

MEAT ON BONES:
STORIES ABOUT
GIRLS AND
FOOD

Thesis

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ABSTRACT

MEAT ON BONES: STORIES ABOUT GIRLS AND FOOD

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Meat on Bones is a collection of humorous stories that all connect to tell the story of Eric Sketcher, a skinny young man with a collapsed lung and a penchant for attracting odd characters. After a quirky confrontation with a homeless man, Sketcher reveals that even though he fantasizes about having odd adventures, when they actually happen he longs to push his life back into the straight line of routine. The subsequent stories and intertwining vignettes involving girls and food expand on this notion, chronicling his movement from oddity to routine. Along the way, he helps a Methodist minister kidnap a pig, administers an age-old Hopi home remedy to a friend, and attempts to burn down a tree that once belonged to Adolf Hitler. Ultimately, my intention for writing this piece was to design a collection in which the stories could work together, as well as exist autonomously.

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ONE

I have the body of a twelve-year-old boy. Wait. Let me revise that. I have the bare, scrawny chest of a twelve-year-old boy. I like to think the other parts are up to par. If I suck in my breath, the skin sinks deep down into the cracks between my ribs. Being skinny in high school had kids introducing my face to more lockers than I care to remember. Sophomore year ended with three football players throwing me down the stairs. "He's lighter than the ball. Coach should let us play with him," one stuttered through the gap in his teeth. Well, that's what I think he said. After all, I was plummeting through the air at the moment.

I landed okay—nothing two stitches to the forehead couldn't handle. My doctor, a beefy guy who wheezed loudly through his mouth, suggested an additional prescription. "Get meat on bones," he said, revealing his single gold tooth. I decided to follow his advice, mainly because I really didn't want to be a junior in high school and still get my ass chucked down any more staircases. Before school started in September, I vowed to fill in the gaps between my ribs until the fat oozed through holes, necessitating some type of embarrassing support garment. It was there that my summer of potential obesity began.

NIBBLES

His grandmother's life depended on the seventy-eight cents in change jingling around in my pocket. Apparently, the Ak-47-wielding thugs surrounding her car demanded that exact amount in exchange for her safe return. While driving up to Ohio from Texas, they stopped at exit 187 in Chambersburg to gas up, when an army of thugs charged their car about two blocks away from the gas station. Nibbles, as I started calling him, managed to escape to get help. Poor grandma. Locked in the car like a fidgety puppy on a summer day, I pictured her thrashing wildly, as the chain on her spectacles clicked against the window. The more frantic her pleas became, the more obnoxiously the armed thugs circling outside laughed.

I leaned against my car with one hand on the gas pump, studying the number of gallons clicking by only half as fast as the dial above it racking up the price. He stood on the other side of the trunk and relayed his "heavenly serious predicament" with frantic gestures. His brown fingers wiggled anxiously to accentuate his slurred speech. Three day's stubble, peppered with white whiskers, covered his cheeks, stopping just below the heavy folds under his eyes. The upturned collar on his mustard-stained tan work shirt sheltered his shriveled ears from the surprisingly chilly summer gusts streaming through the

columns of gas pumps.

I kept my eyes fixed on the rolling numbers, not sure how to handle the situation. Five years ago, while Christmas shopping with my dad in downtown Pittsburgh, a homeless guy shuffled up and asked us for five dollars. Without even looking at the guy, my dad threw his hand in the air and screamed “no way, Jose!” I, on the other hand, preferred the more subtle yet pathetic approach of claiming not to have any money while desperately clasping my jeans pockets to silence the rattling quarters and nickels. Even though I told Nibbles “no” three times, he didn’t believe me. Yeah, I had money, but it wasn’t like I could spare anything. A couple of months before, in May, I graduated from college and was looking for a job. After living with my parents all summer in their house up in the mountains, I decided to leave Pennsylvania. My college friend, Marty Stephenson, had a place in Columbus with a foldout couch. So, I lined up a few job interviews and packed up for Ohio.

Finally, the pump snapped loudly and the numbers abruptly stopped whirling. I replaced the pump while reaching behind me to feel around for my gas cap, which I left on top of the trunk. Not feeling it, I spun around. It was gone. With the blood rushing heavily through my face, I scanned underneath the car, just in case. In a frenzied panic, I reeled around, patting my pockets and checking on top of the pump. Still standing on the other side of the car, a drippy grin melted over the homeless guy’s face.

“Did you see a gas cap around?”

He just smiled. I leaned back down, peering under the car again.

“I’ll give it back on one condition.”

I jerked up. “What?”

“I’ll give it back on one condition.”

“You took my gas cap?”

His lips pulled back like a curtain, revealing his green fizzing teeth. “Yep.”

I feebly threw out my hand. “Give it back.”

“Like I said, only on one condition.”

Frantically, I scanned the gas station, hoping the attendant was on the phone with the cops, reporting the case of the stolen gas cap. Instead, he hunched over the cash register, his back facing the plate glass window. The other people at the pumps stood oblivious, shouldering their cell phones while watching the number of gallons rack up. I sucked city air between my teeth, suddenly remembering my grandmother’s advice about avoiding “pervery” homeless people.

“What’s your name, boy?” he asked, trying to get my attention.

Before I realized what I was saying, I told him. “Eric Sketcher, but people just call me Sketcher.”

He nodded approvingly, feeling we were making progress. In my head, I swore at myself and toyed with the idea of retracting the name in favor of a fake one.

“Sketchy,” he began. “We do this the easy way. I’ll give you your cap back on one condition.”

“What condition?”

“Buy me a Reese’s Pieces Cup.”

“You mean the candy?”

“Yeah. I love ‘em. Eat ‘em all the time.”

“A Reese’s Cup? If I get you one, you’ll give me my gas cap back?”

His left hand sprung up to the left side of his chest. “On my word.”

After locking the car, I went inside, bought fifteen bucks worth of gas and a single, 60 cent Reese’s Cup wrapped in a shiny orange wrapper.

He scoffed when I handed it to him. “What the hell is this?”

“It’s a Reese’s Cup. It’s what you asked for. Can I have my gas cap back, please?”

“Reese’s Cups come in twos. There’s only one here.”

“Yeah, they sell singles.”

“I’ve never seen them.”

“They have been around for years.”

“Probably for the cheapo folks to pass out at Halloween.”

“Look, just be glad it’s not a mini Reese’s cup.”

“This is a mini, there’s only one here, boy.”

“No, I meant one of those tiny ones that are wrapped in gold tinfoil.”

“You mean a Hershey Kiss?”

“No. Hershey Kisses come in silver foil and have that little flag sticking out of the top.”

“The ones with almonds come in gold foil. I know. I had ‘em last week.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of nose. The rushing traffic hissed by, rippling my bangs across my forehead. When I opened my eyes, he continued shaking his head in disgust at his lone Reese's Cup. He closed his fingers over it and thrust his fists against his hips. Removing his checkered newsboy cap, he cocked his head up towards the clouds, contemplating the most effective course of action.

After about a minute, he licked his lips. “I got it. I'll take the peanut butter challenge.”

“What?”

“The challenge. I'll try to eat the chocolate away and get the peanut butter center free.”

As a kid, sitting on a dark curb on Halloween night, I used to do the same thing. My friends and I would challenge each other to see who could eat the chocolate without harming the slim disk of crumbly peanut butter inside.

“If I can't do it, then I'll give you your cap back. If I can, then you buy me another one to get your cap back.”

“No, no,” I protested. “The deal was a Reese's Cup for my gas cap. You didn't say anything about the challenge.”

“That was before you tried pawning this cheapo onto me.”

“That’s it. I’m getting a cop.”

He turned to go. “In this neighborhood? Good luck.”

“Wait, wait,” I said. “Okay. Take the challenge.”

The deeply cut lines around his eyes squashed together, as his chapped lips bent upwards in a wide smile. His fingers, bulbous and pocked with dents and warts like hotdogs burnt on the grill, tore at the orange wrapper. Grasping either side of the cup, daintily, he peeled down the black cup holder and swabbed his cracked and bleeding lips with his tongue. Satisfied, he rolled his neck from side to side to pop the joints, and then began lightly nibbling away. Like chomping down a juicy ear of corn on the cob at a fourth of July picnic, he mechanically chewed his way around the edge, turning the cup between fingers. Finally, he plopped it in gully of his palm and thrust it under my chin. His pickled tongue swiped the chocolate from his moss-covered teeth. Between two layers of chocolate, glistening with saliva, a ring of golden peanut butter shone through.

After a deep breath, he turned the cup on its side and began raking the top layer over the dulled edge of his bottom front teeth. A car drifted up behind us. Above the pump, the loudspeaker crackled: “Clear pump four, please.”

“Come on,” I yelled.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and opened the car door, showing the driver behind me that I was gearing up to leave. Placing one foot inside, I leaned my elbows on the roof. The driver pitched his hands up, impatiently.

“Clear pump four, please.”

I closed my eyes, spitting inaudible swears. Suddenly, the thick, rich scent of peanut butter filled my nose. Opening my eyes, the small but intact pellet of peanut butter nestled in Nibbles' palm floated under my nostrils.

"Want it?"

Before I could say "no" and wrench my breakfast on his battered boots, he catapulted the disc into his mouth, smiling happily while flapping his jaws.

"Gotcha!"

I got in the car and started it up. "Hang on."

I pulled into a parking spot on the side of the store and went in to buy a two pack of Reese's Cups. As I headed back to my car, Nibbles' eyes glistened excitedly. I tossed him the package, and he ran it under his eager nostrils. Ruining his moment, I extended my hand, expectantly. He snarled, fishing deep in the pockets of his drawstring pants for my gas cap. Like a pistol, he drew it quickly from his side and tossed it to the concrete. It bounced, ricocheting off my left front tire and shimming on its side like a flicked coin. I scrambled for it.

"Good doing business with you," he cackled.

I brushed passed him, opening the flap on the gas tank to screw the cap back on.

"And don't steal my technique, boy," he snarled over his shoulder.

Shutting the gas flap, I collapsed against the car and watched him shuffle down the bustling morning sidewalk. I didn't handle it well at all. I was an idiot, throwing around an empty threat about the cops. I should have kept my cool and

just played along, perhaps cracking a joke about how his love of Reese's Cups superceded his grandmother's well being. But, I didn't. That usually happens to me, though. I'll set out on a Friday night or a long road trip with the hope of having all kinds of weird adventures, but when the moment actually comes, I'm caught off guard and desperately seek for a way to shove my life back into the mundane, back into the straight line of routine. But still, leaning there against my car, watching Nibbles relay his tale of woe to two middle-aged women, I couldn't help but smile.

