumb as a box of rocks, he thought maliciously. Yes, that's what he decided as he walked out of her office with a fixed smile on his face but feeling the Green Goo Ball come to life inside his chest.

The company would probably be bankrupt in a year with her as CFO. Dumb as a damn box of rocks, he thought again, holding his head up as he walked to his car whistling a self-made tune under his breath. He imagined a car driving into the wall of her office, pinning her to it, the framed college degrees crashing down upon her head and breaking, the shards of glass hitting her

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directly in those brown eyeballs of hers. She reminded him of Alicia Starwell. He hated her.

Just a chance, he thought, gunning the engine of his used white Volvo a block away from the office building. That's what he deserved here. Just one damn chance!

Bob went home and let the Goo Ball have at it. He thought about all the bad things that it could do to the youthful, smirking CFO as he did with everyone who'd ticked him off over the years. He thought of turning it into a Green Goo baseball bat and being the hitter in a baseball game with her chopped off head as the ball. He thought about smacking the back of her skull again and again with the Goo Ball baseball bat. Bet she wouldn't be smirking then. He thought of her with Green Goo crap all over her face, with him and the power of his magical Goo Ball doing the crapping. Then he went back to the Goo Ball baseball bat scenario again. 'Yes, hit her in the brain cells, make those cells rattle until they were all dead,' he thought.

He imagined her eyes rolling back in her head as he hit it with the baseball bat. She'd seize, slobber, drool like an epileptic

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freak. Bob laughed at the thought as he kicked off his loafers and sipped a beer. Dimwit. Bet he could do her job with his eyes closed and time left over for a nap. Bet he could.

Bob's anger grew as forty rolled into forty-one, then forty-two. Then he decided he was going to do it. Screw waiting on that golden opportunity to come to him. He was going to chuck the insurance sales job and make that golden opportunity happen. He was going to become a business owner, a CEO, and show them all.

Bob perused the internet for possible franchises to buy. Bob Newberry, Business Owner and CEO. He loved it. That was him. Sure, he made a good living at sales. He was good at it but he would be so much better as a CEO, head of the pack, leader extraordinaire. He had the "it" factor. He knew he did. He saw himself in a plush carpeted office in a building in downtown Remy, with plaques of his many awards nailed along the back wall of his desk behind his head. He'd have an extra-large burgundy leather backed chair and a mahogany desk that spanned at least six feet in length. He'd have a window view of the entire downtown area. He'd rake in the bucks, easy as pie. People would look up to him. The important people of Remy would know his

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name. He'd live in the best part of the city and drive a white Hummer. Screw a BMW. He'd project authority and power in a big way. Yes, and everyone would know his name. Hah! Bob loved the thought.

Bob shook his head out of his fantasy world and continued his internet search for the perfect business opportunity. He was great at many things. He was resourceful. He was smart. He knew people like the back of his hand. He had a hundred grand saved up for retirement. He'd sink it into his company. He'd show the world he believed in himself enough to do this. He'd show them how great he really was instead of settling for a mediocre life in sales.

After only an hour of internet searching Bob saw his perfect opportunity, a payroll company. He was going to start up a payroll company. Yes. That sounded right. It would show up all those jerk-off Chief Executive Officers out there who was really good at what. And also, he'd have an 'in' with the payrolls of companies throughout Remy. He'd know who got paid really well and who didn't. He could use that to his advantage one day, he was certain of it.

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Bob wasted no time to plunk his money down and set up shop. He found a space to rent. He bought top of the line office furniture. He bought some new suits, splurging some but knowing he was well worth it. He got a new haircut, something trendier, more impressive. If you were going to do something, you should go all out and do it right.

He made phone calls. First order of business was to get some actual business. He put the word out, made up business cards, touted that he was a payroll expert, made up some stuff about his background that no one could prove one way or the other. He would get to the top by his own determination and grit. He'd worry about tax details and that junk later. He smiled every morning as he got out of bed at ten in the morning--as CEO he made his own hours--thinking of the deflated looks on people's faces, especially all those supposed "experts" in the field of finance as he showed them he could do what they did and better. Hah! He'd show them all.

Seven months later, Bob was humiliated. That's what he was. He took down the beautifully engraved sign on his office door that

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he'd been so proud of when he'd first gotten it. He was humiliated and enraged. People in this town didn't know true genius when they saw it. Seven months of phone calls, advertisements, and hard work at putting his name out there and he'd gotten two calls, two maybes, then nothing. He'd spent one hundred thousand damn dollars to feel like an idiot. It made the Green Goo Ball that had deflated some seven months ago; get so large he believed he'd choke on it. The Ball was giving him indigestion. He really hated his life. More crap, he thought. More crap gifts to Bob. He'd just have to crap back on everyone else more forcefully.

Bob took a vacation before he looked for another sales job. He took a vacation because it was either that or purchase a gun and shoot some people. The Green Gravel Goo Ball gone from shrinking to expanding to inhabiting his entire being to something entirely indestructible. It was now an eternal force, surrounding his body in an invisible green force field that kept him safe inside of its green tinted bubble. No one would ever make him feel humiliated again. He dared them to try!

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Three months later, he'd gotten his equilibrium back. He'd lost some money but he'd gain it back. He'd make it back because he could sell well and sell he would. Bob looked thru the local newspaper for something that would make him money quick. That's what he needed, money quick. He knew he could do it because he'd done it before. Easy pickings.

A sales position at a bank caught his eye. They offered an advance, rewarded well with a salary plus commission, and had excellent benefits. He'd be in finance too. The green ball shrunk a little. Finance. He loved the thought. He was going to sell the hell out of some banking commodities. What type of commodities did banks sell anyhow? He looked up at the white ceiling of his living room and pondered that for a minute. Did it matter? He knew how to sell. He could sell anything.

Bob formulated a plan in his mind as he got his résumé together. He'd start in sales then work his way up into upper management. He'd make big bucks. He'd make it all and then some.

He got the job easily enough. He'd known he would. He had an excellent sales record. At the bank, Bob saw a whole new pie

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just waiting to be sliced into and devoured. This is where he belonged, he thought, walking down the long hallway of the bank's operations center, his suit snug, his belt tight from too many beers, but his head up as always.

He'd found his calling. He passed by some offices with name plaques on the doors and important titles attached to them. Something thorny pricked him in the throat. This would be him one day, he thought, taking a deep breath and keeping a forced smile on his face. He caught the eye of a brunette in a black business suit as she looked up from her desk. Bob's eyes narrowed into slices as he looked away and continued down the long hallway of the bank's operations center. He'd have her job one day. He envisioned the brunette in a car wreck with her eyeballs popping out of her head. So sad, people would say. And there would be Bob, humble yet qualified, and more than ready to take her position. He could sell anyone anything. Yes, he was in the right place.

Bob walked with the shiny folder full of bank information-- history, company benefits, sales techniques--clutched tightly to his side, and headed to his cubicle. It was a standard gray

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cubicle. And there were fifty others just like it. He'd counted them. As he saw it, he had forty-nine competitors in this building and he'd beat them all. He wouldn't be here long. He'd have another office by year's end. He'd bet on it. He'd gotten a taste of the office life, in between slaving over phone calls, when he'd owned his own business. He liked it. The memory he wanted to keep and bottle up was that of him in his new Armani suit, shoes shined, sandy brown hair perfectly cut, nails manicured, smelling like a million bucks, leaning back in his plush leather chair with his hands behind his head, looking out the big window of his office and feeling like he'd finally made it. The memory of that minute where he'd felt the world envied him was where he wanted to stay. He'd get back there. Grit and determination, he reminded himself, preparing for war.

Bob went home that night and threw the blue binder he'd been given on the living room coffee table, then plopped down on his living room couch. What fluff! He didn't need to read any of that stuff. He knew how to sell anything. He perused his living room. His first wife had decorated it and his second wife had redecorated it. One day he'd like to decorate his own damn house! Yes. The women he'd married, and divorced, had been

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decent in the bedroom, terrible in the kitchen, and dumb as a box of rocks. Just once he'd like to meet the type of woman who would really impress him. That woman would know how to please a real man.

Bob went to the kitchen and poured himself a beer. Drinking from the can was for dimwits. He preferred to get a frosty glass from his freezer, then pour an ice cold one into the glass. Class. That's what he had that the majority of the population in his field did not, class. He'd met some of his co-workers today and none of them could hold a candle to the genius called Bob Newberry. He had no worries in this area. He'd outshine every one of them.

Bob sold banking services into his fifties. The once Magical Green Goo Ball that was now a permanent green force field kept him safe from feeling much of anything except the thing he needed to feel to get thru life. He'd walk into office buildings full of hate and war and leave feeling the same things. When he was with fellow salesmen, he quit acting like he respected any of the CEOs and CFOs he had to deal with daily. "MBAs were crap," he said. "CFOs were crap. And CEOs were crap." He used

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the knowledge he gained from some of the more conversational clients and then sold it as his own, always reminding his co-workers, "See. You don't need a degree to have that knowledge."

Behind their backs, behind the naïve and simpleton backs of all those CEOs and CFOs he met, he made up stories about them. What used to be fantasy horror flicks with a Magical Green Gravel Goo Ball in his mind became adapted real-life dramas. He was sure Mr. White of XYZ Co. was screwing a teenage girl who lived down the block from him. Mr. Gray was a closet alcoholic. Ms. Prim must delegate *all* of her work to *everyone else* because he was absolutely certain she had no brains inside that pretty little blonde head of hers. He sold this fiction as well as he sold banking services. And as he did his Green Goo force field got stronger and stronger.

"Bet the CEO at Bigtime Rentals is easy as hell. You should call her. Set up an appointment. Maybe you could snag her job in the process," he told a co-worker one day. "She's got that look. You know, the one that says, 'I'm dumb and had to sleep my way to get into my position.' Yep," he said, "Dumb as a box of rocks,

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that one." Bob was just as brutal with the men. None of them had any gumption and most lacked class in his fine opinion.

Then again, his fellow salesmen were just as gullible and dimwitted as the CEOs of the world. They'd tell him about potential lead after lead and he'd always find a way to take the business right out of the palm of their hand. It was funny, really.

All he cared about now, Bob thought as age sixty rolled around, besides coming out of his fourth bad marriage without losing too much money, was ensuring he retired with a lot of money. His fourth wife was taking much, too much. He was fighting her but also losing the battle. He'd have to make up for the monetary loss by adding a few more years of work to his life. Bob liked to recoup losses quick. He'd always been about getting things fast, including money.

He moved again, transferred to a bank in North Carolina so he could live near the beach. He smiled knowingly at the young know-it-all clients he now had to deal with. They thought they were going to teach him a thing or two. He knew who they were.

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Dimwits, the lot of them. He mostly tried to ignore all conversation that wasn't coming out of his own mouth. He saw people's lips move but didn't see much else except himself somehow one upping them, beating them to pulps. But he'd perfected his smile over the years so that it was permanently fixed, never wavering, no matter how much the hate inside him bloomed.

He got high blood pressure and high cholesterol in his mid-sixties, the normal problems of a man his age. Then a car wreck caused some vertebrae damage but he dealt with it as he always did, by handing off the crappy life he felt to someone else. He wheeled and dealed and oversold to people dumb enough to believe the B.S. he was selling to them. It was his way of getting back at the world, cheating them out of money as he'd been cheated out of it. If his thoughts could travel, the world would be dead.

The worst part of his life, he thought one day sitting on a park bench and watching birds poop on a nearby water fountain, was that he'd had to watch. For years, he'd had to watch people pass by him on their happy little bikes of life as he stayed

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permanently stuck on a tricycle. He'd had to watch person after person get what they wanted while he never had. Not once. Not one damn time.

He should have been a CEO, he thought again, when he celebrated his 70th birthday. He should have been somebody.

Everybody smirked as Bob aged. They all smirked and seemed happy. Their happiness made Bob want to puke his guts out. He hated them all. He drank more beer to offset the feeling.

In his late eighties Bob wondered briefly, hatefully, when his body was finally going to quit on him. He was out of money, on Medicaid, food stamps, and barely paying the yearly insurance premiums on the small two bedroom house he'd bought when he'd moved here. He woke up every morning and wondered why he'd bothered moving here because he hated the beach, he hated the ocean. He hated his life. He had no wife and no friends. What did he care? Life had given him crap so he'd crapped back on it. Yes, that's what he'd done, crapped back on it, with Green Goo crap and a lethal Green Goo Gravel ball turned into an eternal Green Goo force field. But now he all he felt was the Goo of

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hate oozing into his brain, his memories, and it made him feel like he was full of Green Goo crap. The feelings of hate he'd had all his life, at eighty-eight, were impossible to control. He felt that Green hate slowly finishing him off. He began to envision the Ball eating him alive. He dreamed about it, seeing himself always stuck in the middle of a giant, man-sized Green Goo Ball, choking him and tightening his chest with Green Goo feelings of hate that had turned so strong they made him want to die.

He woke up each morning barely able to breathe due to the immense hate he felt for the world. It made him want to do nothing, be nothing. Each day he felt the Green Goo turn against him, getting stronger as it ate at his memories, his hopes and his dreams. He began to spend his days in bed, wishing his mind would quit talking to him. 'Chatter brain,' he thought, feeling the Goo oozing from his nose, his ears, and his mouth. It trapped the air in his lungs and made him fight to catch his breath. His face turned ugly, his skin turned frail and broken with oozing pus-filled wounds. Sleep eluded him as the Goo chattered on, hatefully laughing at him, laughing at his life.