I started the car and rolled out of the gas station. As I coasted passed Nibbles and his new victims, I tapped on the horn twice. He whirled around and thrust his hand high in the air, growling a goodbye. The two women took advantage of the distraction and hustled off with their shopping bags banging against their large thighs. I grinned and drummed the wheel excitedly. I had over a hundred miles to go and a good story to tell when I got there.

TWO

Growing up, I had a heavier older brother. He wasn't obese or anything, just a little chubby in the cheeks and had to wear these special pants with an adjustable Velcro waistband. My younger brother and I constantly ridiculed him, calling him "Chubby" or "Tubby." When he started high school and grew a goatee and long hair, we called him "Fat Jesus." Anyway, my mom always told me especially to not make fun of him, because kids who are skinny at a young age grow up fat and chubby kids slim down to become lean and handsome as adults. That summer before my junior year, my brother came home from college and got a summer job delivering Sunday newspapers. He ended up losing eighteen pounds. So, I figured it was about time for my mother's fat prophecy to come true.

I daydreamed about the first day of junior year. Lockers would bend like spoons, as my five hundred pound frame thundered down the hall, chucking horrified freshmen down the stairs like overripe apples and oranges. All the kids would tremble at the thought of seeing me eat spaghetti in the cafeteria and would give me a cool fat nickname, like "Eric Pants Stretcher." I mean come on, let's face it, every fat kid needs a nickname like Fat Albert; William "Refrigerator" Perry; or Chunk, the husky kid from *The Goonies*.

Now, when I did leave the house, I went to the mall and bought size 42 jeans and XXX T-shirts of The Beatles, Pearl Jam, and Nirvana. I was going to be fat, but hey, that didn't mean I couldn't be hip. Now, if you're skinny and ever shop in the "Plus Sizes Section" of department stores I have to warn you, you won't get a warm welcome. While I shopped for XXXL flannel shirts and pants with a doublewide seat, the other customers gave me dirty looks. The store clerk didn't quite take to me buying all these big clothes, either. He stood awestruck as I emerged from a dressing room with a pair of size 42 jeans cinched with a belt around my size 26-inch waist. I asked him if he wanted to go watch me eat twelve cinnamon buns in the food court, but he only sighed and walked away.

By the middle of June, I had the clothes, a fat nickname picked out, and the willingness to give it the old college try, but one thing was missing: the weight itself. Upon stepping on the bathroom scale, I was a feathery 118 pounds. That's when I decided to get serious and start a new diet consisting primarily of cupcakes and fattening salad dressings. In my mother's kitchen, I concocted high fat treats for my now eight meals a day. The recipe is easy:

- 1) Take 1 cupcake-- homemade or store-bought (doesn't matter)
- 2) Put the cake in a bowl
- 3) Take a bottle of salad dressing and pour in bowl until cake is submerged
- 4) Put a cherry on top (optional)
- 5) Get a spoon and enjoy!

Here are some of my favorites:

- Buttermilk Ranch Chocolate Twist
- Blue Cheese Blueberry Muffins
- Thousand Island Cakes with Shredded Coconut
- Sweet and Sour with Sprinkles

After eating one of these delectable treats, don't do anything physical, like synchronized swimming. While these cakes may be tasty, they'll leave you feeling like you could birth a small automobile. However, I wouldn't advise lying down. I usually sat back in a recliner, that way my head was slightly elevated, so I wouldn't choke on my own vomit like Jimi Hendrix did. So, find a recliner, sit back, and watch reruns of *Cheers* and *Who's the Boss*. This will keep you alert and laughing. Don't laugh too hard though, because that burns a lot of calories.

RECIPES FOR FALL

"I bet we could eat all of these leaves," Grandma said, gesturing to the expanse of dry leaves with the day's mail of cooking and craft magazines.

"That'd be easier than bagging them all," I replied, jamming my foot into a black garbage bag of leaves to make more room. "The city still hasn't picked up the four I put out by the curb yesterday."

Grandma painfully hunched over, snagged a stiff leaf from the ground and studied it. "Yes, sir, I bet we could eat them, get nice and fat, huh?"

"But, if I was fat, I couldn't come rake them up for you."

"We wouldn't need a rake, dear. We could just spread an afghan in the middle of the yard and have a leaf picnic."

I laughed. "Yeah, at least the ants and flies wouldn't bug us."

She slapped my elbow with her rolled-up magazines. "You're my favorite," she said.

Setting her hands on her hips, confidently, she surveyed the fluttering blur of red, yellow, and green. "Yep, I bet we could eat all these," she said, shaking her head.

At that, she clenched the mail under her arm and wobbled up the curved stone path back to the house. I watched the peak of her blue hood bob up and down between the high hedges. Tufts of curly white hair, sprouting from either

side of her hood, remained stiff in the fall wind. Grandma was born in Ohio in 1913. She met my grandpa Eddie, who died when I was in fifth grade, in 1930, when her family moved to Pittsburgh. They got married in 1932 and bought the tall white house on Elmer Place Road. Like most two-story houses in the southwestern Pennsylvania, it looked squat and unassuming from the street. From the back, however, as the earth sloped around the sides of the house, the house became an imposing white tower, like a lighthouse presiding over a rocky cliff. And while Grandma had a great view of Three Rivers Stadium, where the Pirates played, the hill was a headache and a half to rake in the fall. Grandma always said she had a staircase instead of a backyard. On the right side of her house, level with the street, was a small, square yard with a little golden statue of Buddha holding up a white birdbath. Behind "Birdbath Buddha," the ground slanted about fifteen feet to another small landing of green grass. The second level wrapped around the tool shed to the basement door. Near the door, a thin trail lined by hedgerows, which came up to my stomach and Grandma's neck, snaked down to the third and final level. This level stretched almost three times as wide as the previous two levels.

Down on the ground level, the oak trees swayed with life, rustling like a quick summer rain. The overcooked leaves dropped silently while my back was turned to fill in the bald spots I had just cleared. As I slogged through the ankle deep layer, dead leaves, curled like dead slugs, clung to my white socks and pecked away at my ankles with their dull points. Removing the third hooded

sweatshirt Grandma gave me to wear, I wiped my grimy forehead with one of the sleeves before chucking it on the ground. Instantly, the leaves swarmed, swirling madly over the bright blue fabric to restore the natural red, yellow, and green landscape. After about ten minutes, a lone pull string, like a stretched out hand emerging from quicksand, poked through the sheath of leaves, helplessly. Exhausted, I stopped raking and stared at it while catching my breath.

Just then, the steel clothesline pole trembled, and the pulley attached to the top squeaked frantically. As the pulley churned, the rope moved like a conveyor belt. A white square of paper attached with a clothespin arched against the wind as it fluttered down the staircase. Leaning against the pole, I squinted until it came into focus. In green, glittery ink, the message read: "Lunch time, Hointzy." Hointzy. She called everyone "Hointzy": me, my brothers, and even stray dogs on the street. I think it's a German word, but I have no clue what it means. I liked when she called me that, though. Of course, being in ninth grade and just starting high school at the time, it wasn't something I wanted spread around, if you know what I mean.

Anyway, the whole clothesline system was her idea. It worked pretty well, considering we used it solely for communicating up and down the staircase. (She had a new washer and dryer.) Don't get me wrong, though, not all of her ideas were this practical. Five months before, at my brother's high school graduation, she had a crazy revelation. Driving to the ceremony, as my mom weaved through the bustling parking lot to find a space close to the auditorium, Grandma hunched

quietly in the back seat next to me. The tops of her square bifocals peered over the door at the proud oaks shading the gravel lot.

Suddenly, she clasped her hands together. "Park it in a tree, Elaine."

Keeping one eye on the road and the other on a lurking minivan, my mom cranked the wheel hard in a U-turn. "What, mom?"

"Wouldn't it be nice to just hang it in a tree? The leaves would sparkle."

I grinned, working a finger over my snug white collar.

Grandma continued, "I bet we could..."

The car lurched to a halt. The minivan slipped past us, stealing our spot.

"Mom. No. I don't want you buying hooks or chains or hanging anything heavier than a bird feeder in a tree. I'm still trying to figure out what to do with those 'bat motels' you built behind the utility shed."

"Oh, I was just thinking out loud, dear, that's all."

"As long as that's all. And that goes for both you," she warned, eyeing both of us.

"Ka-peesh," we said in unison. Grandma saluted.

Mom lifted off the break, and we sputtered forward. Without taking her eyes off the trees, Grandma reached back and popped the top button on my collar.

At home, after the ceremony, my mom and dad lectured me about not going along with Grandma's crazy schemes. She pretty much drove them crazy.

“She’s my mother, and I love her, but we have to watch her. I don’t want to put her in a home.”

“She likes the outdoors too much,” my dad mused, half watching the news.

Mom continued. “I want her to be in that house. That’s why I go and stay every other weekend.”

I agreed. I wanted Grandma to stay in Grandpa Eddie’s house, too, so that’s when I volunteered to spend two weekends a month, raking leaves and hanging the storm windows.

As I neared the top level of the staircase, I whiffed the familiar smoke of one of Grandma’s famous grilled cheese sandwiches. Sliding into the restaurant style both in the corner of the kitchen, she heaped two of them on my blue-checked plate. My nostrils winced. The thick bread smelled odd. Grandma stood next to the stove in her green “This German is Huggable” apron. Her wide, blurry eyes, magnified three times over by her glasses, beamed proudly. As I picked up the first sandwich, she hooked her arms behind her back and rocked from side to side, expectantly. I tore into the sandwich; my teeth slid through the layers of bread and cheese and grasped the sloppy sheet of lettuce. Pulling back, it swung from the sandwich and slapped against my chin. The steam stung the soft skin under my bottom lip. I keeled forward, sucking it into my mouth like a loose strand of spaghetti. I chewed frantically, even though it scraped harshly across my tongue, like a dry wad of paper.

Little shards jabbed into the sides of my windpipe. Clenching the sides of the table and fighting the urge to hack, I peered over at Grandma. She had turned to the boiling pot of water on the stove and fished around with the ladle. A steaming heap of soggy leaves hung from the ladle.

"Oh, God!" I exclaimed, spraying leaves and cheese across the table.

I popped the tab on the soda and sucked until the empty can crunched under my grip. Grandma thudded my upper back.

"You alright, Hointzy?"

Massaging my throat, I leaned back and shook my head yes. Blinking away the tears in my eyes, I noticed a garbage bag over on the floor, the leaves billowing onto the fuzzy rug at the foot of the sink.

"I put leaves in place of lettuce. It was the quickest thing I could come up with for lunch. Tonight I'll make a casserole or leaf salad, yes?"

She scooped up the bits of leaves and cheese with a wad of paper towels. "I really think we can get rid of all of them. Don't you?"

I didn't reply and just hung my head. Grandma leaned over and wiped the table a second time, retracing the streaks on the table with her wad paper towels.

"People think I can't take care of things around here anymore," she said, tenderly.

"Grandma," I objected, without a hint of what to say next. I just figured the "Grandma" would stop her from saying what she said next.

“It’s okay. I know your mother thinks that. But, it’s okay. We’ll show her.

What do you say?”

Her wide eyes filled her inch-thick lenses. Her lips fidgeted, itching to curl upwards.

I stared down at the sandwiches on my plate; the leaf tips protruded like hard strips of bacon. After pushing the plump garbage bag by the stove out of my head, I yanked a clean napkin from the holder and, for effect, jammed it into my collar. I picked up the second leaf sandwich and cocked my head.

“I’m gonna need another soda, Grandma.”

THREE

In addition to my diet of cupcakes and salad dressing, I ate at the Mile High Sandwich Shop about four times a month. Over the course of that summer, my dad's 1986 Buick Skylark broke down about twelve times, and each time he took it to Rod's Garage, which sat across the street from the Mile High. Rod's was famous for their chief mechanic, this big Indian guy named Steggs. Well, I'm not sure if he was actually Indian, but he had a long black braid rolling down his back and dark, rusty skin. Instead of a green shirt with his name etched on the front, like the rest of the mechanics, he wore a khaki jumpsuit with the top part tied around his waist to display his granite chest muscles and swooping eagle tattoo pressing through a snug white undershirt.

The legend of Steggs began in the summer of '88, when a shriveled old woman with cat hairs matted on the back of her purple overcoat scraped into the parking lot with shot breaks. Clutching her handbag, she shuffled into the service station and meekly asked how long the repairs would take.

"Should I have my son pick me up and come back in a few days?"

"Days?" Steggs balked, lumbering forward. The woman drew back a few steps, and understandably so, as the seven foot behemoth drifted closer. He sidestepped the cowering woman and leaned against the doorframe, swinging the door wide open. Pointing across the street to the Mile High he commanded:

“Go get a sandwich.”

The way I understood it, the bigger the meal he told you to get, the more severe the repair. For instance, an oil change equated to a Coke, alignment amounted to a combo meal, and a new starter meant a combo meal plus a bowl of wedding soup and a ginger scone. The incredible thing was that Steggs finished every job in that amount of time. However, after many combo meals that summer—the Asiago roast beef sandwich with fries and slaw on top being my favorite—my dad’s left eyelid began sputtering, signaling that the quiet kernel of rage buried at the base of his brain had cracked and the contents seeped loose. Refusing my mother’s commands to sell the car, he waited for “a monster repair to stump that smug jackass at the garage.” By late June, when the gas tank began leaking, he thought he had found it. The gauge inside had also broken off and clinked around; he kept track of the mileage with a pen and pad.

Steggs stood quietly, wiping his greasy hands with an even greasier rag while listening to my dad tell him about the gas tank. After dad finished his story, he dropped the keys on the counter to present a formal challenge, like smacking a duke in the face with a leather glove before a duel. Deep down, I cheered for Steggs. Nothing against my dad, but I needed my Mile High fix. Surprisingly, Steggs didn’t kick the door open and command us to go buy a sandwich. Instead, he scratched his temple with the bitten down eraser end of a pencil and squinted painfully at the work order.

“That’s a big job,” he commented.

A startled hush rippled across the waiting room. The elderly folks in the row of chairs by the window chattered in hushed tones. Gripped with the fear that she had to go to a dealership for all of her routine maintenance, one woman closed her eyes and pinched her earlobes. Dad didn't waiver. He crossed his arms and demanded that they fill the tank up three quarters of the way after finishing the job.

With the whole service station in suspense, Steggs nodded his head and emerged from around the counter. Silently, he towered over dad, nodding for almost half a minute. Then, dad showed his hand. He cupped his hands over the keys and suggested we go across town to Car Care. In response, Steggs thrust his hand up in the air to stop us from leaving. His greasy finger still pointing upwards, he stomped his right foot rhythmically. Dad threw up his hands, taking a step back. Demonstrating a quickness rarely seen, Steggs whirled around and proceeded to moonwalk to the door. His big boots smeared black trails across the shiny floor. Attempting his best "A-hhheeee-hhheeee" in a low, monotone voice, he twirled, threw the door open, and announced: "Go do some early Christmas shopping for about forty-five minutes and then grab dinner."

Fuming, dad took the walk of shame through the gauntlet of applauding senior citizens complimenting Steggs on his "Michael Jordan" impersonation. Steggs stood grinning, as dad rumbled through the door.

Approximately one hour and fifteen minutes later, we sat in the Mile High, next to the plate glass window amongst other condemned saps nibbling on their

sandwiches and straining to see what was happening across the street. I happily ate my roast beef in the sun, while dad jittered his legs anxiously. The ice in my Coke chattered. As if on cue, Steggs pulled the old Skylark around to the front of the garage, got out, and bowed towards us.

Dad slammed the sugar packet he had been fiddling with on the table. "That guy's a real smartass. This is the last time he's getting my business," he promised.

Engrossed in my dripping, fattening sandwich, I giggled unconsciously and immediately regretted it. Dad crossed his arms and pitched back in his plastic chair.

"And enough goofing around for you," he said. "You're getting a job."

HOPI HOME REMEDY

She could walk across a sheet of ice like no one I've ever seen. Her costar, a dapper black man in a stone gray, pinstripe power suit, could only muster three dainty steps across the ice rink in his wing-tipped loafers. They were tiny steps too, bordering on a flat-out waddle, with his knees practically pinned together to prevent his feet from diverging to separate hemispheres. He didn't speak either. He said, "Hello" when the commercial started, carefully planted his three steps to center ice, and continued: "We know driving can be slippery business, that's why we at All-Safe Insurance stand solid, ready to take your claim." As he launched into the 1-800 number, the yellow Zamboni lumbering by behind him cleared the screen to reveal a voluptuous brunette about my age—24 or so—in formfitting black pants and a leather jacket.

Leaping into the sales pitch, Mr. Dapper proclaimed, "So, if you call us..."

"...It will be smooth sailing," the girl cooed, gliding across the ice with sure and steady strides. The clunky square heels on her sexy black boots clomped with a crisp crunch. Her guitar hips pitched back and forth. When she reached her partner, easily covering a distance of about eight feet, she scrunched her lips into a try-that-on-for-size smirk and shot him a sideways glance. I pedaled my feet excitedly on the ripe couch cushions. All day at work, that look played in my head, leaving my hands to squiggle freely in red ink across my stack of proofs.

Satisfied, I nestled deeper into the crack of the couch when the six o'clock news flicked back on. I undid the top two buttons on my white dress shirt, yanking the collar on my gray t-shirt away from my damp neck. My black workbag, frayed near the zipper, slumped over in the corner near the freestanding halogen lamp. Inside was the new issue of *Midwest Cuisine*, a monthly trade publication that I worked for. I had written a profile on a Houdini-themed restaurant in Indiana and wanted to see how the final layout looked but didn't feel like getting up. I was content.

Through the slits in the blinds, girls with slicked hair clicked by in heels, getting an early start to Friday night even before the blue haze of evening crept down the steeple on the Sharlow Church across the street. I lived in a complex of stout A-frame townhouses dressed with crisscrossing wood slats like 17th century shanties. My roommate Marty Stephenson and I shared a two-bedroom place between the laundry room and a billboard facing the road, which announced, "Jamestown II: A Home for Young Professionals."

Suddenly, the front door scuffed open. Marty lumbered in, dropping his red binder of notes and scripts. He crumpled on the worn, foldout couch cattycornered to me. Removing his black horn-rimmed glasses, which helped him become a convincing Seymour in *Little Shop of Horrors* the previous month, he squashed his face against a red throw pillow—my red throw pillow.

"I'm miserable."

"Your ear is still stuffed up?"

His long face peeled from the pillow. Tufts of thinning black hair swirled in intricate patterns on top of his head. He muttered “yes” and shoved the pillow against his right ear. “It’s plugged up with wax or something.”

I just “hmp-h-ed” and nodded; I knew better than to suggest Q-tips. Growing up, he shared a room with his older brother, who left Q-tips smeared with orange wax—way up to the cardboard stick—all over their floor. My toes still recoil in horror at the thought.

“Well, if you had come five minutes earlier, you would have seen the All-Safe girl. I bet that would have made you feel better.”

“I missed her? No!”

“I’ve noticed it usually comes on right before the six o’clock news.”

“You know, some of my friends at the Crop Theater Circle know her. Her name is Holly Winters. Can you believe that?”

“Yeah. You told me.”

With that, he rolled over and rammed his face deeper into the back of the couch.

“Yeah,” I began, muting the TV. “I keep daydreaming about her at work. Do you think one of your friends could ...”

Marty rolled back over, aiming his good ear in my direction. “What?”

“Um, well...”

“Hey, do you want to go eat?”

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. “Yeah, okay.”

Marty pulled himself up. "Let's take your car. Tobey is in mine."

A few months before, he'd gotten a steady gig as Tobey Thumbtack, the perky star of The Pearson Corporation's training films. In his debut film, *Welcome New Trainees*, he helped a poor disheveled rookie with a paper jam in the copier. Tobey shuffled to the machine, his lycra-clad legs straddling his sharpened pinpoint. In a shot that took 17 takes, because Tobey kept braining the trainee with his wriggling foam saucer head, he leaned down and liberated the troublesome tray before giving a tour of the cafeteria. The whole thing was disturbingly Freudian. No wonder the guy threw a black sheet over the costume when it was stuffed in his back seat.

Rolling out of the Jamestown II parking lot, we wobbled down a thin, cobble stone alley to the Short North, a hip arts district north of downtown. It was the best place to grab a big, greasy burger.

"Pull in here," Marty said suddenly, gesturing to the Healthy Lifestyle Emporium on Fifth.

"We're eating at the new age health food store?"

"No. I want to see if I can get something here for my ear."

Inside, a stout woman with gray hair halfway down her back smiled warmly behind the front counter, as the clanging cowbell announced our entrance. With my stomach grinding through my half-formed abs, Marty wandered slowly through each aisle, assuring his ear that help was on the way

with a tender finger massage. In the far corner of the store, he came across a dented box of what looked like giant, mummified pencils.

“I think this is what I need.”

“Earwax Candles,” I said, reading the handwritten sign taped to the box.

About three times as thick as a pencil, the hollow earwax candle funneled at one end and was wrapped in strips of beige beeswax.

“Is this an actual thing?”

“As opposed to a hologram?”

“As opposed to something ten out of ten doctors would recommend you not jam in the soft inner workings of your ear canal.”

“It’s a real thing, okay? The Hopi Indians use them.”

“Alright. Just pay for it so we can go eat.”

As we rounded a row of steel wire racks of cement tofu blocks, there she was.