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On the deadly sin of Lust...

"But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has been conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death."

James 1:14-15

Notes to the Reader: In a world full of porn, skinny bodies, reality shows that promote sex without emotions and men who intentionally steer otherwise deep conversations back into the shallow end of the relationship pool with sex talk that's clearly meant to objectify the female; it was fairly easy to write a story about a man who uses sex to avoid the realities of his forty-something life.

At its deadliest lust shows up as an intense love of self, in this case man, and intense hate for another, woman.

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Love Letters

Blaine Manly vowed never to date a fat girl. He was sixteen with blonde hair, tan skin and a good body, so why would he waste time on trying to get in the sack with a fat girl? They had visible stomach blubber in rolls of fat. They had cottage cheese dimples for thighs and their faces looked like they were encased in a circular foot of skin. Very unappealing. He grimaced at just the thought of having to touch one of them. Fat girls were useless to him, as were homely girls. He deserved only the finest pieces of steak. That was him, Blaine Manly, in high school. His looks guaranteed him the steaks he believed he deserved. He had his pick of the prime.

But he had other guidelines he followed. Looks were first and foremost but there were other unsavory things walking around in mini-skirts that looked like steak but were actually anything but. For example, the "goodie-two-shoe princesses were a complete waste of his time. Sure, they looked great but (big but here) they usually didn't put out. These were the snobby, "I've only had one boyfriend and am looking for something more than

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just a good time," girls. Oh, he'd waste some time with them if he found them drunk out of their mind at a party and there was a bed handy. Dead deer, he liked to call them. Easy pickings then. They didn't fight much, if at all. Though a time or two, dead deer for dessert came with some drawbacks. He'd been vomited on one time from a girl who'd decided to lose her dinner as he was trying to force her mouth around his dick.

Three years later, a freshman in college, Blaine still cringed over the unsavory memory. It popped up out of the blue sometimes at the oddest moments. He believed it was the smell of buttered popcorn that did it to him. Stupid slut. He'd had one heck of a time trying to hide vomit stains while nonchalantly making it to a bathroom to clean himself off. He'd tried to block out the actual smell of that vomit, even though the sight of the small chunks of yellow gunk in his underwear and on his dick cropped up every so often. But since he had no idea what she'd been drinking that night, he could only guess that she'd been eating buttered popcorn at some point. Otherwise, why would the smell always bring up the memory?

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Blaine quickly tossed the memory back into a mental trash bin and continued perusing the night's menu. He was sitting on the concrete bleachers of the football stadium with his new best friend and partner in crime, Steve Marins. Steve wasn't a looker like Blaine, but he had the one thing Blaine didn't: money, lots and lots of money. Steve provided the booze and Blaine provided the entertainment.

"There's one," Blaine said, eyeing a blonde in a pair of faded jeans and some cowgirl boots. "Bet she'd be a nice piece of ass. The one beside her looks stuck up though, probably wouldn't put out unless she was drunk off her ass." He shrugged and looked over at Steve with a question in his brown eyes.

"No!" Steve said adamantly. "That last dead deer was enough for me for quite a while. I'd love to find a *willing* girl this time."

"Fine." Blaine said, not really put off. He wasn't in the mood to hear Steve complain about his lack of bedroom prowess. And he really wasn't in the mood to explain things yet one more time to a guy who seemed too thick in the head to get it. Steve had book

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smarts, but he sure didn't have any street smarts. "Let's go over to Kate's dorm then. You know she and Sheila put out anytime, anywhere."

There were several tricks that could get a girl into bed with a guy but the guy had to know how to use them. Blaine had tried to teach Steve but he just wasn't getting the lessons. He'd gone over how to use self-pity to your advantage, how to use guilt on a girl, how to use anger to get what you wanted, and even how to use fear of disapproval to get laid. None of it had sunk in with Steve.

Finally Blaine had tried to simplify his entire lesson book. "It's really just this simple: objectify and devalue. Do that in just the right manner and girls will be eating out of the palm of your hand because the girls never get the objectify part, see? But they always *feel* the devaluation part and that, my friend, is your ticket into their pants."

"I don't get it." Steve had said. Blaine felt like plucking him in the forehead. Hard.

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"Most girls will do anything to keep from feeling disapproval from a guy. How hard is that to get?"

But Steve still didn't seem to get it so Blaine spent a lot of that year over at Sheila's place. Then he'd found another new best friend, one who understood how to play the game of love.

Twenty years later Blaine sat on a barstool of Griffin's Bar and Grill, watching two teenage-looking boys scope out women in the bar. Damn, he missed those days, he thought wistfully, downing a draft and ordering another. He swiveled in his barstool to peruse the bar too. He much preferred a hot, wet willing body to his hand, some lotion and some internet porn. He silently saluted the two boys, knowing they wouldn't see the small gesture given to them by an older man in a suit sitting at the other end of the bar. To date he'd had sex maybe three times in the last six months, and this from a wife who constantly complained it seemed. Truth to tell, he'd lost his attraction to her years ago. But she wasn't fat, she wasn't ugly, and he'd invested a lot of time and money into a secure financial future. He wasn't going to ruin all that for a side order of sex.

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Besides, the real love of his life was at home waiting for him; his daughter. She was ten years old, looked exactly like him except in a female form--same eyes, same hair, same nose--and if Blaine had to answer the question of just who made his heart beat triple time, that answer would be her. Even at ten, she was absolutely beautiful. From the time she was born and he'd first held her in his arms, he'd fallen utterly and hopelessly in love. She was, and would be, the only real princess in his life. She was completely different from all the other girls out there in the world for one simple reason: she was his daughter. Men would respect her for one simple reason: she was his daughter. She would marry a prince. Then again, Blaine thought, there were no men out there who could treat her half as well as her father, so maybe she'd never get married, live at home with the folks forever. It was a ludicrous thought but it clanged in and out of his head as he watched the various couples at the bar in between beer orders. Men could certainly be assholes.

Blaine drank his third and final beer and followed the two teenagers' line of vision to the girls they were salivating over. The chick on the left was a brunette with straight long hair--they all had straight long hair these days--and a larger

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than average set of jugs on her. The chick on the right was the traditional man's dream, with blonde hair--also long, what a surprise, he thought sarcastically--and an hourglass figure. Though he was too far away to be certain, he'd bet she had blue eyes.

Blaine took each woman's clothes off in his head to compare the two bodies. It was a game he'd played since high school, but after having had sex with well over a hundred girls throughout the years, he was pretty good at guessing which one would please him more in bed. He'd almost decided on the brunette, when she stood up, showing a set of ultra wide hips. No, he thought with a shudder. He should have caught that one.

He looked again at the blonde, then another woman walked in front of them, momentarily blocking his vision, which turned out to be fine because that woman, another brunette, had a set of fake boobs that would have done Playboy justice. He could spot fake tits a mile away.

Something that had held true throughout history was that body types didn't vary much unless they'd been medically enhanced.

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Blaine had been with a set of fake tits a few times in his day. He didn't much relish massaging a pair of plastic balloons. It was much more fun keeping the variety of natural boobs out there in society.

Blaine took some cash from his wallet and slid it under his empty glass, then walked towards the bar exit. His Friday nights were pretty much routine. He came home, took off his suit, hung it up, put on some sweats and a t-shirt, played with his daughter if she wasn't busy with homework, talked briefly with his wife about *his* day and *her* day, then meandered downstairs to turn on his PC and watch porn. Then he'd get a sock, some lotion, and beat off to whatever online fantasy suited him for the evening. This portion of the night took up the most of his time because he enjoyed looking at the smorgasbord of naked women that were available online. He especially enjoyed the so-called "amateur" pictures. The girls looked so young and firm everywhere. They had perfect, well, everything.

And they *did* everything too, Blaine added to himself as he listened for a moment for any noise upstairs, then, hearing nothing, checked the time on the oversized clock on the wall

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behind the basement sofa. It was eleven. The wife would be in bed by now and so would his daughter. He got up from his desk and walked over to the basement door, locking it just in case. Then he went back to his desk and pulled his sweats down to mid-thigh, just enough to access his dick. It was already half-hard from Amanda. Amanda was a spry petite little brunette with old-fashioned tan lines and an ass that was out of this world.

Blaine sighed forlornly as he rubbed some lotion on his dick and studied the parts of the picture he liked the best to get his johnson fully hard and loaded, thinking again how much he missed the good old days of drunk girls and high school parties.

Easy girls. That's what Blaine was thinking about the next Friday as he perused the Callahan's Downtown Bar. He missed those girls. Where had they all gone? They all *looked* easier now than they used to with the ultra-low cut styles they were sporting these days that were geared towards making a man's mouth water and making his eyes ache with a wish the shirt would slip down just an inch more. And the shorts and skirts the young girls wore nowadays were absolutely genius, Blaine noted as he craned his neck to watch a tall woman with jet-black hair in a

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pair of shorts so short you could see the cheeks of her ass. He loved the looks but was beginning to hate the lookers. He'd been coming to bars alone every Friday night for a few months now and not one woman had come on to him. Not one. He may be forty-one years old but he didn't think he looked it. Blaine glanced at his reflection in the walled bar mirror. In his usual gray suit, black tie, and white button-up, he looked like a forty something Cary Grant. He didn't get it. Women should be flocking to him, chatting him up, making him feel like the man he was. But, no, after four months of Friday night bar hopping, he'd gotten nothing. He'd had fantasies about some young thing crawling all over him just begging for it in a bar one night. They'd sneak into the bathroom in the back or maybe walk across the street to where his car was parked and he'd fuck the hell out of her. Yes, they'd have a fine time together.

The rule was that he wouldn't cheat unless the opportunity presented itself. The opportunity would have to present itself though. That way it wasn't really his fault. The young thing who'd come onto him so strongly would be the guilty party. It was his own out clause. "She came on to me," he'd say if it ever came out in the open with his wife, "And it's been months since

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we've had sex!" He'd yell that one at his wife, shove it down her throat so the guilt would be thrown on her too, not him. Castration of a man. That's what his wife was doing to him, castrating him. Besides, Blaine decided on a calmer note, a man could never feel guilty for having sex with a woman after she'd been coming on to him. That was just the way life went.

Five months later, after very dissatisfying sex with his wife during which he fantasized about a cute little blonde-haired blue eyed online vixen, Blaine went back downstairs and perused the many porn sites. At one in the morning, he leaned back in his computer chair, a cheap blue thing that needed to be replaced, and came to one inevitable conclusion about his life. He was bored.

He went to bed thinking that and he woke up on Saturday morning thinking that. Then he decided to take a trip to Richmond to see a high school buddy, rather, that's what he told his wife he was going to do. Rob Wellington was actually his high school buddy and one he kept in touch with, but that Blaine had no actual plans to go to Richmond to see Rob. He was going to Richmond to visit some places. He had an urge to go to a few old haunts and

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he was just paranoid enough in a city as small as Remy, Virginia not to want to attempt to enter into one of the few porn shops for fear of being seen by one of his co-workers. Or worse, a neighbor. He had a reputation to protect. And he didn't want to order any porn movies online. He wanted the places that had the back rooms. He craved new stimulation. And he had another idea that required him to be inside a joint as opposed to visiting a website.

On Friday, he drove the three and a half hours it took to get to Richmond. He'd already printed out a few porn shops he knew he wanted to visit so he had no problem finding them. Blaine spent the day visiting peep hole type dives, even masturbated in one of them to an all nude stripper behind a glassed window who did things to herself with her fingers that had Blaine's dick standing at attention and giving her a one-eyed salute. So he masturbated hard and fast as she gave him a show, smiling seductively to him thru the glass window, telling him what he'd known all along; he was one hot damn guy.

That night, Blaine checked into a Holiday Inn, parked his car and called a cab to take him to a local strip club. He had a wad

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of cash in his pocket and a smile of anticipation on his face as he paid the cab driver. He'd discussed the "should he feel guilty about this?" issue thoroughly with himself and had decided he should not. A strip club wasn't cheating on his wife. Women who stripped chose to do so. They wanted men to admire their bodies. They craved being the naughty girls and he was more than happy to oblige. Why, he was just a spectator. No harm in that. If they were going to show it, he was certainly allowed to watch. He kept up this little diatribe in his mind and then cursed his wife forever trying to make him feel guilty about doing what was natural for a man to do.

Blaine forced the sneer off his face as he waited on a waitress to take his order. But his wife made him so mad. Every time he thought of all the years he could have been doing this and instead had settled for a sock and lotion, he got ticked off. He wasn't going to stand for it any longer! He was a man and allowed to go to a strip club if he chose to do so. Lots of men did this. He looked around at all the men in the club and agreed with himself. Yes, lots of men. Nothing wrong in it. Nothing at all.

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He told himself to relax as he ordered vodka on the rocks, telling the cute young thing in black fishnet hose and an ultra short skirt to keep his tab running. He watched the waitress as she sashayed away. Ah, he thought. Home. Here, he could ogle all he wanted to and no one was going to accuse him of being ungentlemanly. This was exactly what he'd needed. This was what life was all about, naked women's bodies everywhere and just inches away from touching one. Blaine cocked his head to one side. Maybe he'd invest in a strip club someday. They were very lucrative. It was a thought.