“The All-Safe girl,” I gasped.

Leaning behind the counter in a red smock, the ice-walking insurance girl stood coolly chatting with the gray haired woman. Marty yanked on my arm, pulling me back between the shelves for cover.

“Oh, my God. She works here,” I said, tipping up on my toes to peek over the shelves. Her short brown hair gleamed blonde under the dull store lights.

“This must be her day job.”

“The All-Safe girl needs a day job?”

“Yeah, those commercials only pay like four hundred bucks. That’s why I’ve never done one.”

“Well, yeah, you’re Tobey Thumbtack now,” I said with a playful jab.

“I’m going to go pay for this.”

“Then why are we hiding?”

He puffed his cheeks in trumpet-blowing position and then deflated. “I’m going to do it. I’m going to ask her out.”

This time, I yanked on his arm. “You?”

Marty looked puzzled. “Well, yeah. Why not?”

“I know. I meant I’m just surprised that you want to do it now.”

“Does she look like the type of girl who would laugh at a joke about the Hopi Indians?”

“I’ve always said body language reveals two things, if a person is assertive or not and if they would laugh at jokes about the Hopis.”

“I mean, should I say that I’m buying this because, hey, whatever works for the Hopi Indians works for me?”

“Why don’t you just buy something less gross?”

“Because, I have an audition tomorrow. I need to hear.”

“Fine. Try the Hopi joke. Who knows?”

She threw her head back laughing and tagged the top of his hand with her fingertips. She then rang up the thirty-nine cent earwax candle, rolling it between

her cupped hands while praising Marty for his performance as Seymour last month.

“So, Holly,” he began, smartly refraining from dipping into suave-sleezeball territory by not leaning on the counter. “Gray Area Theater Group is staging a postmodern adaptation of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ tomorrow night at the Warehouse Playhouse. Would you like to...”

She propped a fist under her chin, pensively. “Hmm, do I dare and do I dare.”

“I’ll bring peaches,” he tempted, which surprisingly received a cute chuckle.

A sly smile slipped across her lips. “I’ll make you a deal. I’ve always wanted to see how these work, and since you’re the first person to buy one, I feel I should be there to supervise. If I can come over tonight and watch you use this, then I’ll go.”

Without hesitation, Marty sealed the deal. He wrote our address down on his receipt and slid it across the counter. She scooped it up and sent us a wink as we pushed through the doors.

Back home, I ordered a pizza from Pete’s Primo, while Marty sat at the computer table, diligently gliding through *The Home Remedy Companion* with a pencil. *The Hopi Experience*, my fourth grade primer, sat nearby. The earwax candle was parked to his left, blocked from rolling off the table by two Monopoly dice.

"Here it is," he said suddenly, dog-earring the page. "It's just like I thought."

He picked up the candle to provide a visual aid. "I lie on my side and stick the funnel-end in my ear. We light the top of it and let it burn down to the red line, here."

"Oh, good, and I was afraid this wasn't safe. Are you crazy? You want me to stick this thing in your ear and light it on fire?"

"Yeah, and you have to snuff it out before it reaches my ear. You also have to make sure that sparks or ashes don't fall in my hair."

"What?"

"Come on, Sketcher. It's just like that experiment in science class, where you drop a burning match in a bottle and set an egg on the bottleneck. Then, as the fire burns, it creates a vacuum, and poomf, the egg gets sucked down through the opening."

"Yeah, but the egg didn't have the hot girl from the All-Safe commercials watching. I think he would have reconsidered in that case."

Marty turned back to the book. "The fire creates a vacuum that sucks the wax right out of my ear."

We decided to stage the show in the 4-foot wide space in the middle of the kitchen, so Marty's head would be near the sink, just in case. Because the book said that the wax fills up in the tube, instead of spraying all over the room, we placed a rickety old lawn chair, where Holly would sit, at the foot of Marty's fuzzy swim towel. After we picked at our pizza, I went and borrowed a sturdy, plastic

coated paper plate from our neighbors two doors down. When I came back, Marty hunched over the sink, thoroughly soaking a bath towel under a steady stream of water.

“This is your ‘snuffing towel,’” he explained. “What’s the paper plate for?”

I jabbed a paring knife through the middle of the plate and held it up by the handle. “We put the candle through this hole and the ashes fall on the plate and not your face.”

“You’re a genius, Sketcher. Wait. Is that safe?”

“That’s why I went next door and got the coated kind. We only have Styrofoam.”

“Okay, yeah, you’re a genius.”

With everything set, checked, and rechecked, we sat and waited until she wrapped on the heavy steel door at about ten thirty. Marty ushered her in with a graceful curl of his right arm, and I immediately noticed the sexy black boots with the square heels. Underneath her black leather coat, she wore a light blue top and a thin gray scarf nestled softly between her breasts. She tramped across the living room, swaying her tight black hips, and settling next to me against a bare spot on the wall.

“Are you helping with the show?”

I held up the lighter and clicked it three times before a yellow flame sprouted.

“This is my roommate,” Marty said. “He was with me at the store.”

She lowered her head and thrust her eyes upwards at Marty. “I remember.”

“Eric,” I said, offering my hand with my stiff, bent back thumb jabbing upwards.

“Well, Sketcher,” Marty chimed in. “We just call him Sketcher.”

“Sketcher it is,” she said. Her soft fingers wrapped around my thumb. In one fluid motion, she shook it and pulled her hand back to corral a stray lock of hair behind her ear.

“I believe you gentlemen owe me a show.”

“Right this way,” Marty announced, stretching out both arms to encompass her courtside seat.

“Wow, front row,” she quipped.

The aluminum lawn cheer squeaked as she casually dropped into it, shifted once, and crossed her legs. Her right boot hung heavily in the air for a moment and then began swaying lightly. Marty crouched down, smoothing the wrinkles out of his swim towel. Her eyes fell on his swirling hands, and her lips crunched into the sly smirk from the commercial. When he looked up, she threw her glance sideways to the collage of refrigerator magnets. Before assuming the position, he smiled and studied the whirling shocks of hair tangled around her reddening ear.

“Sketcher, do the honors, please.”

I winced as I lit the end, expecting it to ignite in a snapping flicker of sparks, like a stick of dynamite. Instead, it burned softly, like a chunky wax candle on a kitchen windowsill.

"I hope it gets better than this," Holly exclaimed, crossing her arms.

Marty bellowed out from under his paper plate. "What's happening?"

"Are you allowed to talk?"

"Yeah, I can talk."

"It seems like you can't talk."

"Yeah, you can't talk. Just Sketcher and I," she said.

It was my opening. "Can I ask you something, Holly? Was it hard to walk on that ice?"

"Concentrate," she said, sternly.

"Really? That's it? They didn't put down a path of salt or anything?"

She folded her hands in her lap and leaned forward. Her red lips caught a glint of the yellowing flame. "No. You better concentrate," she said, nodding towards the peaceful one on the floor.

As if granting her wish, an inch-high blue flame flared up and sizzled down past the red ring. I reached for my snuffing towel.

"I'm snuffing it," I announced.

"My ear didn't pop," Marty protested.

"It's supposed to pop?"

"That's how I know it gets better."

A lock of hair dropped down and began pecking at my eyeball. I gritted my teeth and squeezed the towel for relief. Lukewarm water trickled over my hands. Now past the mark, the flame shot a fury of sparks, pocking the paper plate with black trails.

"That's it. I'm snuffing it."

Holly shrieked excitedly, throwing her hands up. "Snuff it! Snuff it!"

"Wait!" Marty yelled. I studied his steady frame for a lingering second.

"There. It popped!"

It hissed when I clapped it with my soggy towel. Streams of water pattered on the paper plate. Exhaling, I teetered back on my heels to lean against the cereal cupboard. Marty plucked the funnel stub from his ear and stood up. Holly clapped slowly when he bowed but burst into spastic applause when he held the stub in the air. He pulled the candle out of the plate and unraveled the wax wrapping. Inside was a two-inch long cylinder of orange-green earwax, which he sealed in a sandwich baggie and held up for show. Holly chipped at it with her fingernail, as if there was a goldfish swimming around inside.

"Hey, so there's this crazy hillbilly punk band playing down the street at Doolittle's at midnight. You want to go test your new hearing, Marty?"

"Yeah, hey," I said, "Did it work?"

Marty sniffed and aimed his newly unclogged ear at Holly, instructing her to say something.

“Is it smooth sailing?” she purred, her lips drifting closer to his lobe with each syllable.

He turned and smiled. “I’ll go change.”

Marty clomped up the stairs, singing the All-Safe jingle.

“So,” I said, staring nervously at her boots.

She chuckled lightly, and after a drifting pause, leaned into me. “The ice thing is my secret.”

“I wasn’t going to ask again.”

I was totally going to ask.

“You know,” she said, lowering her head slightly to hide a smile, “You’re a good friend for doing this.”

“Yeah, well, who else would he get to light his ear on fire?”

Marty stomped down the stairs in his new leather jacket.

“Are you ready for a loud night?” she asked, surveying the new leather-clad Marty with an approving eyebrow lift.

He spun around. “Ask me in this ear.”

“Are you ready for a loud night?”

“Been ready for days,” he quipped, offering her his left arm.

She accepted, and they strode through the dark living room lit only by the blue flicker of the eleven o’clock news.

“Don’t wait up, man,” Marty said, opening the door for her. Holly gave a finger wave over her shoulder.

I watched them pass in front of the window and head off into the night. On the news, the anchor spoke gravely about a pile up on I-71 south to Cincinnati.

“Let’s go to our traffic reporter, Linda Dellepointe in the traffic center for an update,” the anchor suggested. “Linda.”

Linda appeared, as she always did, behind an orange construction barrel with a glinting red reflector attached to the top. I used to imagine that that was her desk, and while attempting to straddle it comfortably to do some paperwork, the big shot anchors would walk by and scoff, “Hey, Linda, nice desk!” But Linda always looked respectable, standing rigidly with her bare hands folded in front and wearing a plain but fashionable green suit coat that cut low (but not too low). Her shiny brown hair, curling slightly under her chin, framed her young, slender face. Phrases like, “chaotic pile up,” and “please be cautionate” tumbled clearly and sensibly from her pale, pink lips.

I slid down over the back of the couch into my usual position, completely transfixed, as she gestured to an inset of red taillights filing one by one into the static black night.

FOUR

After threatening to make me get a summer job, my dad quickly realized that I was only fifteen. Nonetheless, he and my mom brainstormed ways to get me out of the house. During the first week of July, I was about 127 pounds, up from 118. My diet was starting to work, and the big Fourth of July family picnic helped too. In the evenings, after dinner, they deliberated endlessly over the kitchen table in hushed voices to find a solution, which was never good. The last time they had done that was when they debated how to give me the sex talk. Without going into the gory details, the final solution consisted of my dad sitting me down at the kitchen table with a model train, a butcher knife, and a carrot.

Anyway, as their luck had it, my old soccer coach, Coach Weston, called to ask if I would be able to work as an assistant coach for his soccer camp at Wesley Camp. Being too bloated to answer the phone, I let my parents take the call. Without hesitating, my mom told Coach that I would be there. I'd be taken from my diet and my days of sleeping until two in the afternoon, which was bad news. What was worse was that if you added up all the food that I actually ate during my years at Camp Wesley it would amount to one full lunch and a light eight p.m. snack of three pretzel sticks and a glass of milk. Upon setting foot on campus, my stomach automatically went into suspended animation, hardening to a spindly chunk of coral. Goodbye salad dressing cakes, hello scurvy!

REVEREND VINE'S LAST SCORE

Slumped at the head of the speckled formica table and surrounded by yellow plastic saucers and bowls that looked borrowed from a six-year-old's tea set, Reverend Vine sighed over the moist, breaded fish sticks on his plate. They weren't fish sticks, really, just hunks of rainbow trout yanked from the Allegheny River, breaded, and shaped like exotic starfish, proud seahorses, and wavering kelp that actually looked more like deformed cacti. The official title, printed on the dry erase menu board at the front of the dining hall, was "Wonders of the Sea." In any case, Reverend Vine was disappointed. His thinning black hair, combed over his ears in a Jimmy Carter style cut, framed the heavy creases around his eyes. Sighing once more, he scooted the plate away with his knuckles.

After graduating from the seminary in the early eighties, he came on as Camp Wesley's Chaplin, taking summers off from his church to hang around giving communion, leading prayers, and counseling homesick kids. Camp Wesley is a Methodist summer camp up in the mountains in Pennsylvania, near West Virginia. It's named after John Wesley, this dude in a ruffled shirt who discovered Methodism. Well, my dad, like Reverend Vine, is also a Methodist minister. He's on the board of trustees for the camp, which is basically why I went every year since I was nine years old. It was one big camp segregated into a bunch of little camps. They recruited other ministers and members of

congregations all over Southwestern Pennsylvania to be the deans of these sub-camps. There was Horse and Pony Camp, Rowing Camp, day camp for kids from the nearby troubled youth center, and Soccer Camp, which I went to.

Of course, we didn't have the best reputation; the other camps called us "Soccer Screwballs" or the ever popular and equally annoying "Slacker Camp." When forced to spend a summer at Camp Wesley, a tingling chemical reaction in the brains of all the kids with a quiet disdain for singing, gluing a macaroni beard on a portrait of Jesus, and cheerfulness in general, automatically guided their hand to check the "Soccer Camp" box on the application. It was as if we instinctively knew that Soccer Camp would be the most likely place to find other normal, lazy kids. Out of all the camps, however, Reverend Vine spent most of his free time with us, joking around and bounding up and down on the soccer field in his knee-high black socks. He played semi-professionally in South Africa when he was a missionary, so our dean, Coach Weston, who was also a member of my dad's church, was happy to have the help.

But the year the dining hall introduced the "Wonders of the Sea," the summer before I started seventh grade, things were different. Reverend Vine seemed permanently locked in his somber, communion-giving mode. I figured he was just depressed about the food, which was especially bad on the first night, so I asked him if he wanted some potato chips that I smuggled into camp.

"No thank you, Eric."

Eric? My parents didn't even call me Eric. Everyone just called me by my last name, Sketcher.

Beside me, Gilby Strunk tore the points off a starfish and shoved them in his mouth. "Eric? Who the hell is Eric?"

Every year, I'd emerge from my parent's minivan on the first day to see Gilby sitting outside of our cabin on his blue footlocker. It was his only luggage, and it seemed rather fitting, considering he was built just like it: boxy, imposing, and scuffed at the corners. As he ate, his slits for eyes tightened and his lips curled above his pointed teeth.

"Gilby, I still can't believe you're here," I gushed. "I thought you were too old. Before seventh grade is the limit."

"I failed."

"You failed?"

He grinned proudly.

"Seventh grade? You failed seventh grade?"

"I failed seventh grade."

"So..."

"So, it's still before seventh grade, so Coach let me come. Hey, you think they'll bring back them peanut butter squares?"

"I doubt it."

Two years earlier, the head chef, Chef Betty, stopped making her famous peanut-butter squares after seeing a report on *60 Minutes*, which claimed that

eating too much peanut butter could cause cancer. The heavy, one-inch blocks of crumbly peanut butter, topped with a half-inch layer of chocolate frosting, caused Altamont-scale riots in the aisles of the Chipmunk Grotto Dinning Hall. Not even the Hell's Angels themselves could diffuse the frenzied stampedes that Chef Betty's little blocks of heaven caused.

Gilby pounded on the table and laughed. "Remember last year, when you tried bribing her to make them again?"

Reverend Vine scrunched his face and shrugged, as if to say, "That was a long time ago."

Gilby pinned his napkin to the table with his forefinger and slid it between my elbows, as if it were a crisp twenty. "There's more where that came from, Madam Sweet Touch," he muttered, imitating Reverend Vine. "Ha! 'Madam Sweet Touch,' where'd you come up with that? Classic!"

Oblivious, Gilby repeated the joke six more times before Reverend Vine shifted in his seat sideways, crossed his legs, and hovered his toy coffee cup mechanically under his lips.

Just as the hectic after-dinner chatter peaked, heating the air around our heads, the dreaded bong of wind chimes imposed an eerie silence upon the room. A hulking counselor stood firmly on the small stage at the front, ringing the hanging steel wind chimes with the blunt, heavy handle of a silver butter knife. Like all the male counselors at Camp Wesley, he wore a white tank top that drooped wide under his hairy armpits and red baseball cap twisted around

backwards. I imagined him wearing that same uniform around his college campus in the middle of winter, flapping on a wad of minty gum and twirling his lifeguard whistle around his finger.

“Great. Lord Butterknife is back,” Gilby muttered quietly out of the side of his mouth.

Like my previous years at camp, Lord Butterknife led us in the evening sing-along, using his gleaming butter knife as a conductor’s baton. The other camps, especially the girls, bopped up and down to “Noah’s Building an Arky-Arky” and walked like Egyptians during “Pharaoh, Pharaoh.” As always, Soccer Camp, even the new kids, groaned and slid further under the table with each tune. It’s probably why we were placed at the three rickety round tables in the dark corner under bare and flickering light bulbs.

“We have some new songs tonight,” Lord Butterknife crooned, flicking a blob of sweat from the tip of his nose. “As most of you know, our beloved mascot, Sam the Goat, retired.”

Out of respect for Sam, the crowd applauded. The year before, a group of Horse Campers snuck out on the last night of camp and attempted to kidnap Sam, but when they untied him, he went crackers and took a headlong suicidal sprint into a tree.

“Our new mascot is a baby pig, and he’s filled with Wesleyan Methodist pride,” Lord Butterknife continued. “He doesn’t have a name yet, but we’ve narrowed it down to either Rocco or Rossco. We’re going to vote at the end of

the summer, so it's important that you support the name you like best. So, with Chef Betty's wonderful meal in our bellies to give us energy, let's get singing!"

He instructed all of the Rocco fans to start a stirring chorus of "We love you Rocco, oh, yes we do," and for the Rossco buffs to do the same, only change the name. Flailing his butter knife upwards, to increase the volume, the singing-shouting match carried on for about eight minutes. Noticing the fading daylight, and our waning spirits, Coach Weston leaned over my shoulder.

"This has to end soon. I'll rally the troops to the field. You guys go do your thing."

Since our first year at camp, Gilby and I had been in charge of getting the water cooler for every soccer practice. As we snuck towards the back door, Turk, Camp Wesley's resident disciplinarian and bounty hunter extraordinaire, tracked our movements with her darting eyes. With her feet propped up on a small round table in the back corner, she pushed her sailor cap from her forehead with her finger and scowled. Feeling her scorn on our backs, we quickened our pace and passed through the door.

Outside, we rounded the trail to the back of the dining hall. Gilby suddenly stopped short, scattering the neat woodchip path. "Shoot. Willya look at that bugger?"

Rocco/Rossco sulked in a corner of a shoddy pen made of three plywood sheets nailed together in a "U" against the back of the dining hall. Despite not having a name, he had it pretty well: a shady back corner of camp, the soothing

sounds of the industrial dishwasher hissing through the open window above, and plenty of lettuce and bread scraps scattered across the hardening clumps of mud. Sam the Goat was mascot for almost twelve years and they just tied his ass to a tree in the middle of camp where six-year-olds chucked pretzels at his head all day. After studying his rumped neck for nearly a minute, Rocco/Rosco lifted his head out of the clay and rolled his eyes over us. After realizing we weren't bearing food, he dug his head back in the slop with a muffled grunt. He was small, with a compact body and only one ringlet in his tail. Gilby scoffed that he wasn't much to look at, as we trudged up the steps to the back porch where the cooler was kept.

Usually, on the first night of practice, Coach Weston stood on the sidelines with his clipboard, while Reverend Vine did a lesson on balance and ball control. He called it "dancing on the ball." Leaping from one leg to another in a manic Irish jig, Reverend Vine would tap the top of the stationary ball with the tips of his toes, informing us to "dance with it before you take it out to dinner." This year, however, as the long shadows of the goal posts crept back from the centerline under the dropping evening sun, Reverend Vine slumped on the "Make-Out Rock" at the far corner of the field and stared off into the treetops. So instead of dancing on the ball, Coach ordered us to run six laps around the dirt road that circled the field. I slid on my fuzzy blue sweatband to clip back my teacup handle ears and hustled off. Matching my pace, one of the new kids jogged alongside me.

He nodded over to Reverend Vine. "Hey. Who's that guy?"

"That's Reverend Vine."

"He's that priest, right?"

"Chaplin."

"I heard he's kinda mean."

"Mean?" I objected. "No. He's really fun. Last year, he used to sneak in Coach Weston's room every night and put red lipstick on him. Took Coach half the summer to figure out who it was."

"Nah. My brother was here at street hockey camp last month, and he said that guy never talks, unless you act up in Bible Study. Then, he yells. I heard his wife got cancer or something like that."

My legs burned and became sluggish. "His wife?"

"Or it could be his mom."

"Wait. Which is it, his wife or his mom?"

"Hell, if I know," he said, picking up the pace to join another group.

I wondered why my dad never told me that someone in Reverend Vine's family had cancer, if it were true, I mean. He would have told me. Heck, if Mrs. Vine was in the hospital, he and my mom would have forced me into my itchy church pants and taken me to visit. Reverend Vine was our friend. He buried my grandpa, performed my Aunt Lucy's third wedding, and taught me how to play soccer. My mom once said he was like an uncle to me. He wasn't. He was my

friend. I put my head down and pumped my legs, focusing on my jet-black cleats gliding over the blur of gravel and ignored the tingle of nausea gurgling in my gut.