He took a big gulp of his drink then sat back in his chair to enjoy the show. He fell in love with something as he did so but he wasn't sure what the something was exactly. He knew he loved the atmosphere of a strip club. It smelled of exotic perfumes, red lipstick, and anticipation. He didn't know how red lipstick could have a smell, but it did, and it was oh so sweet. Blaine inhaled deeply and watched woman after woman come onstage and dance down from cute little costumes to G-strings and tassels, to no-strings and no tassels. He watched a cowgirl dance. He watched an 80's style Vanity 6 type of dance where the chick was wearing a baby doll pink lacy corset. He watched many girls

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dance and loved them all. His best was this young thing, maybe twenty-two, do a number to "Rock Me" by Great White and Motley Crue's "Girls, Girls, Girls." Damn if that music didn't take him back to the day where he was king. He could tag any girl back then, had been famous in his own mind.

This was what he'd missed: the in-your-face, young, tight, wet and firm as hell girls. He knew there was an age criteria for these places but some of these girls could pass for sixteen easy. He loved them all.

Blaine moved to another table where a group of men his age were sitting and started up a conversation. He found out soon enough which girls and how much for a back room visit. These places always had back rooms where a gentleman could have some fun. He did. He was happy to pay the price to be able to massage and touch and be massaged and touched. It was over too soon yet had been thirty minutes of sheer heaven for him.

The next day Blaine got into his Suburban and headed home, blissfully happy. Actually, he thought, cocking his head to one side, blissful didn't even describe it. There was no word high

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enough to describe the extreme feeling of euphoria he had at the current moment. He felt like flooring the gas pedal and taking his chances on getting a speeding ticket. He was god.

He began to make monthly weekend trips to Richmond. They were his guy time. "I need to have some buddy time," he defensively told his wife. He wasn't lying anymore either. Rob had started to join him on his weekend excursions to the porn shops and the strip clubs. It was the only real fun he had going on in his life, with the exception of horse playing with his daughter.

Blaine masturbated on weeknights to internet porn but there was always the anticipation of his monthly visit to the back room that kept him alive with adrenaline. Tits and ass. That's what it had always been about and that's what it should always be about.

"I love this," he leaned over to Rob one night six months later, a topless stripper grinding her gold G-string against one of his jean-clad legs. Her full breasts were in his face, fake as hell with the perkiest nipples he'd ever seen in his life. He'd changed his mind. He loved faked tits. Loved, loved, loved them.

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He felt like he'd just fallen into a giant birthday cake. "I love all of it." He added with a boyish grin.

Blaine's every day walk to his office turned into a prideful bounce. His chest stayed puffed up, his stomach sucked in. He was a man again, a real man. He no longer felt castrated, he felt adored by many.

But if this feeling made him feel this good, he thought one night as he prepared mentally for his monthly trip, what would it feel like to take one of those back room girls home for the night? Bet they'd know how to really turn a man on. He thought on one blonde in particular. She'd be all over him. Those girls wanted it all the time. Hot and ready. She'd beg him for it. Bet she would.

Blaine wondered on this as he researched more on the web, then clicked on a "high school porn" site where all the girls looked sixteen, tight and firm. Candy store, he thought again with a dreamy look in his brown eyes. All he had to do was close them to remember last month's visit to the back room with Brandy, a solidly built black piece of sweet milk chocolate. He'd love to

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see if he could make her melt in his hands. They had all kinds at the club. They had Asian girls, Hispanics, White, you name it and they had it. Blaine craved ownership of a place just like it someday. He'd own them all, his own stock of beck and call girls. Maybe when he retired? It was a thought.

But just how would one go about getting a chance to spend the night with one of these women, he wondered? Did the male just ask such a woman? He didn't want to get arrested for doing anything illegal. But was it illegal? Blaine thought on that some more but the seed he'd planted wouldn't go away. He wanted to put his mouth on a woman again, a sexy youthful pretty one that turned him into a fire captain trying to put out his own fire. The things he'd do to such a woman; he'd ram her hard, drive it home, make her scream like a, well, make her scream like hell.

Blaine found himself bored a lot more at home in between his monthly back room times, unless, of course, he was talking with his daughter. But that was less and less as she grew older. She was so beautiful though, it made his heart hurt to look at her. So damn beautiful.

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"She would be thirteen soon," he noted out loud in the kitchen on a Tuesday morning before school. She smiled at him sweetly and Blaine thought, wow. Just, wow! "You know, sweetie, you are so beautiful," he said to her as an afterthought. Then he gave his wife a perfunctory kiss on the forehead, barely looking at her and left the house for work.

Two weeks later and back in Richmond, Blaine did a gutsy thing. He called a call girl service. He'd called 900 numbers in his past. Whatever. Sex talk only went so far. He needed visual. He needed it right up in his face and all over him. He needed that. "For a price," the prim sounding woman over the phone said, "anything was possible." Blaine placed his order. He saw himself inside an ice-cream shop with every flavor imaginable. He wanted the flavor that came with a vibrator. He wanted to be right there in the same room with one of these hot and ready girls who didn't pretend they didn't want it and he wanted to be able to use a vibrator on her as the men did in the porn videos. Watching videos was fun, but real life would be the 4th of July.

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Her name was Samantha. She looked like an exotic tan cat with bright green cat-like eyes that slanted up at the corners and sandy blonde hair. She had the kind of body he could touch and finger and squeeze and nibble on all night long and never tire of doing so. She was prime steak.

He'd called Rob in advance, telling him he had to cancel this weekend due to work. He trusted Rob with the strip clubs but he wasn't sure even a buddy would keep this secret. Blaine spent the night going thru condom after condom and using the vibrator, his fingers, his mouth, and his dick on Samantha. She was so hot. She sucked him off. She screamed when he made her come. And then came that euphoric god-like feeling again. He loved it. Couldn't get enough of that feeling.

Two months later Blaine was bored again. He kept replaying that one night with Samantha and he wanted it back. Blonde-haired, green eyed Samantha. He found himself thinking about her ass, her tits and comparing body parts against his wife's body parts. He grimaced at the comparison, then tried to shove the image of his wife's naked body out of his mind. Bluck. That was his wife. The mix of Blah and Yuçk. She was a Bluck, capital B.

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Blaine rode around that Friday night, just perusing the streets of downtown Remy. He wondered how much a hooker cost in this town. He wondered if they had any good ones or if all of them looked rode hard and put up wet. He wondered if it mattered what their face looked like as long as they knew how to suck a dick really well. He decided it didn't matter so much. He came home that night fifty dollars poorer but with a satisfied dick and a satisfied smile on his face. She may have had a facial scar or two, but the girl knew how to suck a dick. He wouldn't do it again though. He'd just wanted to try it out to see how it felt. Not bad, it turns out.

His wife should feel lucky. Without his paycheck she was about a month away from being in that hooker's shoes with no money and just a body and a mouth that would have to do something to earn her some money besides being a nag to get it. Yes, his wife was damn lucky to have him. What would she do, in fact, without him in her life?

A few more months passed with Blaine doing the back room thing and masturbating to the online porn sites, but then summer hit

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and he found himself once again bored. He was bored with it all. He needed excitement. He needed something more than having to pay for some firm young thing to get him off. He should be getting it for free. He should be getting it from someone like that girl over there, he thought sitting under an umbrella by the Country Club pool one day and eyeing a high-school girl in a string pink bikini.

He'd been to enough bars recently to know one simple truth that hadn't changed since his first sexual encounter as a fifteen year old. They all acted like they didn't want it, but they all did want it. Cyndi Doe had been her name, his first. She'd been drunk. She'd said no. She'd resisted but that measly resistance had just told him she really wanted him more. She'd half-heartedly fought. She hadn't been dead, he thought with disgust on the tiny piece of guilt that had been caught all these years inside the memory. He didn't feel guilty over it anymore. Had she not wanted him, she would have been able to fight harder. All no had ever meant was, try harder. Yes sir, they all wanted it. They just acted like they didn't.

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Blaine sat there under the umbrella, sipping on a beer and thought on his options. So maybe he'd go back down to Griffin's Bar one night. Maybe he'd strike up a conversation with one of the pretties down there. There was plenty of candy to choose from. So maybe he'd do that and see what happened. Why not? If they wanted it, he'd know. He'd know as he'd always known. He'd lost his sex radar for a while but now he was back. A new man and driven to get what he wanted.

That Friday Blaine did it. He went down to Griffon's, found a nice seat at the back of the bar, perused the room for possible lucky candidates, and chose a few options. After seeing his many options from his Richmond trips and from repeatedly browsing the internet, he'd become picky again. The women in today's society ate too much. They had flab and cellulite where he required perfection. He was only buying if a Barbie doll was selling. And there she was, this five foot tall brunette minx who had him wondering how fast and hard she could ride a stout cowboy such as himself. Blaine drank a few more beers then added a whiskey shot to that order. He wiped his palms on his jeans. Damn, he was nervous, he thought with a small laugh. It was an

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invigorating feeling to be nervous like a schoolboy after all he'd done in his life. He loved it.

He watched the girl go to and from the bar with drink after drink. He got another drink for himself and moved over to the other end of the bar, near to the place she kept ordering from. When she came back for another drink, he politely offered to buy her one. She looked him up and down, smiled, nodded and said thank you as she left with her drink. Blaine mulled that one over as he downed two more shots. It was getting late, almost one in the morning. He'd already decided to leave his car in the lot across the street and call a cab to get home, but he hadn't yet called his wife. Did it matter, he thought cockily? She wasn't going to leave him. He was the money maker, king of the realm. Where would she go? What would she do? Blaine decided to try again with his pick of the night, but just then he felt a tug on his right arm.

He was, he decided a minute later, getting drunk, because when he turned around and saw a slightly chunky but oh so stacked on top blonde smiling invitingly to him, he decided he'd never had a fat girl but now he wanted one. He offered to buy her a drink.

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They drank. They got a cab to a local hotel and Blaine had another new notch he could attach to the bedpost he'd started counting in high school. Fat girls, at least smaller fat girls, weren't half bad, he decided the next morning, creeping slowly out of the room and down to the lobby. He called a cab from the front desk, sipping coffee he'd gotten from the small table at the front of the lobby as he did. He wanted to go home and take a shower and then sleep another ten hours. He dared his wife to try to make him do otherwise.

Blaine did everything just as he'd planned it in his head. No complaints from the wife. No anything really. Good. He wouldn't have heard any had she had any. She was like a talking, nagging, aging mop doll. Her firm was going away. Her beauty. Everything he'd loved about her when they'd gotten married was gone. Her body, her face...all gone to pot. He needed a newer model, he thought briefly, as he drifted into a contented sleep.

It was in the month of May when he saw his new piece of candy. She was blonde haired, blue eyed, big boobed, and tight bodied. She was a daughter of a co-worker but she was eighteen, completely of age, and she was hot for the taking. Blaine caught

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her eyeing him one day when she'd come to ask her dad for some money. Oh yeah, he thought, sucking in his stomach and sitting taller, she wants me really badly. He'd seen her look at him, he knew. He'd had various affairs at this point. He'd had sex up, down, and sideways. He'd been with the best bodies out there. Currently, he was at the breaking point with the affair he was having with his best friend's wife. She'd gotten boring in bed and the thrill of the cheat had worn off as well. He'd scored again and again, sure, he'd snuck around and had a good laugh at being able to pull the wool over his wife's eyes with the affair. But Bev was looking old to him now. He wanted an affair with the newest model he could get his hands on and he believed it was this girl, Heather Watts.

Fitting last name, he thought, because she was causing some heavy voltage to run thru his groin. What a little tease she was, coming into her father's work dressed in a tight little black dress. He wondered how and when they'd end up together. He wondered if she'd intentionally worn that dress as a come on to him. Maybe. He may have less hair than he used to but he was a fine specimen of a man.

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That night he went home to an extra surly wife. His daughter's sixteenth birthday was coming up and she needed his help with the plans. "Sweet sixteen was special." She'd told him. Blah. Yuck. Bluck, he thought. "Do what you want to do, dear. You have free reign over my checkbook." She gave him a look that said she wasn't amused with his sarcastic wit tonight. Blaine didn't care. His thoughts were on Heather. He changed clothes, checked in on his daughter, told her she looked like a princess all grown up, then meandered downstairs to look at internet porn. He was no longer into masturbating girls or young girls or anything of that sort. His latest craze was two guys on one girl, a dick in each hole, and they were hitting it so hard and with such force, Blaine fully believed the girl's screams were real. He was having a fine time searching the web for this very specific type of porn. He loved it.

He did his usual that night as he did every night. He searched, waited until he knew everyone upstairs was asleep, walked over to the basement door and locked it, then shoved his sweats down to his ankles, got out the lotion and a sock and starting stroking away. Tonight's site was particularly gripping. He imagined himself as the guy taking her from behind and the

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blonde whose face was currently hidden as the girl of his fantasies, youthful and beautiful Heather Watts. Blaine shut his eyes as he let her screams and grunts roll over him, then opened them back up to get the full impact of the internet visual. Damn she was good, he thought, stroking faster and harder, really good. She screamed loud as both men pummeled her, her legs in the air behind her head and spread wide and the men going at it.

Blaine stroked faster as he watched two men pummel her insides. He was close to coming. He was so close as one of the men left her and another man flipped her over and commanded her to, "get on her knees like the dog she was," so he could do her from behind. Blaine could see her better now. He stroked hard and fast as he watched her getting pummeled by this guy and took his time looking at the moving views of her body. She had beautiful tanned and toned legs, an ass that was out of this world (Damn, she had a really nice ass!) slightly curvy stomach but not too big so still a turn on, big breasts with big brown nipples...God, he loved her, he thought stroking faster and harder, and that hair, silky blonde... and that face, he thought, feeling himself beginning to come...that face was perfection, sheer perfection.