Over the next few days, things got worse. The Wonders of the Sea became a staple on the dry erase menu board. At breakfast, we had greasy potato hash browns shaped into Wonders of the Sea. For a hearty lunch, we got Wonders of the Sea chicken fingers with a little plastic cup of liquidy coleslaw on the side. And of course, for dinner, it was the Wonders of the Sea fish sticks. Lord Butterknife extended the singing sessions after meals from ten minutes to twenty-five. He constructed sophisticated operettas, romantic ballads, and hymns praising the camp's mascot that rivaled Mozart's whimsy and Beethoven's grace. The other camps sang with a kinetic force that propelled them out of their seats and into the aisles. They scripted gestures to every anthem, wore buttons made in arts and crafts sporting their vote for the pig's name, and hung on Lord Butterknife's every chime and thick, gravely word. And through all of the choruses of "We Love You Rocco/Rossco, Oh, Yes We Do," they took the time to turn around and sneer back at the "Soccer Screwballs" slowly withering away at the back of the dining hall.

Due to his stockpiled body fat, Gilby was the only one with any energy. He decided to vent his frustrations by kicking off the sixth season of "Deatherball," his unique take on tetherball. The concept is quite simple and highly entertaining if you're not actually playing: one guy stands on either side of the pole and they

basically slam the ball back and forth trying to knock each other out of the small concrete circle surrounding the pole.

His first competitor that year was a tough looking hombre from the juvenile delinquent day camp. Clad in the stereotypical greaser uniform—a plain white t-shirt and rolled jeans—he stepped confidently into the circle, raising his fist in the air to show off his black leather wristband trimmed with dull silver studs. Gilby rolled his eyes and chucked him the ball. Cranking back his arm, Black Wristband sent a hard but wild shot around the pole, which slapped Gilby's shoulder. Gilby teetered on his toes, flailing his arms in a frantic circular motion, as if he were about to topple out of the circle. We all laughed at the ridiculous thought. Turning serious, he spun around, spit a white missile in his right palm, and rubbed his hands together. Black Wristband threw off his black shades, also indicating it was time to get serious. The ball hung limp on Gilby's side of the court. He clenched it in one hand and cracked the knuckles of his punching hand against his hip. Without taking his eyes off his prey, Gilby drew his fist back six inches and popped the ball in a perfect, calculated arc. It clocked Black Wristband in the left cheek. The force propelled him out of the circle, and he desperately peddled his legs to keep from falling. However, the force was too much; he spilled into a patch of grass about six feet away. Soccer Camp exploded in cheers. It was our only victory that week.

After the match, Gilby and I celebrated with two fat-free strawberry milkshakes at the camp store. About a hundred feet from our picnic table,

Reverend Vine sat near the brook reading his bible. His red ribbon bookmark flapped in the breeze.

“Do you think the rumors are true, that someone in his family has cancer?”

“I don’t know. I know he’s not fun no more.”

Gilby took a long draw on his milkshake, keeping his eyes fixed on Reverend Vine. “You know,” he said, “some of the guys are talking about going home.”

“Who?”

“A bunch of the new kids. They’re going to talk to Coach after practice tomorrow. Maybe you should.”

“My dad would never let me leave.”

Just then, a terrible fear washed over me. “Wait! Are you going?”

Drying his hand on his shirt, he reached in his pocket and pulled out a crumpled piece of paper. “Nah. I got stuff to do.”

Scribbled in green ink down the middle of the page was a list.

People to kill in Deatherball:

Rowing Camp kids

Chef Betty

Smelly Horse Campers

Lord Butterknife

I rolled my eyes. “Lord Butterknife?”

“Wouldn’t that be awesome?”

I nodded and took a long drag on my shake. My temples pulsed as the cold liquid chilled the lining of my skull. “That would almost make this summer worth it.”

Our soccer practice the next morning ran like all our other practices that week. Coach Weston planned a morning of intensive offensive drills, in which three offenders would take on two defenders. Gilby and I were the crack defensive line. I reclined in the grass, just outside of the goalie box, while Gilby hunkered in the goal. Instead of charging, the offensive line took limp potshots from center field. If the ball happened to wobble my way, I’d break the cardinal rule of soccer—the one rule that even Gilby knew—and pick it up with my hands and bowl it back to the centerline. Coach Weston, who would usually shout, “Hot hands, hot hands,” slept in a lawn chair with last month’s *Sports Illustrated* tented over his face.

When Coach Weston finally called us into centerfield at the end of practice, the group of traitors huddled together, plotting their move. As they conspired, Coach gazed down at his clipboard, cupping his hand under his sweaty brow to prevent plops of sweat from smearing the day’s schedule, and made a few quick announcements. He then swiveled around to ask Reverend Vine if he had any announcements to make.

Reverend Vine popped to attention. “Yes. Could Eric and Gilbert stick around to help me prepare for a communion service I have at Rowing Camp tonight?”

“You got it. Sketcher, Gilby, you heard the Reverend. The rest of ya better march off to arts and crafts.”

The traitors groaned. “But Coach, we want to...”

“No buts. Get to crafts, knuckleheads.”

“But Coach,” one squeaked in a desperate last attempt.

Mustering all the energy he had, Coach jabbed a finger towards the camp center. His face pulsed bright red. “I don’t want to hear it. Now get.”

Startled, the herd grumbled off towards the camp center, while Gilby and I followed Reverend Vine to the water cooler.

“You’re not too worn out from practice to help me are you?”

“Nope,” we said collectively, wondering what practice he had been watching.

“Good. I need you guys to run to the lost and found box and pick up some old sheets.”

“Sheets?” I asked.

“Yes. Every year, kids always forget sheets and things when they go home at the end of the summer. Go see what you can find and bring them to the parking lot.”

The lost and found room was a small, creaky loft above the main meeting room in the camp center. Ascending the rope ladder, we hopped up onto the landing and found seven balled-up sheets in a half-collapsed cardboard box. We

grabbed six of them. The seventh remained in a crunchy ball when Gilby dangled it up over his head with his fingers, so we left it.

“Great. Throw them in the backseat,” Reverend Vine said, as Gilby and I came jogging across the parking lot with mounds of sheets heaped to our chins. We tossed them in the backseat of Reverend Vine’s dented beige Buick and started hovering back to crafts, slowly of course.

“Not so fast. Get in. We have more work to do,” he said.

To our surprise, Reverend Vine swung out of the parking lot and headed for the front gate. Turning left out of camp into the real world, we clicked up the mountain; my stomach tingled, thinking it was on a roller coaster. Less than half a mile down, he cranked a U-turn and shot across the yellow line onto the wide dirt shoulder. He inched the car down the shoulder and stopped parallel to a side road into camp, blocked off by a yellow pole. He stamped the parking break on with a crunch and switched on his flashers. We tumbled out onto the gravelly shoulder into the baking sun.

“Boys, listen carefully,” he said, placing one hand on my left shoulder and the other on Gilby’s right and shoving us together. “I’m going to be right up this road, at the campsite where the service will be. I want you to take those sheets and spread them across the back seat, okay?”

Gilby and I exchanged sideways glances before collectively muttering, “okay.”

After a quick pat on each of our shoulders, he awkwardly crouched under the yellow pole and marched down the gravel road that curved off deep into the woods.

“And don’t play in the road,” he shouted over his shoulder, rounding the bend.

We spread the sheets evenly across the backseat, even taking the time to cover that little shelf above the seat next to the rear brake light. Gilby then stretched out, letting his legs hang out of the passenger-side backdoor.

I scrunched up my nose. “You know, kids could have peed on those sheets.”

He just grunted.

I leaned against the flimsy yellow pole, letting my mind drift off into the bright, chirping woods. About ten minutes later, in the middle of a wide, tear-inducing yawn, I heard a faint squawking deep off into the woods. I closed my eyes and listened closely to the sound trace the twists of the gravelly road. The sound quickly grew to a deep throaty shriek, pulsating in rhythm with a steady crunch of gravel.

“Do you hear that?”

Gilby just shifted on his side, burying his face into the seatbelt buckles.

Suddenly, a throaty snort, like someone gargling a thick gulp of milk too fast, clipped through the foliage. In response, a man’s booming voice cackled, “Whoa! A-Woop-Woop-Woop!”

Gilby snapped to his feet. "That I heard."

We crouched slightly behind the yellow barrier, as if preparing for an offensive line of three to dribble down the road. Shifting my weight from side-to-side, I anxiously clicked the heels of my cleats against my white plastic shin guards. The footfalls increased from a compact crunch to the sounds of pebbles frantically scattering across the road. A dark blue blur flashed between the trees to our left. Around the curve, a booming voice commanded: "Open the car door!"

"Did you hear that?"

I sliced Gilby's words down with a swift chop of my hand. The voice came again.

"Open the car door!"

This time, the words registered, and Gilby and I scrambled back to the car. The door was already open, and we just stood there gazing at it.

Like an Olympic runner rounding the final bend to light the ceremonial torch, Reverend Vine emerged from the deep curve of the road, sprinting with high steps. Rocco/Rossco wrestled furiously in his arms.

Giggling giddily, Gilby and I both grabbed the car door and pulled it open as far as it would go. The pig started wriggling free, but Reverend Vine crunched over to hold onto it just a few more feet. Just as the pig's hooves hit the ground, he reclaimed his grip, scooped it up, and launched it across the remaining five feet to the backseat. Rocco/Rossco dove headlong into the car, landing on the floor behind the passenger seat. Instantly, he rebounded and charged. Reverend

Vine reeled back, flipping back on his hands and drop kicking the door right in Rocco/Rosco's snout.

"Whoa! Bicycle kick," Gilby commented.

Shoving us in the front seat, Reverend Vine cranked the engine and screeched onto the empty, open highway in a stream of dust and angry snorts. In the backseat, Rocco/Rosco thrashed and protested, bucking the back of our seat. Gilby twisted around and surveyed the prisoner, while I scanned out the back window at the hills falling behind us.

"Coast is clear," I reported.

Reverend Vine nodded approvingly with a big grin and giddily swung the wheel from side to side.

"So what are we going to do with it?" Gilby asked.

"We're going to take him to a nice farm where he can run and play."

Gilby's eyes slid my way. "Does that mean we're going to kill him?"

Reverend Vine laughed uproariously.

I leaned towards Gilby and whispered, "He's back."

Without taking his eyes off our path, Reverend Vine grinned.

"I've always been back."

After the snatch and grab, we went on lamb, slipping across the West Virginia border to hide out at a farm that Reverend Vine's brother, "Uncle Kimbo," owned. Celebrating in Uncle Kimbo's kitchen with two greasy pepperoni pizzas,

Reverend Vine regaled us with his account of the legendary smoke bomb attack of 1972. In this definitive version, the little red bomb sailed through the window of Turk's trailer just as she sliced off her pinkie finger with a butcher knife. As the story goes, she was whacking a hunk of watermelon when the blade slipped, slicing diagonally across the second knuckle of her left pinkie. There's another version, passed around by the kids in rowing camp, in which the stub hangs in mid air by a lone tendon and she rips it free with a quick, band-aid removal snap. In another version, concocted by the kids from the juvenile delinquent day camp, Turk does this with her teeth. However, Reverend Vine said it was a clean cut, so I don't doubt that's what happened. What I don't believe for one second is that Turk, Camp Wesley's lurking rule enforcer, accidentally slipped with the knife. I think she did it on purpose, as if each night while cutting a juicy wedge, she toyed with the idea to see if she could stand the pain. And it just so happened that the night she finally did it, Camp Wesley's resident prankster has his revenge for the time she confiscated his stash of licorice.

Now, all of those jittery safety films I watched in woodshop stressed that a severed appendage must be reattached within twenty-four hours to heal properly. In less than a half-hour, Turk barreled after Reverend Vine, pounced on his back, and duct taped him to a tree before checking herself into the emergency room at St. Anne's twenty minutes down the mountain. Reverend Vine said the only reason he got caught was because he tripped in a gopher hole. He remembers

looking up to see the swaying tree limbs laughing at him. In any case, because of the bust, Turk became the most revered disciplinarian in the entire camping industry. Yeah, even more than Betty Buster from Whitney Arbuckle's Camp for the Obese. It's what earned her a tenured position at Camp Wesley and the right to reside permanently in her silver trailer behind the maintenance shed.

"Unfortunately for us," Reverend Vine warned, ending the story with a lesson, "She'll no doubt be put on this case. We must be cautious."

"So what do we do when she comes sniffing around," Gilby shouted, with his mouth filled with dough.

Reverend Vine threw up his hands to stop the barrage of questions. "Let me worry about that."

He went over to the counter and grabbed a pair of scissors and a stack of Uncle Kimbo's old issues of *Guns and Ammo*. "Let's start clipping letters for the ransom note and then we'll go out to the pen to make sure the prisoner isn't giving Uncle Kimbo any guff."

I flipped through the magazine on the top of the pile. "What should we ask for?"

Suddenly morphing into General Patton, Reverend Vine paced back and forth, gesturing widely with a paper plate in one hand and a greasy napkin in the other. "Men, we state in clear, specific terms that in order to have their beloved mascot returned safely, they must fulfill three primary concessions. One. Chef Betty's Wonders of the Sea must be stricken from the menu immediately. Two.

The sing-alongs shortened to a maximum of six minutes and all songs praising the pig stricken from the program.”

We cheered wildly.

“Just those songs. The Christian ones can stay.”

Jeers went up from the front row. “Boo!”

Reverend Vine raised a finger to get us back on topic. “Finally, and probably most importantly, they must leave three trays of Chef Betty’s peanut butter squares in the grotto behind the swimming pool.”

We howled. He won us back.

“And make Lord Butterknife give that letter,” Gilby added.

“Letter?”

“Yeah, you know, that letter you give when you quit someplace.”

“Letter of resignation?” Reverend Vine suggested.

“Yeah, that!”

“Yeah, that,” I seconded.

Reverend Vine Held up his hands. “Now, boys, we don’t want to go too far. They might not even give into these demands.”

“What if they do?”

“If they’re willing to comply, they will leave word in the old dog house behind the bus garage. After they drop the peanut butter squares off at the grotto, we leave the pig in the horse barn. Now, it will take a few days for the

ransom note to get there in the mail, so until then we'll have to pretend nothing is out of the ordinary."

My shoulders wilted. "Does that mean you'll go back to being..."

Gilby crossed his arms. "Not fun?"

Reverend Vine licked his lips. "Let's call it introspective. But, if you boys wouldn't mind circulating word that those terrible cancer rumors aren't true." He furrowed his brow. "I don't know how those got started, and I'm not happy about it."

I nodded. Gilby saluted.

"Was it all an act then?" I asked.

"As I've said, all of the Vines are fine."

"But then why..."

He shifted his attention back to the ransom note. "Much to do. Much to do."

After dropping the ransom note in the mailbox down the road from the farm, we returned to camp. Reverend Vine went back to sulking, Gilby continued pummeling kids at Deatherball, and I went back to shaking and shivering due to malnutrition and worrying about Reverend Vine. During this time, Lord Butterknife nervously told the camp that Rocco/Rosco was sick and had to be moved to Camp Director Wolfe's garage for some R&R. However, everything changed three days later. Instead of singing after lunch, he marched up to the microphone

and solemnly announced that Rocco/Rosco wasn't sick but in fact had been kidnapped.

"We will not give into these demands," he shouted to a patriotic eruption. He clenched the crumpled ransom note in his fist and waved it above the heads of his followers. "I will personally find the kidnapers and nail their butts to a tree!"

Reverend Vine dropped his head to his chest to hide a smirk. Gilby and I exchanged glances. Needless to say, we weren't worried. A few hours later at evening practice, however, we started to worry. Slouching in the goal, a strange shadow drifted over us. A chilled breeze rippled the yellow net. Turk's plump outline eclipsed the fading sun. Once she had our attention, she strode across the white sideline into our space. Wearing black sandals secured with Velcro straps, her white, grass stained socks slumped limply about her bulbous calves. Her white sailor cap, with her name spelled out in block letters on the front, slumped heavily over her brow. Unable to look away, I caught her green eyes, spraying electrical red veins and half buried by her sagging bulldog cheeks. Throwing her hand up, she spread her first two fingers and aimed one at each eye.

Gilby scratched his head as she lumbered away. "Trouble?"

"Definitely."

Reverend Vine strode up behind us. "Don't worry, boys. She's just working on a hunch."

“What hunch is that?” I asked.

“That if there’s a prank, I’m usually involved. She’s got no proof. We’re fine.”

At the time, we believed him. Apparently, Lord Butterknife’s drive to nail anyone’s butt to a tree quickly dissipated. The next day, a signed note from him appeared in the old doghouse behind the bus garage. Reverend Vine retrieved it that night on one of his three a.m. “God walks” around camp. In the note, Lord Butterknife, “on behalf of the administration of Camp Wesley,” conceded to our demands, expressing his “most sincere desire to bring this whole mess to an end and give the kids a summer to remember.”

After reading the note aloud to us, an evil smile slipped across Reverend Vine’s lips. I imagined that it was the same smile he had while lighting that smoke bomb. “We’ve got a busy night ahead of us, boys,” he said, chuckling lightly.

Crouching behind a log, trying to breathe as little and slowly as possible, I waited for Gilby in the woods above the grotto. Usually reserved for worship services or bonfires, it was a dark little nook nestled in the trees with a bonfire pit in the center and log bleachers on all four sides. We agreed to arrive separately, but of course, Gilby was late. I swore under my breath. We had to pick up the loot quickly in order to make it to the rendezvous point before Reverend Vine returned from Uncle Kimbo’s with Rocco/Rossco. The plan was to meet up near the gravel road next to the highway and then drop the pig off at the horse barn

under the cover of darkness. But I figured it would be dawn by the time Gilby made it.

Through the trees, two kitchen hands in white aprons plodded carefully through the woods with long silver trays. As instructed, they placed the trays on top of the pit in the center and headed back up through the log bleachers. I didn't want to risk waiting five more minutes. After carefully plotting out my steps, I hopped over the log and crept down to the center of the grotto. The wax paper covering the trays crackled in the breeze. Grasping the chilled trays, I started up the other side of the incline. Just then, a dry twig snapped about thirty feet to my left. Instantly, I crouched down, almost dumping three pounds of peanut butter into a bed of ferns. After a quick scan of the perimeter, I trudged along, glancing over my shoulder every five seconds to make sure I wasn't being tailed.

A few minutes later, I made it to the gravel road near the highway where we had made our getaway only days before. I spied Reverend Vine's car parked on the other side of the yellow pole. Faint laughter and cheers echoed up the curved road from the camp below. In a crouch, I scrambled swiftly across the road and disappeared into the woods on the other side. There, Reverend Vine chatted with Rocco/Rossco, who was on rope leash and secured to a tree.

"He's not such a bad guy," Reverend Vine said, stroking the pig's back.

"Especially since he got us these," I replied, raising the trays.

Reverend Vine's eyes widened, as he peeled back the wax paper. The golden peanut butter glowed softly on his cheeks. He pulled out three slices and handed me one. My fingers sank into the soft peanut butter.

"Where's Gilby?"

"Don't know," I said, smacking on a mouthful of peanut butter. "He never showed."

"More for us then."

He leaned down and fed Gilby's peanut butter square to Rocco/Rossco. The pig's tiny tongue darted out, giddily scraping off the top layer of chocolate.

"Being kidnapped isn't so bad, eh, boy?"

Before I could inhale to laugh, a shrill voice cackled, mockingly. The ferns waved angrily; Rocco/Rossco began squealing.

"What was that?"

Reverend Vine scooped up the trays. "I better get these to the car and then we'll drop him off."

I wiped my fingers on my shorts and began untying the fidgety pig, as Reverend Vine worked his way back to the car. Suddenly, in mid-slipknot, a sure and steady voice boomed, "I knew it was you soccer screwballs."

Turk materialized behind me, fists cocked against her hips.

"Run, Sketcher, Run," Reverend Vine called from the road.

Without hesitation, I scampered down the hill with the pig in tow. He pedaled his tiny legs furiously, skipping over fallen branches and scruff. Reverend Vine heckled Turk. "Yoo-hoo, sweetheart! Over here, honey bear!"

She didn't bite. With her hooves kicking up clumps of red clay, she bounded after us, fuming and snorting like a Baptist who has finished her copy of *Better Homes and Gardens* before the long-winded pastor has finished the sermon on Sunday. I tried pouring on more speed, but Rocco/Rossco couldn't keep up. I dragged him about five feet before he skidded out of control and twisted around a tree. The taut rope yanked me down. I caught an upside-down view of Turk launching through the air, her mouth snarling. Strings of saliva clung to the top and bottom rows of her stubbly teeth. I clenched my eyes and rolled out of the way. The hard-packed ground quivered with a dull thud. As I opened my eyes, her sailor cap rolled in front of me like a runaway hubcap.

Before Turk could pull her chin out of the soil, Rocco/Rossco scampered over and jumped in my arms. Despite my scrawny frame, I had pretty long legs and could really take it to town if I needed to. With the pig's leash flapping after us like a streamer, I vaulted through the woods with long and light strides. A chorus of "Sum'bitch! Sum'bitch! Sum'bitch!" echoed over my shoulder.