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Blaine felt his come squirting out of his body as reality hit him like a jolt of lightning.

That face.

His come was still spurting out of his dick but he no longer wanted it to. That perfect face. His eyes were glued to the computer monitor even as he willed them to shut themselves, look away, anything but keep watching. They watched anyway, like the man from Clockwork Orange, his eyes couldn't move away from the vision he was looking at, couldn't avert, couldn't abort.

The man was still pummeling her, slapping her ass, calling her every dirty name in the book..Blaine looked on in frozen horror and rage. Stop! His mind started screaming, spurting remnants of come still coming out of his dick. Stop! Stop! Stop!

Somewhere inside him a man was turning beet red with rage and pulling out his own hair.

Still the man pummeled her. She was moaning and screaming, telling him she needed more. She needed bigger.

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Stop! Blaine shouted inside. His face took on a contorted look but he couldn't stop watching. That face, he thought, that beautiful face of perfection. He felt his hand still wrapped around his now limp and wet with come dick, and felt something begin to tear at his insides. Vomit. He wanted to vomit everything out. He wanted to vomit all of his intestines and everything out. Something acidic and deadly rose towards his throat.

Then frozen in time, red-faced with rage and grief, half insane, limp wet dick in hand, sweats down at his ankles, half-balding and aging Blaine Manly watched the screen intently as his daughter came.

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On the deadly sin of Sloth...

"Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men," Colossians 3:23

Notes to the Reader: While researching the deadly sin of sloth I became struck by a Catholic story on new monks, men of God who often end up committing suicide. Why commit suicide so soon after committing yourself to a higher purpose? What was it about becoming a monk that would create such an urge to kill yourself? The thought stuck and a story about a newly saved individual took off from there.

A brief note on Karma in relation to this story: Housed inside Karmic law is the idea of cause and effect, also a universal law. In Biblical terms it would be phrased, "We reap what we sow." I used Karma in this story to show the idea that it's too easy to overlook that you could be the "cause" of bad karma coming your way as opposed to being the "effect," meaning you choose to see yourself as a victim as opposed to anyone who could ever do anything wrong to anyone else, even if the wrong

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is something you perceive as harmless, for instance gossip. Under Karmic law and under Biblical law, if you choose to do harm to another, eventually that same harm will come back to you.

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The Shadow

Guy Steward got saved on a Sunday afternoon in June. After forty five years of feeling pretty much like he was just going thru the motions of life without any particular goal in mind, he now felt like he was heading somewhere. And that somewhere was a good somewhere. The 'why' he got saved was hard to explain. He'd felt something one day and decided to go to church. He hadn't been in a church since he was a kid and his parents were still married. He called those the pre-parental divorce days.

Before the divorce he'd blamed God for the jerk of a father he'd been given instead of one of those perfect dads he saw on the television shows and over at friends' houses. After the divorce he blamed God for not sending his family down some of the good stuff everybody else's family but his had. Other kids got seriously cool toys and had paid-in-full cars waiting for them on their sixteenth birthday. Not Guy. When Guy had gotten his driver's license, he'd scraped up enough money from a part-time job mowing yards to get an old clunker so he could work for a local hotel. Eventually, he got a decent car, but it had taken a

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while to get it. In the end, what Guy had seen in those pre-saved days was a lot of wrong being given to his family while everyone else's family seemed to have it made.

But that life was all in his past. Sunday, June 8th marked a new start to his life. It was a new beginning, one in which he was getting a jumpstart onto a train track that had the word "golden" written all over it. He wanted that. He was ready for it. His life "pre-saved" was full of raw anger at the world and feelings of being victimized by anybody and everybody who stepped in his path. And also guilt. It seemed when you grew up as a son in a household with a jerk for a dad, you always felt some type of guilt for not being able to fix everything for everyone else in your family, especially your mother. You bonded with her on an instinctively adult male level and wanted to protect her and take away her pain. Pre-saved he'd felt like a victim.

But now, after being saved and being given the power of God, he felt like he could rule the world! Now, he had every confidence that his anger would dissipate and his guilt along with it. His old worries about money and retirement would disappear

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magically, and all of his bad habits would suddenly go away as well. He'd finally be at peace because he now had God on his side. God would make everything better.

It was exactly one week and two days later that the nightmares began. Guy hadn't expected them. He'd had nine days of really good dreams of being promoted at work, then retiring from his job on time, or maybe even finally finding the right woman to share the rest of his life with. He'd been married exactly once and had no desire to repeat such a miserable life the second time around with the wrong woman. In the beginning, his wife had been perfect. She'd backed him up always. She'd understood him like nobody else in the world had. She'd been a compliment to his own personality as wives are supposed to be. But then it was as if she'd suddenly changed overnight. She wanted things he didn't agree with and she'd forgotten her place in their household. She was his wife. Until she wasn't, which had left him feeling yet again like a victim in someone else's lying game. Yes, Guy had been having really good thoughts up until that Tuesday night.

Then his world got turned upside down.

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The first nightmare came in the form of a flood. He was there and he was right in the middle of it fighting for his life.

That was one interpretation of it. The other held the truth.

He was a little boy in his blue and red themed bedroom. It was nighttime and his bedroom light was off. He was wearing his favorite Superman pajamas and standing by his upstairs bedroom window with his palms and his face pressed against the glass, watching the rain pour down, feeling the thunder rattle the window pane beneath his palm, and practicing not moving a muscle when the occasional crash of lightning ripped and cracked pieces of the sky open with its power. He was also doing one other thing. He was trying not to let the downpour that threatened to burst open from behind his eyes happen while he listened to his parents yelling at each other in the next bedroom.

He so wished he could ride that sky, he thought, clenching his small jaw tight so his lips remained perfectly still. He'd rather be anywhere but here, because here a voice kept whispering to him with every rant from his father to his mother

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that somehow he was the cause of their latest argument. It was no different from the last time they argued. He was always the cause.

The second nightmare came in the form of a fire. He was right there in the middle of it, the hot flames surrounding him in a circle of fire and threatening to engulf him.

That was one interpretation of it. The other one held the truth. He was age fourteen, standing by the fridge, already drunk and stoned from partying with friends. He leaned his back against the refrigerator door and lit a cigarette. He smoked it quickly, sucking the nicotine into his lungs in deep inhales so he could feel the burn of the tobacco put fire into his lungs. Both his parents smoked so Guy never feared being caught smoking in his house. He opened the fridge and took out one of his dad's Miller's, then guzzled it in one big fat f-you to the man who'd always made him feel not good enough. Imperfect. Guy tilted his head to one side in a dramatic gesture of thought as he finished the beer and tossed it in the garbage can housed under the sink. Imperfect didn't describe it. How about shit? Did that word describe what his dad always managed to make him feel like?

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Maybe, he decided with an I-don't-care attitude. Then again, he thought, taking out a big fat piece of homemade fried chicken from the fridge and stamping out his cigarette in a nearby ashtray, maybe not.

The third nightmare came in the form of a tornado with monstrous winds and a deceptively calming eye.

That was one interpretation of it. The other held the truth.

He was sixteen, staring down at the drunken form of his girlfriend and zipping up his jeans. He'd just come in her mouth and now it was time to go back to the party. Sex was good, but it only lasted so long. She hadn't come. He knew it and he didn't care. Sex was about self, not selflessness. Besides, what he needed now was another high and his buzz was wearing off. Briefly he wondered if he'd still want to be with her a month from now. He wasn't sure he cared about her anymore. The feelings he'd felt when they'd first started having sex were going away, and in their place was a black hole of something called nothing. That's the way it always happened with his girlfriends. Love at first sight, then a slow fizzle to nothing.

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The fourth nightmare came in the form of an earthquake that tore the earth asunder.

That was one interpretation of it. The other held the truth.

He was sitting on the wooden floor in the empty living room of his soon-to-be-sold house holding his divorce papers in one hand, a glass of red wine in the other and staring out the curtain-less large picture window at a perfectly blue sky in July and holding just one thought, 'wasted time.'

He'd lost pretty much all of his savings in the divorce, all of his dignity, everything he'd worked and dreamed for was now gone. He looked around the empty room again, then gazed at the fireplace. In the daytime, when he was awake he remembered the tender way he'd made love to his wife there, on the floor in winter, before they'd replaced the carpet with wood. She'd smiled at him and he'd dreamed of forever with her. He remembered how he used to see this perfect image of himself reflected in her eyes. He didn't have to do or be anything better for her to love him, they said, because he already was

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better. And he'd felt that, in the beginning with her, he'd felt like he was better than every other man on the planet. She'd lied to him in the end. Her eyes had lied. Eventually he'd gone back to feeling like he was never good enough, would never be good enough, and once again found himself in the victim role.

At night, in his dreams, his mind wove different tales on his marriage, tales he didn't much like. He remembered looking at her once and thinking she wasn't pretty anymore. She'd gained too much weight and he was no longer attracted to her body. He saw cellulite on it and hated her for it. He remembered turning away from her body full of disgust and guilt that night.

Once the nightmares started, they didn't stop. Every night Guy would go to bed and faithfully say his new prayer, The Lord's Prayer, then roll over and try to sleep. And every night some variant, some forgotten memory of his past would crop up but from a different point of view, and it would hit him like a bird pecking at the insides of his eyes, stinging them until they hurt from what they wouldn't do, because Guy had never shed a tear in his life and he wasn't about to at this late stage of the game. He'd wake up in a sweat and with the word, "No," very

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loudly on his lips but never uttered. He'd never been that selfish jerk his nightmares kept trying to portray. He'd been the victim, always.

Mistake. The word kept whispering itself to him when he was awake but still half asleep from compounding restless nights. The nightmares would try to poke thru his conscious during his days at work like relived memories instead of something else, but always they came with that one word attached to them.

Mistake. Mistake, mistake, mistake. Was he? He thought angrily one morning, still half asleep as he poured himself a cup of black coffee from the break room pot. Was he a mistake? Hadn't he just recently given his life to God? What else could he possibly do to make it all go away? His past was done and gone! He couldn't change it. He couldn't rewind and make things all better. God could have done that for him but he, Guy, a mere mortal, could not.

He couldn't take back things he'd said or did so why taunt him with the memories of those things? Why taunt him with the memory of being a teen and killing a cat with a bunch of friends for kicks? What was the point? He'd been a good guy overall,

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compared to all those other louses out there! He'd been the victim!

That night Guy had another nightmare, woke up and forcefully told himself to quit thinking as he walked into the bathroom of his new house to wash the sweat off his body. Tomorrow morning when he woke up he already knew he'd remember none of this. He knew he'd once again see himself as the victim he'd always seen himself as in life. He also knew he'd have to fight the pecking bird calls that would try to bring the fiction of his dreams into his daylight hours. And he knew he'd have to fight to keep from hearing that self-same annoying word: mistake. He'd always been the traumatized little boy who'd been good to everyone. He was the one who always got crapped on, not the other way around. This is what he knew to be true. There was no other truth here and there never would be.

Like clockwork Guy went thru his days as a shadow of himself and his nights as a true shadow, some guy who didn't care about the rest of the world, some guy he'd never own and some guy he'd never known.

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He began to feel on edge when conversing with people at work. He had to bite back retorts on the tip of his tongue due to lack of sleep. The thought of losing his temper gave him another problem. He was becoming anxious all the time. He felt the extreme desire to tell someone off and as he held that in check with an effort of will, he felt his armpits begin to sweat and his head light up like it was on fire. He forcefully commanded his upper brow not to perspire long enough to excuse himself to the men's restroom. He'd always held his anger in check with, well, a few exceptions in some high school throw-downs, but nobody had ever seen the anger he'd hidden over the years. Now, it was rising into a dangerous zone. He felt rage. It was hot, volcanic and ready to explode.

Two months into his so-called "grand salvation" Guy went to his doctor about his problem and came out of his office with a prescription of anxiety pills. God, he thought with some disgust as he sank down onto the side of his bed and tipped up a beer to drown out the bitter taste of the pill. Being saved was supposed to mean God was now backing him up. God was supposed to be fixing things for him. God was supposed to make everything better, like the ultimate eternal Band-Aid. But what had Guy

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gotten since the day he'd been baptized? What grand thing had actually occurred?

Nothing. That was the answer. Absolutely nothing. He still had the same bills, same debt, same ex-wife, and no new wife to replace her. And worse. He now had more anger than he'd ever had in his life, not to mention guilt that felt so bad it made him feel like he'd done everything wrong in his life. Everything. He'd give just about anything to have somebody else's life right now.

"Any takers?" Guy sarcastically addressed his tidy but barren bedroom. Then he shrugged in the way he always did when he decided he was not going to care so much anymore about anything, "Didn't think so."

He was wallowing in it again and he knew it but couldn't stop himself. He was wallowing in his own self-pity at the fate he was trapped in of this so-called life of his. Pre-saved, he'd always believed that fate ruled the world. No. He'd *known* it had ruled the world. You could do all the good you wanted to and nothing good would ever come back to you. You could stay out of

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everyone else's way and you'd still get bad stuff coming back at you.

Karma taught the opposite should be true, but it wasn't. Not for him. Sure, he'd lied to make some deals at work. So what? Everybody did that. And maybe he'd been into some drugs in junior and high school. Maybe used a few girls before he'd matured and gained respect for women in general. Once again, so what? Everybody did that. But had he really deserved everything he'd gotten in life? What good had it done him? And now, in his after-salvation life, what good was God doing for him? Because from Guy's point of view God should be making something up to him. Actually, He should be making a lot up to him for all the bad he'd taken in his life. Instead, it seemed He was having a fine time giving him nightmares that he'd rather just forget about forever.

'Yes,' Guy thought, 'God was laughing it up somewhere and the joke was somehow on Guy.'

Scattered. That's what Guy was beginning to feel between the nightmares, and the lack of sleep. He was beginning to feel

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scattered like a uniform pile of leaves that was now taking flight in every direction due to some unforeseen gust of wind. Guy re-read the instructions on the bottle of pills and prayed they do their job. He needed sleep so badly, his brain ached. And, fat or thin, tonight he missed his wife.

He lay in bed that night and thought on curses he'd read in the Bible. He was certain his father was to blame for this terrible fate of being sleepless, guilt-ridden, angry, alone and lonely in the middle of his life. Somehow, his dad had put a curse on him. That's what was going on here. He may not have read the whole Bible, but he'd read the part on curses. He knew this was possible. He'd been cursed. He was one of those guys, those first generation guys of the fathers who'd sinned so badly that he had to take that curse belt and live with it...forever.

That night Guy slept surprisingly well. Ah, he thought on waking up with a long stretch and a yawn. Sleep, after weeks of not having any, felt incredible. He went thru his daily routine of masturbating and having a morning shower with a whistle and a smile. Then he wrapped what seemed to be the softest blue towel around his waist and headed for his closet where he picked out

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his finest black suit, red tie, white shirt and shiny black dress shoes. Breakfast tasted divine. He had the best egg, mushroom, and green pepper with cheese omelet he'd ever made in his life, and the best cup of black coffee. Everything tasted so much better today than it had yesterday. Maybe God was finally listening to him on what he needed for his life.

As luck would have it, Guy passed by a woman that day. She reminded him, in a very odd way, of his ex-wife (pre-weight gain). She had shoulder length wavy auburn hair and wore a prim gray business pantsuit. Guy watched her pass by him along the busy Main Street of downtown Remy, Virginia. Put her in a purple skirt, a black shirt, cut and dye her hair blonde and she could pass for Kim easily. It was the facial structure that reminded him of Kim, because on second glance, nothing else fit except maybe the body. He missed that woman. He missed Kim in the initial stages of their marriage where she'd politely agreed with everything he'd said. He'd thought she'd seen the real him, understood and agreed fully with his point of view on life. She'd had bad times growing up too. She'd had a dad that was crap. And they'd both had parents' who'd divorced each other in

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their late teens. He missed *that* woman. He missed the woman who'd shown him the mirror of his best side so long ago.

'Mistake,' he thought, with one final look back towards the woman as she crossed the street. It would be a mistake to try to re-make her into the image of Kim because Kim hadn't even existed. The truth of the matter was that the Kim he'd married had been a figment of his imagination. He'd married a doll thinking he'd actually married someone exactly like him.

Suddenly, Guy's mood plummeted back to where it had been the day before. The sight of the woman had caused things to well up inside him, truths he kept hidden way down began to bounce up and down like spiky porcupines inside of his chest and the volcano began to erupt again. Why had God cursed him with this rage at mid-life? He felt as if he could strangle a man with his bare hands.

Those were the worst of his daytime haunts, the ghosts that told him Kim had been fiction, because if she had been fiction then so had he. But he also missed that piece of fiction. He missed holding her in his arms. He missed those thoughts of

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anticipation when he might see her after work on a Friday date night. He missed the looks she'd given to him, her hugs and the funny way she sometimes smiled with just one corner of her mouth slightly tilted. He even missed that she refused to wear the trendy clothes and instead kept up with her forever "hippie" wardrobe of broom floral skirts and pastel cotton shirts. Those fictions made him feel the bite of reality so much more now, in present day. Had losing her been another mistake? His life was somehow full of those.

Guy increased his dose of medication because the world was suddenly shrinking into him. The day-mares moved from visions of Kim and visions of a past self to visions of everyone else. He supposed he'd seen these pictures his entire life but hadn't thought much of them until now. Because now he felt them. And they were like razor blade cuts along the inside of his mind, filling him with more guilt and more anger until Guy decided he'd had enough of the after-salvation life.

It was as if God was showing him how bad the world was and expecting him to do what, exactly?

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Help me, God, Guy started talking back to Him in his mind, then I may help somebody else. You help me first! But no help was forthcoming, so Guy decided to play his own game. When he saw the old woman in the grocery store trying to reach for a can of cherries housed on a top shelf, he passed right by her and said angrily, 'Help me and I'll help You.'

He said this so many times in so many days because there was just too much bad in the world he was being not only made to see, but to feel. He wasn't equipped for the feeling. Dammit, he wasn't!

He walked by homeless people, beaten up women, abandoned babies, downsized men scared to death they'd never be able to retire. The more he saw, the more he suddenly felt, the more shut up inside himself he became.

Was he a part of this world he was now seeing and feeling: couples on sidewalks fighting, trash being thrown out of car windows, people begging, dirty, and looking so humbled by life it made him want to puke his guts out? The teens he barely noticed pre-salvation were now rude spoiled brats wearing brand-

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name clothes the cost of which could compete with his car payment. He saw old men leering at pre-teen and teenage girls. He was seeing too much.

There was nothing he could do to help any of these people. He had to worry about his own life and his own tragedy.

It seemed all God wanted to do was make him feel more angry, more guilty, and more depressed. Guy had wished for the opposite to occur. Now he wished he could go back to being blind to it all. He didn't want to feel any of it. He wanted his old life back. He wanted to be the only victim in the world again, now and forever. Life had been easier that way.

This was Guy's thought as he skipped church that Sunday. Nothing had changed and it never would. Guy spent the day watching Superhero flicks he'd bought over the years. These were among the few items he'd been allowed to keep in the divorce. Superheroes, he thought ironically. Where had they all gone to? And where was the ultimate superhero in all this mess called earth? *Where was God?*

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The rest of the week he tried to go back to the former him, the one who'd never felt or seen all the bad in the world, but only that which had tainted his own miserable life. He called this new trick, sleep walking. But this time he put a new motto inside of his head. This time, he'd make sure to forget every bad thing he ever saw. If he wanted a world of good, then he'd just make one up. God had given him fictional horror and so he was going to give that right back to God.

If Guy actually did hear an elderly woman in the Kroger parking lot on Tuesday evening, pointedly asking for someone to give her a hand with her groceries as he passed by, he was sure he forgot to remember that moment. If he did actually pass by no less than ten homeless people on his walk from the downtown parking garage to work, he was sure he forgot to remember that moment too.

Days then months passed with Guy focusing on forgetting all the bad he was seeing outside in the world, by sleep walking and keeping to himself. Then he added a twist to his new fictional book entitled: *Why help anybody? Nobody had ever helped him, including God.* He turned the homeless people he was trying to forget to remember into life-sized leaves blowing in the wind.

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He turned the elderly woman into an invisible flea one could only hear as a slight buzz inside the left eardrum. They weren't really people. They were all just distant objects of some type of film being played for his amusement only.

In the middle of all this new fun Guy was having, Guy believed he was finally healing. Screw God and salvation. This was more fun.

Guy received the phone call that his ex-wife had been in a car accident in late September of that year. It was a hit and run and she was now dead. Guy would never forget this day for as long as he lived. He tried to envision his ex-wife in his mind. It had been so long since he'd done that. He'd even gotten his accountant to write out the monthly alimony checks. Funny though, when he tried to see her, all he saw was a pile of drying up autumn leaves in blood reds and oranges blowing and scattering in the wind.

Something went from angry to broken that day. And something went from guilt to grief that day too. It was one thing to divorce a woman, to hate her, to be angry at her for not loving you

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enough, and to feel guilty for all the things you wished you could change from a past you couldn't relive. But it was quite another to know that the one person you'd felt the closest to in this life was no longer in this world with you. His wife as an ex was one thing, but his ex-wife as no longer being a part of this planet, inside of it with him, even as they both lived apart and separate lives, was something he could not, and would not, get a grip on.

That night Guy went to bed in grief and woke up numb. He hadn't known what hopeless was, he thought as he looked at his alarm clock then rolled back over to go back to sleep, until now. Sometime later that morning, he woke up again and stared at the bottle of pills by his nightstand and thought about the monks. He thought about the monks he'd read about regarding the deadly sin of Sloth, back when he was just entering into religion and feeling all gung-ho about it. He hadn't understood before why they'd convert, then take their own lives but now he got why. Now he got it.

Guy thought about calling in to work, then said screw it in his head, then called in anyway. Nothing mattered anymore. He'd

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become the homeless guy. He'd become the elderly woman he'd decided not to help. He'd become all those people he'd turned into fleas, or else leaves scattering and blowing in the wind.

Guy's mind darkened as he reached over and popped the entire bottle of pills into his mouth. He no longer cared about anything, for what was left to care about? To be angry about? To feel guilt about? The pills caught in his throat so he forced himself to get up and walk into the bathroom so he could wash them down with a few handfuls of lukewarm tap water. Then he slumped down onto the bathroom floor in front of the tub and thought about razor blades. That would be the quickest way, wouldn't it? Then he thought about getting up and finding his gun but decided it would be too noisy. Then he realized he was worrying for nothing. The pills would work. He was alone in the world, no wife, no kids, no anything. Guy sat there on the floor, chest bare and sweaty, blue pin-striped pajama bottoms sticking to his thighs, thinning, but not balding, hair disheveled, and with the face of a porcelain doll and waited. Then he lifted himself up and walked towards his garage. A knife would do it, but what if it wasn't sharp enough to make a clean slice? He found the razor blades to his box cutter easily

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enough. Then he walked back into the house and into the bathroom so as not to make a mess. Then said, 'screw it,' and went back into his bedroom and lay down on the bed.

On third thought, he remembered the reason most people kill themselves in the tub when they used razor blades. The water took the edge off the pain. Or at least he thought that's what he'd read online somewhere. He wondered how much pain he'd feel as he forced himself back up and into his bathroom.

He ran the tub water on full hot and hoped it was hot enough but also that it wouldn't hurt his skin. Then he wondered who the coward was that had just entered into his mind.

Too late, he thought, slipping as he stepped one foot into the tub, the razor blade in his left hand flew out as his body bounced backwards, his head hitting the solid ceramic tiles of the tub. His body bounced a few times, then bobbed in the water like a doll before it stopped, the shadow of his head interrupted only by the few small lines of Guy's blood, streaming down a few ceramic tiles like strings of red paint.

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On the deadly sin of Pride...

On Jezebel: "And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works." Revelation 2:23

Notes to the Reader: It was difficult to write one specific story on the deadly sin of pride because all sin, deadly or not, has at its core some type of pride, some type of self-importance. This is what trips humanity up more than anything else, our sense of self-importance, even if it's self-importance related to being humble.

It's misguided self-importance that leads the enabler of the addict to believe he or she can save the addict. It's misguided self-importance that has the ultra-rich believing their wealth is a sign of greatness. It's misguided self-importance that allows the lazy man to believe he has to do nothing because the world owes him everything. Misguided self-importance creates self-delusions of how important each of us is in the larger

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scheme of things. Each of us has a particular road to travel in life that will lend us the power we need to serve the greater good. It's the self-importance and lies we tell ourselves that end up turning the road we *should* be traveling on into a dead end. Jezebel, and the lack of love that defines her life, is a great example of a dead end.

Side note: The largest influence on Jezebel's earlier years was the influence of her father.

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Jessica Bell grew up knowledgeable. But her knowledge wasn't anything a book could dole out. Her knowledge was about how the world worked and about how she could get what she wanted from it. Her knowledge was about true power. Her father had taught her well.

She had some rules before she even made them, rules she'd learned as a youngster that had stuck. Use guilt to get what you want. Use self-pity to get what you want. Use anger to get what you want. Use others' fears to get what you want. And if those don't work, try something else to get what you want. The ultimate goal was power over others and having control of your own destiny.

At age thirteen she wrote and practiced her first actual rule of thumb.

Rule # 1: Give a man sex but make sure you always get something of monetary value in return.

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She had sex with plenty and in return got free pot, free beer, free jewelry (some of which she stole from boyfriend's parents' bedrooms), free cash if there was any lying around when a guy went to the bathroom, and free food. Sometimes she got a movie date for free but most of the time she knew the score and didn't bother. Guys used most girls. She'd seen how they used and had decided to use first. Jessica knew she had the equipment to use a lot of guys and use them well. So she did. With size D breasts, cat green slanted eyes, and jet black shoulder length hair reminiscent of Elizabeth Taylor, she used really well.

At eighteen, Jessica wrote her second rule.

Rule #2: Always be sure you can out drink any man in any drinking game.

She didn't like to be one upped and yet, men had consistently done this to her until she'd learned a few tricks of the trade. Go to the bathroom a lot, use your fingers to make yourself vomit out the excess beer so you can drink more. Keep your stomach hard, like steel. If you're in a drinking game and need

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some help, numb your throat with Chloraseptic so that you can drink more and vomit more on breaks without feeling throat pain. Never become completely and idiotically drunk in the presence of the male gender. Not only will they take advantage, you won't get anything in return. She'd learned that lesson a few times the hard way. After the third, she vowed never to have to repeat it again.

And not only had she learned the lesson well, she made sure to pay back a few men by getting them roaring drunk, then robbing them blind. It was easy pickings to search a guy's dorm room, his wallet, when he was passed out from too much beer. That was her own little present she gave back to men after a few had taken advantage of her drunk and given nothing to her in return. Jessica had more than one laugh on a morning after as she imagined them wondering what happened to all their cash. Hah! Men shouldn't mess with a lady such as herself, she thought maliciously. They'd always get burned.

At age twenty-one, one of her most valuable rules was set in stone.

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Rule #3: Consider every other female a rival, not a friend.

Treat them as such and seek to destroy.

The one thing Jessica loved about the "do-gooder" women was that they were so utterly hopeless. They kept looking for a man who actually loved them. These women had fairy tales in their heads of men on shiny white horses, men who would love them for who they were, men who weren't selfish and manipulative. Other women, Jessica thought, could be such simpletons. Men didn't love, they used. She made sure to remind her "friends" that men were all about sex. But she waited until they were in the midst of break-ups and in tears to gently turn on what she called her motherly charm. Men were jerks. "My mother always told me to go after the money." This was a line she'd heard from a movie once but she'd liked it enough to claim it as her own.

But for the women who looked down on her, the ones who didn't take her advice or who had snubbed her in some way, for those women Jessica enjoyed spreading rumors as gifts from her to them. Any woman she knew to be an anomaly, a female she couldn't break via normal means, she talked about with such malice that she figured eventually the "fictional stories" she'd made up

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about them would stick with the men and the other women.

Eventually, those women, too, would be crushed by her.

Her next rule went along with rule number three fairly nicely.

Rule #4: Every person you meet has the potential of giving you something you want.

The goal on first meeting anybody was to discover what they could give to her that she wanted. Everyone had something that could benefit her in some way, something she wanted. In junior and high school the commodities were popularity, clothing, drugs, free rides, and some laughs behind their backs at how easy it was to fool everyone. In college, the commodities were similar but with higher stakes involved because college men had more access to daddy's money and college women had much better clothing and jewelry, not to mention music. Jessica loved getting free CDs. And she loved one other thing; school breaks taken at newly made college friends' homes. Those many weekend trips usually involved no parents and a lot of items Jessica both loved and had no problem stealing out of the houses. She took advantage whenever possible.

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As she hit twenty-four, another rule was written on a stone tablet inside her head.

Rule #5: Never marry a poor man or a man who comes from a poor family.

A poor man, she'd found, always had loads of "potential." But potential was a future commodity of probability, not a current thing that could be used to her advantage. Jessica didn't bank on probabilities. She banked on sure things. A rich man, on the other hand, could offer her a lot. She knew how to spot them from years of experience. At twenty-four, she'd been in many houses, had snooped, observed and learned. She knew, for instance, the clothing styles the rich men preferred to wear. She knew the models of the cars they drove. She knew their dreams. And she knew the thorns in their sides. They all had one worry in common: marrying a woman who was just after their money. They all had one secret sexual fantasy in common too: being with a beautiful woman who would make them feel like a rock star in the bedroom.

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Jessica had accumulated much over the years, not just from friends' houses but also from shop-lifting at malls when the mood struck her. She didn't have to pretend that she had a lot, because she actually did have a lot. And as for the sex, well, after her fair share of men over the years, she knew she was better than most. She'd practiced...a lot.

She added her sixth rule shortly after her wedding.

Rule # 6: Marriage is only a business contract.

She'd met a man shortly after her marriage to Ted. His name was Jake and he looked like a sculpted Michelangelo come to life. He had gorgeous thick dark brown hair, brown eyes, and big biceps. Jessica didn't feel like resisting the urge to have an affair with him. So she didn't. She had never been one to inflict any type of self-punishment by not giving herself what she wanted, when she wanted it. She wanted Jake, so she got Jake.

It was a short affair but well worth it. It was also something her husband Ted never had to know about. Once that bell rung though, she decided she didn't want to un-ring it, and so began

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looking around at other men she might like to enjoy herself with on nights Ted was out of town for work. She had a string of affairs she decided were more fun than they were work and so she kept having them, when she could and when she felt like it.

Her late twenties brought another rule with it.

Rule #7: Be sure to carry on your name by having at least one descendant.

When Jessica decided she needed an heir, she was hopeful for a male. She'd seen many sons in her life and had paid attention to the way they talked about their mothers. It was a rare man who didn't have a special loyalty for his mom. She wanted that kind of loyalty for herself and she'd decided she only wanted one child so it was now or never.

She was enraged when she found out she was to have a baby girl as opposed to a boy. What good was a girl to her? She felt nothing but hate for her daughter, but if there was one thing Jessica did well, it was act. She put on the best super-mom act she could in front of the general population. But in private all

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she felt was rivalry and a need to put the child in her place. She let Ted take over most of the care for their daughter. It would serve two purposes really. First, it would keep Ted out of Jessica's hair. Second, it would motivate him to make more money for their family. Maybe then he'd understand that she needed a much larger house than the one they had now.

Jessica made sure of just one thing; that the spotlight remained on her and not the simpering baby girl she'd recently had. She'd lost her beautiful figure for nine months to end up with a girl. She'd make do. Somehow, she'd make do. But it had never been and would never be acceptable for anyone in her own household to be queen bee but her. Her daughter was crap. She kept that one to herself and thought about trying again but then scratched the thought. She wasn't about to ruin her figure on a maybe. Besides, she'd discovered fairly quickly that she didn't "do" children well at all. They were expensive, tedious, and nerve wracking. But, at least she'd have someone to take care of her in her old age. Until then, she'd practice ignoring the little burden. This was, Jessica decided, the first very large wrinkle in her life plan. She didn't like the feeling one bit. She'd make sure it didn't happen again.

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Two months before she hit forty, Jessica sat inside her large, contemporary home in Northern Virginia curled up in a plush white armchair, drank a beer and reminisced about all she'd accomplished and made plans about what she would do in her future.

Her rules had gotten her far. She'd taught many lessons people had needed to learn. She'd done this by showing them how naïve and gullible they really were to believe in things like good and decent human beings. She'd turned every good and decent human being she could into someone tainted and bitter. They'd needed the lesson. She'd tricked many. She'd stolen from many. She had a lot of material belongings, and a savings account anyone worth anything would drool over to have. She loved the thought of people envying her life. Her current goal was to become a millionaire by age fifty.

Then maybe she'd move her family to a bigger city, one which housed the elite of the elite of the world. Jessica saw L.A. as an option. No. Beverly Hills. She saw New York City as another option. And she saw big parties thrown in the mansion she'd

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eventually own. She saw herself as having a personal chef, maybe even a personal waiter. She'd eat only the best food, drive only the best cars. She'd have it all. It was in these plans for her future that Jessica truly believed she could rule the world.

But a month after she turned forty Jessica's plans crumbled like a sandcastle that a rain storm had suddenly hit. She walked out of the doctor's office in a trance, numb and disbelieving of what she'd been told. All she'd had were a few aches and pains. She had thought he'd give her a pill, then tell her it would go away. He hadn't. He'd run some tests then given her a case scenario that she didn't like at all.

She'd been diagnosed with something that wasn't going to go away. It was going to get worse instead. She didn't like thinking about it much less using the name of the disease the doctor had given to her. Using it, defining it with a name, meant it had attached itself to her person. This she would not accept. Forty was too young to have such a turn of fate. She was Jessica Bell. She wasn't some nobody out there in the world who got a terminal illness. This wasn't in her future plans at all. It wasn't supposed to happen. In fact, she firmly believed it

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had to be a joke of some sort. But suddenly she felt like luck was laughing at her, or else shooting its middle finger up at her.

Maybe it was God, though she'd really never held much clout in religion. Religious people had to follow rules she'd deemed ludicrous a long time ago. She made up and follow her own rules, just as she'd seen her father do. He was the one and only man she'd ever even remotely respected in life. Ted was there because he needed to be.

Jessica went home, told Ted the news, then went upstairs to lie down in the quiet of her bedroom for a while. She needed to sleep and she needed to think of other possibilities. But once she was flat on her back on the plush perfectly white comforter of their California king-sized bed, her thoughts didn't take her into solutions to her problem, instead, other thoughts entered. Thoughts like thousands of tiny baby spiders crawling around in the crevices of her brain.

She remembered her first job and how she'd not only fudged her résumé, she'd also planted seeds into the hiring manager's head

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about how wrong the applicant before her had been. She remembered the time she'd gotten another woman fired for stealing money from the cash register of the bakery at a museum she'd worked for once. Jessica had stolen the money. She hadn't needed it. She'd just wanted to see if she could get away with doing it, but she certainly wasn't going to lose her job over it and have that red splash of bad on her résumé.

She remembered a girl named Laney Hall from high school. Laney had been a simple blonde who'd been so in love with Rick Linehart, quarterback extraordinaire. She used to gush about how they were going to get married after high school and raise a family and blah, blah, blah. Jessica had decided she was tired of hearing Laney's fairy tale talk and so she showed her just who Rick Linehart was by coming on to Rick when he was drunk at a party, then making sure Laney saw Jessica and Rick getting it on in one of the bathrooms there. Rick and Laney had broken up after that, which was all Jessica had wanted. Laney had been devastated. But Jessica had done Laney a favor really. She'd shown her the truth about men.

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Jessica also remembered all the items she'd stolen from people's houses back in college. Most of it she'd ended up pawning but some of the jewelry she still kept. And she remembered all the affairs she'd had over the years that Ted had never discovered.

She remembered the year she decided to have sex with other women. She remembered the threesome she'd had once, with a guy, what was his name? And Andrea Lewiston. She remembered when she'd had a threesome with two men and just her. That type was better.

All of these memories and more came rushing in on Jessica's reality. Before they had been memories that made her feel good, made her smile. She'd always won the prize she'd had her eye on in the end of those memories. She's always gotten what she wanted and hadn't felt guilt over one bit of it. Now, though, these memories held a knife point to her throat and, though it wasn't guilt she felt, she didn't like what she actually was feeling for once happy memories now felt like crushing things, like someone had just thrown her off a balcony somewhere and now she was falling towards a hard spot of dry desert dirt.

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This was not her life. Her life was enchanted and filled with lots of everything. Her life at forty was supposed to stay enchanted. Her life forever was supposed to stay enchanted.

She took a week off from work, almost broke a rule by quitting her job, but didn't. Instead, the next Monday she walked in to the gallery she was a manager at and kept her head up high. This was a misdiagnosis. It would be fixed. There was no problem. Her life would stay enchanted. She would stay in control as she always had.

But something inside of Jessica had started to simmer last week while she was home making phone calls to other physicians, specialists who might give her a different diagnosis. And that hot thing that had started to simmer, was now beginning to boil.

In the following weeks, Jessica tried various remedies for her new state of mind. She tried drinking more than her normal share of beer after work. She called her family doctor, explained her situation and got a prescription of anti-depressants. She began ranting about how badly the house looked, how much her job

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sucked, how much Ted wasn't doing, and how much she hated the house, her life.

Jessica felt a few masks she normally wore slipping off like melting wax covers and tried to stop the many sarcastic words coming out of her mouth. She'd kept Ted in check before with sly comments, not these full-out hate ridden ones. It would not serve her well to let the masks fall fully away. But somehow, now, even with the anti-depressants, she wasn't able to stop many of her own tirades.

But she did manage to stop a few of them. She stopped the worst of the bats, the things that could make someone feel like they were a ball in a baseball game and she'd just swung a homerun. It was with effort but she tamped them down, made them lie dead and still inside. But those particular bats were the most deadly because they wanted to shout at Ted that he was nothing without her. He would have never made it as far as he had without her. He had always been the weak one and she the strong one. This should have happened to him, she wanted to rave, not her! Those were her deepest thoughts. She was able, just barely, to keep those chained up in a dungeon somewhere.

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But she couldn't stop *looking* at him as if he were responsible for what was happening to her now. She couldn't stop the hate she'd always felt for him surfacing inside her eyes at times. She knew the times and believed he was completely oblivious to her real feelings for him. A part of her didn't care anymore. She'd been to other doctors. They all concurred with the original one who'd given her a death notice. But still, she wouldn't name that detestable noun they'd used to describe her future. She wouldn't put a name to it.

There were few symptoms of the disease at present, just some malfunctioning in her hands. But eventually it would turn her body into a thing she couldn't control. Eventually, her brain cells would change and that change would cause her body parts to spasm and no longer listen to her mind. Then she'd be put in a wheelchair. A crippled person, someone to be made fun of as she used to make fun of the cripples when she was in high school? Someone seen as weak and without power? The very thought curdled Jessica's blood. She'd rather die than have people look at her like some kind of freak show.

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But then that word...death...she'd never associated it with herself before. She'd stayed away from that word because it made her feel the one thing nothing else in the world was capable of making her feel. It made her feel fear.

Jessica drank more, took more pills and did everything possible to feel nothing. She pushed Ted. She pushed him hard to make more money. There was a time clock and she wanted to be ultra-rich faster than ever. That would change everything. Money bought cures.

But she looked at Ted with hatred. She looked at the daughter she'd never wanted with the same emotion. They were alive. They laughed and acted like everything was normal while she had been given a death sentence. They didn't deserve to be happy.

Something was completely wrong with the current situation of her spouse and her child being happy while she had to deal with all this crap in life. She felt dead. She wanted them to feel dead too. That was only fair.

They moved again. Jessica wanted a change, so they moved. They moved back to Remy, Virginia, their hometown.

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There Ted got another job at another bank. Jessica got a job at one of the local art galleries. She needed to work now more than ever, because her final rule had just been made and sealed in stone.

Rule #8: Make the world pay!

Jessica did. She made sure anyone near her felt her pain, her censure, her disgust, her hate at their life. She knew the tricks. She knew how to make someone eat crap. She didn't care about anyone or anything. She never had and never would. She kept up her tricks as long as she could.

She cheated more. She urged other women to cheat on their spouses. She ranted about how dumb men were when Ted wasn't around then smiled sweetly at him when he was around. She rode Ted more about not having enough money. She spent as much money as possible and directed Ted to remodel their house...again. She began smoking pot, something she hadn't done in at least ten years, because she figured she deserved it. She threw parties and talked Ted into joining a swingers' club. She was back in

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control, she thought. Every time she spread a rumor about some innocent woman around town or cheated on Ted, she thought, she was back in control.

A few years later Jessica's disease, the disease that had promised to turn her body into a thing that was out of control, flared up. Her legs and arms spasmed in the middle of the mall. She saw two young men snicker at her from a Macy's mirror. The pure rage she felt in that moment could have burned down the mall and the expansive parking lot that surrounded it.

It got worse as her forties moved closer to age fifty, and her own personal prison gained more bars. Men who had once salivated over her, quit looking at her. She was told she needed to stop drinking because her meds didn't work with the alcohol. She drank anyway. She was told she had to quit smoking pot too for the same reason. She kept smoking pot anyway. Things she loved were being taken away from her piece by piece. Her beautiful body and face were beginning to look wretched. Her control over men was becoming a thing of the past. Her control over women seemed to be following suit. Whereas before she saw wide and innocent eyes in other people, eyes that needed to be opened up

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to the true nature of the world, now she saw pitying looks being thrown her way. Pitying looks!

The medical bills piled up, with more and more money being doled out to pay for her ongoing treatments. Jessica didn't care. Making sure they had enough money had always been Ted's problem, not hers.

The house was remodeled again just because Jessica wanted a new look. As each day passed Jessica felt a little more decay in her body, more pain to deal with and she was certain it was worse pain than anyone else on the planet had ever felt. Even her headaches felt worse. Life had lost all fun with age.

Jessica drank more and more as time kept passing with no change in her body for the worse, but also none for the better. Her very life had lost its appeal. She wanted to move as soon as their daughter hit high school, so they moved again to another city near Virginia Beach. She demanded Ted buy a larger house and so he did.

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Whenever she looked at him as he progressed towards fifty, she found so many flaws. His hair was wiry and dull. His stomach was no longer tight and tone and he was so freaking big she felt like she was being suffocated whenever they tried to have sex. He repulsed her. His very presence repulsed her. She'd rather just go back to having affairs. So that's what she did. The new city they'd moved to was much bigger, much more her style. There were plenty of eligible and willing older men to cater to her sexual preferences, of which she had many. She'd never been a one man woman so why stop now?

Ted kept to his work, working later and later each night. Jessica wondered on that some. Was he having affairs as well? Then she decided that it was doubtful. He looked washed up with bags under his eyes from working so much, though to hear their daughter talk, he still looked like he was thirty. If Jessica didn't know better she'd think those two were in love with each other. They were exactly alike.

When Ted finally died Jessica breathed a sigh of relief. She came home from the funeral and looked around at her house, fully paid for and decorated to her exact specifications. Maddie was grown and out of the house. Now Ted was dead. She'd done it.

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Finally, she had the true freedom she'd always wanted. She could be with as many men as she wanted to and she had more money than she could have ever dreamed of having, though she kept that thought to herself because she wouldn't want her daughter to call her up from Remy, Virginia crying the blues to her as she used to do with her father. Maddie had never been much of a saver. She could spend though. In this regard Maddie was just like her father, always spending too much money on items of no consequence.

Jessica felt new life as she enjoyed her first few years of being a widow. Her daily doses of wine and beer along with the meds kept any and all pain in her body away. She splurged on some cruises, a few vacations in Europe, new clothing, plastic surgery, and just having fun.

It took her three years to blow through all of Ted's life insurance and most of their savings. She hadn't really been paying much attention to how much money she'd been spending. She'd never had to worry about it before. But that would be her little secret, she decided, as she sold the beach house and moved back to Remy, Virginia. For all intents and purposes she

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was making the move because she wanted to be near her child and her grandkids. The reality was that she needed to move into a lower cost area and into a smaller house.

She spit on Ted's grave as she looked around the small, but affordable home in Remy, Virginia. She'd talked to one of Ted's old colleagues about her finances. She'd slept with him so he'd owed her a favor or two. He'd given her the truth. And the truth was that a small two bedroom home was all she could afford to keep up through her death. Death. She hated that word.

It was a godsend that Maddie called her up shortly after she'd moved to Remy begging for a place for her and her children to live. Maddie agreed but told her there would be rules. No one had to know that she'd bought her house because it was affordable, least of all Maddie. No one had to know that she'd spent most of her savings account. Maddie was still young. She could get a job and help out with the monthly bills. Besides, Jessica needed someone to take care of her so it was a perfect setup.

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But Jessica had forgotten how difficult it was to be around Maddie. She was, well, she was Ted's daughter, not hers. It was unfortunate that Maddie had inherited more of Ted's genes than Jessica's, for she had a tendency to gain weight, which made her unattractive to say the least. It was also unfortunate that Maddie had similar personality traits because these caused a lot of riffs between Jessica and her daughter as they always had.

"You've gotten fat, Maddie." Jessica announced one morning while Maddie prepared peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for her kids' lunches. Jessica frowned as she watched her daughter fumble with the knife. "You never were good at much, were you, Maddie? Look at you. You can't even make a sandwich properly." Jessica told Maddie to move aside, then went to work on making the sandwiches the way they were supposed to be made. "You were always just like your father, you know that? You could never do anything without me holding your hand."

It didn't take long for the old pattern of Jessica and Maddie's life to reappear with Maddie keeping to herself while Jessica tried to teach her how to do everything the correct and proper way. Jessica thought she heard Maddie crying at times in her

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bedroom, but she ignored the sounds. Whatever bad had happened in Maddie's life, she deserved it. The basement was quickly fixed up for the boys once they were old enough to sleep alone. Until then they shared a bed with their mother.

Jessica did so love speaking with her grandchildren. She'd never felt much love for anything in life besides herself but she did feel something close to it for those three boys. Her grandchildren had her side of the family's genes. For this, she was grateful. They were going to be lady-killers someday, she was certain of it.

Jessica's body began to give out one day in August. She felt something that felt like was biting the side of her left thigh. The sensation moved to her right thigh, then her arms, then her feet. From that day Jessica became bedridden with her meds and liquor to keep her company. Nothing helped now though. For a year she suffered sleepless nights with pains that felt like her body was being ripped to shreds by some unknown, gnarled teeth thing. The pains got worse and she now wished for death. She saw herself in a torture chamber somewhere in a dungeon, her limbs tied to a contraption that pulled her arms and legs until the

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tendons were completely severed, the muscles shredded, the bones broken. She pleaded silently as she sipped on her liquor, for death.

When it happened, it happened suddenly and with a jolt of pain in her chest, as if someone had just opened up her heart with a serrated knife and thrown salt into it. Jessica, finally asleep, jolted awake with a wide-eyed look of shock on her face. The next second she was dead.

Jessica Bell's Descendants: Jessica Bell gives birth to Maddie Bell. Maddie has three sons. The middle son has two sons. The oldest of the two sons has a daughter who is named Kathy Novak. Kathy Novak has one son named Steve Novak.

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On Redemption...

"God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth." John 4:24

Notes to the Reader: The story of the Samaritan at the well has been on my mind for a few years now but I didn't get the full point until recently.

First someone said, "God will meet you on His terms, not yours." This thought stuck in my mind and then I happened to hear a church sermon on John 4. It was one of those light bulb moments as the pastor stated that, when Jesus meets with you, he will first show you your own sinfulness--*he'll show you who you are*--then he'll show you what it's like to be in a true relationship with him. The redemption story is based upon this premise. True growth in life starts with seeing reality, not the fictional-reality someone gave you as a child, but the reality of who you really are.

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The Great Hope

Steve Novak had never felt fear like he did on the day he walked into the ICU and looked down at the lifeless body lying on the hospital bed in front of him. His first thought was that this weak and helpless human being with an IV in her arm, tubes up her nose and an oxygen mask attached to her face was not his mother.

As he kept looking at her, he felt panic and one uncompromising truth of life that he'd never had to face before now. Every human being will die. There was no "if" there. He'd just never thought about it until now. He'd always seen himself as the eternal kid. His favorite phrase had been, "I never want to grow up." And that's pretty much how he'd lived his adult life. He'd bought what he wanted when he wanted it. He hadn't worried about a savings account or eating healthy foods or exercising. He'd worked. He'd always been responsible with having a job, but after work, it was a toss-up between getting high, getting drunk, or playing PlayStation games.

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He'd had a number of girlfriends in his past but none of them held a candle to his mother. She'd always been the devoted one, his rock. So it was little surprise that his reaction to seeing her like this, lying in a hospital bed and looking really old, gripped him with terror. She couldn't die. She was the only woman in the world, the only person in the world, who really knew and understood him. She appreciated him. Nobody else had done that in his life. Ever. At forty-five, he'd kind of given up on the idea of anyone seeing his true genius except his mother. He'd been okay with that. He was fine in the knowledge that the world was full of idiots. It was something he'd had to deal with his entire life.

Steve walked out of the hospital room and looked for a bathroom. He needed to splash his face before he passed out. As he walked the image of his mother in that bed didn't go away. But other images crowded around it, like some sort of misfit collage. He remembered her giving him chocolate on Easter. He remembered her making him a carrot cake with cream-cheese icing and walnuts every year for his birthday. He remembered her bandaging up two skinned knees when he was ten years old after a particularly bad fall on his favorite blue bike.

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He remembered so much and all of it reminded him of how saintly his mother had always been, how sacrificing she'd been as a single mom in a cruel world where fathers deserted their families for younger and prettier things.

Steve's grandfather had luckily been a fairly wealthy man. He'd owned his own business and had made good profits, so when he'd died, he'd left his wife--a lazy alcoholic who'd never truly loved her husband according to Steve's mom--with a house that was paid for, though--also according to his mother--his grandmother had managed to spend the majority of the family's wealth by the time Steve and Kathy Novak had moved into the grandmother's small three bedroom home in Remy, Virginia.

This meant Kathy had to go to work to help out with the utilities, food and such. Steve hadn't minded too much. Actually, as a six year old he'd been pretty self-sufficient in entertaining himself with make believe friends when his mother was working. Mostly though, Kathy Novak had managed to schedule her work hours around his school schedule and so had been right there with him each day, making sure he was entertained with

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fantastic stories of all the brilliant things he would do when he grew up while sharing food she'd stated was only fit for a king. Steve half-smiled at the memory. His mother had believed feeding a child a bunch of vegetables was for the birds. You only live once so why not have chocolate for breakfast and fruit loops and ice cream for supper? That may have made Steve a little overweight as a child and something of an exile in his age group, but Steve hadn't much cared for the kids his age anyhow. They'd seemed simple and beneath him. Since Kathy smoked cigarettes and pot, as soon as Steve was old enough, he smoked both too. They kept this a secret between them and hid it from his grandmother until she'd passed away when he was eighteen.

Eighteen was a year Steve would never forget because that was the year his mother betrayed him. He would never forget the day he'd come home from college break to find out she was dating a man. He'd been fairly ticked off at first. Actually, he'd been ticked off a lot during that time period. All his life he'd been his mother's "man of the house," and then his mother had gone and found a man to date. It had knocked Steve's heart into his throat and he'd no longer had any desire to finish college, so he'd dropped out and moved back home to live with his mother.

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Then he'd watched Ben Scarving like a hawk whenever he could. Steve remembered giving him the once over evil-eyed glare more than once! Was he good enough to date Steve's mother? No, Steve had adamantly said silently as he glared at Ben across the kitchen table on dinner date nights. No, he wasn't. No man would ever be good enough for his mom. Ever!

Steve shook himself out of his memories long enough to turn on the hospital faucet and splash cold water on his face. He wished hospitals didn't smell so...odd. They smelled like Lysol had been sprayed inside of a stuffy windowless room where a bunch of pigeons had just died. He didn't like the smell at all.

Taking a paper towel from the dispenser Steve wiped the excess water off his face, and then stared at his reflection in the mirror. The person staring back at him made his knees jerk. His face no longer held smooth lines, a head full of hair, and a smile that made women flock to him. Years of pot, alcohol, junk food and no exercise had taken its toll. Years of working on construction sites without sunscreen hadn't helped much either.

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Construction work had been a far cry from the scientific genius he and his mother had planned for him to be when he was a youth, but it had paid the bills over the years, and eventually Steve had landed a management position inside the company so that he was indoors at a desk at least half of his time each day. But he'd never liked it. He'd actually felt the work beneath him but had chalked it up to his lot in life; being a victim of a world who didn't appreciate a true genius such as himself.

Steve stayed in the hospital that night and the next to be closer to his mother. And he stayed angry the entire time. He was angry at God for allowing this to happen. But he also prayed for God to keep his mother alive. She was all he had.

On the third night, September 25, 2014, Kathy Novak passed away and Steve Novak's world came crashing down around him. He had no other family. It had always been just him and his mother against the world. Now he had no one. Steve went numb as he was told the news. Even looking at his mother's lifeless body didn't do much to take away the intense feeling of surrealism that cloaked his brain in some kind of protective film so that he couldn't quite grasp the concept of her death. Under that film,

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Steve felt pure rage boiling, rage at God, rage at the hospital, rage at the world. His mother had been a victim too, a victim of other people's stupidity and he wished everyone dead!

He walked out of the hospital and to his beat up black Nissan truck, lighting a cigarette and toking heavily on it as he went. He saw nothing on the drive back to his small one bedroom efficiency apartment. He was enraged at the world and couldn't believe God hadn't listened to him when he knew Steve's mother meant everything to him. Females had come and gone in his life and were good for short-term sex fulfillment type relationships, but nothing more than that. Well, there had been Renee but that hadn't ended so well. But his mother...his mother was a diamond. How dare God take her away from him!

As soon as Steve got home, he threw his keys on the kitchen counter and headed for the freezer where he kept a stash of various boozes. He picked up the Jack, then pulled a joint from the kitchen drawer and began to work on both. He wanted numb. That's all he knew right now. He wanted to be completely numb.

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He fell asleep on the small loveseat in his living room that night. It was an old and faded blue thing that he and Renee had bought together, but it was functional so Steve hadn't bothered to get a new one. When he woke up, he realized he'd been crying in his sleep. He also realized he had to call his boss and tell him the news, which he did quickly before whatever was inside of him exploded.

He felt so angry he could hardly think straight. He went into small bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror there. He didn't know what he was hoping to see, maybe he was wishing for this to all be a nightmare and that he'd wake up from it soon. Instead Steve saw himself. He looked older than ever. Even the green in his eyes looked old and faded, like a light had gone out somewhere.

Now, for the second time, he realized he looked old, really old. Out of habit, Steve wandered into his small kitchen and made his morning coffee. Normalcy, he thought, pouring his coffee and sitting back down on his loveseat, that's what he needed. Then it would all go away. It would be as if nothing had ever

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happened. Then maybe, he thought, breaking down into a waterfall of tears that wouldn't stop, maybe his mother wouldn't be dead.

It was hours before he stopped crying. Once he did, he consoled himself that he had a gun in his bedroom closet. He told God aloud that he'd use it too! That's how much he didn't care about his life now! Unless God did something fast to fix it!

Then he calmed again, smoked a cigarette and drank more coffee. He still had on yesterday's clothes, a pair of faded Levi's and a black t-shirt. He glanced down at himself realizing he hadn't eaten anything for over a day. He didn't care, he thought. He didn't care about anything.

He couldn't get that picture of his mother in the ICU looking frail and pitiful out of his head. He banged his hands against his temples wishing the picture would get out. God, he felt like he was going insane. He tried more pot, then spiked another cup of coffee with some rum, anything to make it all go away. This new world he was suddenly in sucked. It really sucked.

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It took a few days for Steve to get the incentive to do anything besides rant at God for taking his mother from him and making him feel this pain. He'd spent his entire life avoiding feeling this type of pain and now all he wanted was to go back and be a kid again forever.

Thoughts kept intruding as he called a funeral home and made plans for his mother's cremation. The hospital had called and told him he needed to get this done. He'd actually forgotten he had the responsibility of handling his mother's remains. He didn't even want to accept she was dead and now he had to take care of this.

But those other thoughts weren't much better than thoughts of taking care of his dead mother's body. Those other thoughts told him he'd wasted his life being selfish and immature. Those other thoughts told him that he was a grown man and not a boy anymore. Those other thoughts told him he'd spent years being angry because the world still hadn't recognized his genius while time had passed and suddenly he was middle aged.

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What had he done? Those thoughts questioned. He'd watched a whole bunch of movies, those thoughts answered. He'd gone on trips to places like Disney World and the Grand Canyon. He'd played a ton of games, watched as much TV and gotten high or drunk or both a lot and he'd shirked any responsibility related to being a man, a husband, or a father because he'd wanted an easy life. He'd been selfish, those thoughts told him. He shut them up with another joint.

He felt so empty without his mother. She'd kicked him out of the house in his mid-twenties when she'd decided to marry Ben and move away from Remy for a while. She'd said she wanted to see the world and be free! He'd been so mad at her then for leaving him to fend for himself. But he'd still called her every week, or else, she'd called him.

She was the one he'd gone to for advice on girls in high school, the one he'd counted on to be there for him always. She was his protective shield from a world that had never seen how exceptional he'd always been. She'd understood his angst.

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Payback time, a voice said quietly in his mind. It was time for him to be a man.

Steve tried to ignore that voice and keep thinking those shiny thoughts of his mother. She'd always reminded him that he was exceptional even if the world never noticed it. She'd told him the world was stupid because they hadn't noticed his brilliance.

Steve buried his mother alone. She had no friends and Ben had died a month ago. They'd had a few decades of fun traveling but had come home from it all broke and old. Neither had worried about a savings account and so had ended up in a small efficiency apartment where the water faucets leaked and the toilet barely worked, but it was a cheaper place than the one Steve lived in. Steve had been close to moving in with them but hadn't quite talked Ben completely into it, when Ben's health had suddenly declined. Then his mother's health had taken a dive too.

Steve sat on his loveseat after the funeral and smoked another joint. He wanted to again yell out to God and ask, why? Why had

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he continually given him this shit in life? But something else kept intruding in his thoughts. It made Steve feel fear.

Kill the rest of the world, he thought. They didn't matter. They were nothing. But his mother, she'd deserved better! A new rage lit up inside of Steve like a campfire suddenly sprayed with kerosene. Kill the world!

Steve didn't kill the world. He smoked more joints and drank more alcohol instead. He wanted numb. A week went by, maybe two. Steve wasn't sure. What he did know is that it was a week or two of Hell. Each day went by with another rude awakening. He was forty-five years old. He'd wasted his life trying to never grow up. His mother was gone. He'd never loved anyone but his mother and himself. He'd never loved God, unless God's name was Steve Novak. He'd lost his chance to have kids. He'd lost his chance to do something great in the world while waiting on the world to see he was great. He'd lost his chance with a lot of women because he'd never respected any of them. He'd hated them all for not being his mother. He'd hated his mother for not being a woman he could make love to in the bedroom.

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Then he realized he was a sick soul, really sick. And his mom had been the same. Their love for each other hadn't been normal. This thought made Steve go into his bathroom and puke his guts out. But the intense feeling of shame and self-hatred didn't go away. He'd been a Hitchcock character. He'd been that psycho. God, he felt sick again but only liquid came up.

'Where were these thoughts coming from?' Steve raged in his head as he stared up at his bathroom ceiling. *Where the hell were these thoughts coming from?* They were insane thoughts. But memories of girlfriends' comments over the years haunted him. He had memories of them accusing him of being a Mama's boy. He had memories of Renee yelling at him with tears in her eyes that he'd never love anyone as long as he was in love with his mother. Steve had almost slapped her across the mouth at the time, he'd been so damn pissed at her for saying any such thing, but suddenly he felt the truth in what she'd said and it made that sick feeling in his stomach stay right where it was. That truth made the past he'd had in his mind all these years twist into something completely different than the one he'd actually held up as former truth.

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He'd always told people his mother was a saint. He'd told them she'd struggled. The truth was she hadn't been a saint. And maybe she'd struggled but she hadn't ever had to buy a house of her own. She'd always had back-up in the form of her mother's money until it had run out. He'd held her up as someone untouchable but, in reality, she'd been another young girl who'd gotten pregnant by a guy who'd only seen women as pretty things to sleep with and maybe make a good meal for a man once in a while.

Steve had been that guy too. He'd been just like his father. All these years, he'd pretended he was so much better than his dad, but then he'd disrespected every other woman but his mother. Disrespect one woman and you disrespect all of them. That was his thought now. He felt shame at his life. He felt complete and utter shame. He'd been selfish and a taker for forty-five years and he had no idea how to change any of it.

Hours passed as Steve sat on his bathroom floor alternately vomiting and crying. He couldn't go back in time and change anything. He wanted to blame his mother for who he'd become, now

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that he was seeing something different from the special boy his mother had raised. But he really couldn't. He'd made choices.

The question of what his life was going to be like in a year from now or even two kept popping into his mind and he didn't like the answer he saw there. He didn't want to live alone for the rest of his life. He didn't want to be the guy who died alone in an apartment without anyone who loved him. He didn't want that.

But who would love him now? He was sick in his mind. He'd loved his mother as a husband loves a wife. He was sick. And he hated himself for it, really hated himself. He got up and looked in the mirror again hoping to see his thoughts were all a lie, but what looked back at him was this distorted and ugly creature he'd never seen before and never wanted to see again. He wanted that thing out of him for good.

Steve closed his eyes and he prayed. He prayed to God to get that thing out of him. He prayed heavily and he prayed with the fear of Hell staring back at him. He prayed hard and then he prayed out loud for God to save him. Steve heard nothing in

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those moments. His mind went silent, still. But then he felt something lift off of him, like a tremendous weight had been holding him down all his life and now it was being taken away. Steve sat down on the bathroom floor and kept praying.

He woke up on Friday in his recliner, not remembering how he got from the bathroom back into his living room and not remembering exactly when he'd fallen asleep. It had been days since he'd showered. His eyes hurt. His throat hurt from heaving so much but his heart didn't hurt. But something odd had occurred while he'd slept. And that odd thing made him suddenly want to "do." All his life he'd been lazy but now he wanted to "do."

He looked around his living room. There were empty bottles and pizza boxes everywhere. It smelled like an ashtray and looked even worse. He walked into his bathroom and looked into his mirror again. What he saw there were eyes filled with hunger and determination.

Steve got into the shower and washed up, then shaved, all the while asking for God's help. He didn't stop all day long. He

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prayed as he cleaned up his apartment and thought of nothing but God. He'd thought he'd been saved years ago, but this time something was different. His heart had been sliced opened and bled out. Now he was getting new blood and feeling a change. It would take a while, he thought as he picked up his cell phone to call his boss. He'd been on extended leave but it was time to go back to work. It was time to live his life.

Steve began making a list. Currently, there was only one item on it but it was an important one. He'd been irresponsible his entire life. Now he wanted to be responsible and he wanted to make something up to one person he was certain he'd done some wrong things to in his past. He wanted to see Renee again and apologize. They'd lived together for a long time before she'd given up on him. He'd made promises to her of marriage and kids and a house and then he'd made excuses as to why those things never happened. She'd deserved better than that.

Steve looked her up, and then drove to Winchester to see her. He was surprised to find out that she'd never married. She lived in an apartment similar to his apartment in Remy and was still living week to week as a waitress. When she opened the door,

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Steve felt like he'd come home to something he'd never seen before. She had wrinkles now and her bright blue eyes looked worn and tired but what he saw was a fragile beauty that no man, including him, had ever bothered to notice before. Suddenly, he wanted to give her the world.

But he wasn't sure if he was worthy of her, not after all the things he'd done to her in his quest to be king of the universe by doing nothing. There was no noble cause he wanted to fight for anymore, but there was something he'd like to work towards with her. He'd like to earn her respect.

They re-started a relationship as Steve began a separate project. He'd promised her years ago he was serious about buying a house. Now he was doing it. But he wasn't just going to buy a house, he was going to build his own. He began to build it on nights and weekends that he wasn't with Renee. He'd picked a small plot in the country just outside of Remy. It had plenty of trees and wildlife surrounding it and instinct told him she'd love it.

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This, he thought as he budgeted out the supplies, was what he knew how to do and do well. He was good at construction. He'd been that way since he was a child playing with Legos and wooden building blocks. He purchased all of the materials at cost because of his connections and he was able to get his labor cheap too. He no longer felt like he was meant to be a genius in a world of idiots. Rather, he was proud that he had the skills he did and was able to use them to build things. For the first time in his life, he felt like he was who he was meant to be.

He sold his old comic books and his PlayStation along with the games and most of his movies. It was time to grow up. Then he let Renee show him who she was. She'd always liked to paint but he'd never taken a true interest in it. He did so now. She showed him her world. She told him of the strife she'd had with her own father before he'd died. She told him of the sadness she felt whenever she saw a dead squirrel and she told him how she saw color as she painted. Colors to her were like words and sentences and books. Colors told a story. She painted stories, she told him with a small smile.

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Steve worked harder on the house. He was also saving up for a ring. He wanted her to have a nice one. It took a year for everything to fall into place but when it did; Steve drove Renee down to Remy and then showed her the house he'd built for them to live in together. He told her this just before he got down on one knee and proposed to her. He told her some other things that day too. He promised her that each and every day he'd appreciate her and love her as God loved the church. He told her from the bottom of his heart that he was so sorry he'd been such a jerk in their past but that he would spend every single day making it up to her if she'd let him. He no longer wanted to be a taker but a giver. He cried as he said the words to her, words he knew he meant.

They were married on one fine day in May. Shortly after, Renee became pregnant with a baby boy. Steve looked up into the cloudless summer sky that day and thanked God for his life.

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Final Thoughts

While at Hollins University I made sure to take advantage of the array of courses offered, unsure of exactly why I was in college again, having already obtained three degrees and having no desire to change careers; I only knew God wanted me to do it. So I did it.

And I learned. I learned about philosophy and justice, politics and power, collage, throwing pottery, kids Literature, the tradition of tragedy, psychology and personality, Hitchcock and suspense, fiction writing and the power of the written word and, in the process, re-learned some things about the reality of me.

Then I began writing again, as I had done when I was a teenager with my own wondrous dreams of becoming a rich and famous writer, as I had done in my twenties with my own cocky dreams of becoming a serious literary writer, and as I had done when I hit forty with no real goal in mind except using a talent God had given to me to tell stories that could, maybe, help other people. Hopefully, I've done this well. Thanks for reading.

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