Losing Turk after the first twenty-feet, I sprinted back to camp in no time. Through the tree limbs, I saw a large crowd encircling the tetherball pole. I tied Rocco/Rossco up to a tree near the edge of the woods and worked my way across the volleyball courts to the playground. The whole camp, minus the adults

of course, watched Gilby exchange shots with a kid from Rowing Camp in a jester's cap with jingly bells dangling from the three stiff points. Near the tree house, I found a group of kids from Soccer Camp.

The kid I ran laps with that first night nodded. "Hey Sketcher."

"What's going on?"

"Some kids from Rowing Camp started pushing us around and accusing us of stealing that stupid pig."

"No way?"

"Yeah, and Gilby stuck up for us and started taking them all on. This guy's the last one."

Was the last one. The crowd cooed a collective "Ooooh," as the jester slapped the concrete. Gilby yanked the cap off of the kid's head, raising it high above the crowd like a bloody scalp.

Tinged with a hint of gravel, his voice boomed. "Is there anyone else?"

"There's me," a husky voice shouted.

Suddenly, the crowd parted and Lord Butterknife sauntered forward, cracking his knuckles. Gilby jittered on his toes, barely able to contain his excitement.

"Not only will I beat the pants off of you, but I'll get you Soccer Screwballs to tell us where our mascot is."

"What makes you think we took him?"

“Because you never sing or participate in any activities. Besides, you live right near here, in West Virginia, where that ransom note came from.”

I then realized that Turk orchestrated the whole exchange as a trap. Lord Butterknife had never written a note.

“Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t,” Gilby coolly replied. “If you can beat me, then maybe I’ll say for sure.”

“I think you’ll just tell me what you know now.”

“What, are you too afraid to play, Lord Butterknife?”

The crowd drew back. Nobody ever called him that to his face.

“Why you stupid little...”

“Come on,” Gilby goaded.

With the approval of the crowd, Lord Butterknife strode in the half circle. Gilby gave him first crack. Tossing the ball in the air, he served it like a volleyball. It whipped around the pole in a sweeping arc, slicing across the red tip of Gilby’s nose. The girls in the front row shielded their noses. Gilby chuckled but studied the ball as it made two more revolutions. On the second pass, he followed through and popped it to the other side. It caught the top of Lord Butterknife’s baseball cap and sent it flying into the waiting arms of the ten-year-old girls in the crowd.

I have to admit, as the match wore on, Lord Butterknife held his own pretty well. Despite Gilby’s dumb grins and trash talk, he remained calm, carefully aiming his swift but powerless shots. However, when Gilby missed a six-inch

punch and clipped the ball with the knuckle of his pinkie, Lord Butterknife found the mustard he needed. The ball wobbled woozily around the pole. Propelling his weight behind it, Lord Butterknife snapped the ball at his opponent's head. Gilby stepped forward to duck, but the rope caught his neck, making two passes around his throat before dragging him to the ground. His head pinged against pole, like someone cracking the hard plastic edge of a Frisbee against steel. He scrambled to regain his footing and finally ripped the cord from his neck. We all froze. Ever the caring counselor, Lord Butterknife leaned over, and in a low mutter, and asked Gilby if he was okay.

“What's it to you, Lord Butterknife,” Gilby shouted, massaging his lashed throat.

Lord Butterknife retracted his hand, and clenched the ball. He spit out of the side of his mouth, signaling his disgust with the whole affair. Still on his knees, Gilby narrowed his slits for eyes at the cruising ball. Letting out a throaty snarl, he arched his back and pitched forward, head butting the ball back into his opponent's chin. Dazed, Lord Butterknife stumbled a step. Before he regained his footing, Gilby clenched his hands together and swung into the rebounding ball. In a yellow blur, the ball made three revolutions, each one cracking against Lord Butterknife's nose, before snapping from the cord and plopping into the crowd. Lord Butterknife's head swirled around twice in a counterclockwise motion before he toppled in front of a line of soft sandaled feet with painted red toenails.

Gilby thrust his fist into the air. "No singing ever again!" Soccer camp exploded in cheers, and if he hadn't weighed almost a duce, we would have put him on our shoulders.

During our celebration, three girls from Pony Camp shouted excitedly: "There's the pig! There's the pig!"

Arm in arm, Reverend Vine and Turk hobbled out of the woods. Turk's left sandal dangled in her hand, as she hovered her foot inches above the blacktop. Rocco/Rosco skipped along happily behind them with Turk's sailor cap sliding over his ears.

The whole crowd rushed over. Lord Butterknife stepped forward, caressing his throbbing head, as three girls stroked his shoulders.

"What's going on here?"

Turk spit a wad on the blacktop and mumbled something under her breath before speaking. "I found the pig. A buncha kids up at the nearby tent and trailer park took him as a crank."

Lord Butterknife stuttered, pointing to us. "You mean they didn't take them?"

Turk spat again. "Nah. Listen up. A buncha tent and trailers did it. I found him tied up in the woods up by the highway. I tried chasing them off but fell and twisted my ankle coming down the hill."

"Luckily, I was up near there preparing for the bonfire tonight and found her," Reverend Vine added. "Everyone's safe now."

"Amen to that," Lord Butterknife said, patting Reverend Vine on the shoulder.

The throng of Pony Campers grabbed Rocco/Rossco's leash and paraded him through the crowd. Lord Butterknife shot Gilby one last glare and then helped Turk limp over to the nurse's station, his loyal harem swooning closely behind.

Reverend Vine leaned down to me. "Boy, is she mad at you."

"You helped her?" I asked.

"Well, we helped each other. We made a deal."

Gilby Scoffed. "A what?"

"She agreed not to rat us out as long as I went along with her story. She has a reputation to uphold, you know."

Gilby scrunched his face. "That's it?"

Reverend Vine rolled his eyes. "Not exactly. We aren't the only ones who love the peanut butter squares."

So that night, we split our peanut butter squares with the dreaded Turk. We sat together on a sagging brown couch, with Reverend Vine squashed in the middle. Turk sat opposite us in a frayed lawn chair with her bandaged ankle propped up on the coffee table right next to the peanut butter squares, which in no way deterred our appetite.

"Eat up boys," Turk said, "I practically had to break Chef Betty's fingers to make these."

"Now, Turk, you didn't put laxatives in these, did you?"

She tapped her three fingers against her chin. "Would you stop eating them if I did, Rev'ren?"

"No," we all said in unison.

"Neither would I," she cackled, shoving two squares in her mouth at once.

I wish I could say that the food got better that summer, but it didn't.

However, Chef Betty did switch from Wonders of Sea to "Rain Forest Mysteries" in mid-July. And, we stopped singing about the pig, too. At a bonfire after his return, the whole camp unanimously decided to name Rocco/Rossco "Reverend Swine," in honor (I think) of Reverend Vine, who announced that he was being transferred to a new district on the other side of the state. So, this would be his last year at Camp Wesley.

"I was very sad at first," he later told us in Turk's trailer. "But it helped me realize that I needed to play one last prank."

"Then what did you need us for?"

"I'm getting too old. Besides, it's your last year, too, assuming you make it through the seventh grade."

Gilby grinned.

"It was only right that my last prank included my loyal and caring friends."

We both smiled, proud to be part of the team.

"Them? What you need them for?" Turk scoffed. "They look like a bunch of weak little grapes to me, especially that fat one there."

Reverend Vine pitched his head back and laughed. "Yes, but thanks to them, I got away with it this time."

FIVE

The food situation at camp was worse than ever. They still served the same old wilted fish sticks in the cafeteria and stale granola bars at the camp store. Not even befriending one of the kitchen workers helped, even though he was an entertaining dude. Well, anytime you have a stoner at church camp, you're in for a good time. Toby—I never caught his last name—worked as a dishwasher in the Chipmunk Grotto Dining Hall. He was a stout, sweaty guy with a white bandana tied tightly around the brim of his forehead to shade his cloudy, half-closed eyes. I'd spy him through the door of the kitchen, looking half-asleep and spraying the bare counter with the dish sprayer until a small pool formed and splashed over the side. Nonetheless, he certainly didn't have any qualms about breaking into the kitchen storeroom.

The first night I hung out with him, during my first week at camp, he kicked in the screen window above the old pigpen and snatched a jumbo bag of buttered popcorn. Giggling like mad, we sprinted up the path to a small grotto of picnic tables. Toby plopped down in the grass with the feedbag between his legs. It came up to his chin.

"We can't eat this here. We'll get caught," I scolded.

"Then where?"

"I know where we can go," I said.

Deep in the woods, up near the staff cabins, there was a tree with a round, shapely ass. The “ass tree,” as I christened it my first year at camp, had a deep, triangular crevice, running up the length of the trunk from the ground, giving it the appearance of having two legs. At waist-level, a hardened, round knot capped the peak of the narrow split, producing a firm and arguably sexy ass.

“This tree is tripping me out,” Toby whined, slouched at the slope of an adjacent tree, his feedbag snuggled between his legs. A stray puff of popcorn stuck to his dry bottom lip.

“How can you eat that crap, Toby? My tongue still feels numb.”

“Nah, it ain’t bad,” he replied, shoveling in another mouthful. “Hey, so, I went to this bonfire for all the counselors last night.”

“Was that cool?”

“It was alright. No booze, though. But I tried hooking up with Jennifer, that red head that always wears those yellow knee pads.”

“Yeah? How’d it go?”

“Shitty. One of those asshole wranglers from the horse barn busted up the whole deal. I was about to make my move and he all busts in, gets down on one knee, and starts singing ‘Jailhouse Rock’ in a Mickey Mouse voice.”

“Really? What did she do?”

“She starts cracking up, all clapping and egging him on and crap. I swear. I’m done with chicks at this camp.”

I was about to suggest he devote his free time to arts and crafts, when a voice off in the woods called out: "Toby-Toby!"

With his eyelids still slinking down, he yelled back. "Hey, hey, chickadee, whattya know?"

A slim girl in a gray hooded sweatshirt with the hood up rustled through the ferns. She swatted the hitchhikers from her skinny, tan legs, as she emerged into the clearing.

"Hey, hey, back. I thought that was you I heard," she remarked. "What are you guys up to?"

"Chillin'," Toby replied.

She went over and gave the ass tree's left cheek a quick pat. "Yeah, that's cool. Gotta love this place."

"You know the ass tree," I asked, utterly amazed.

"Well, yeah. Who's going to miss a beautifully sculpted ass like this?"

I was speechless. Toby, God bless his baked soul, had a moment of clarity.

"Oh, Cora, this is my old friend, Sketcher."

Eyeing the giant bag of popcorn, she whirled around to wave at me, her chin-length curly hair bouncing excitedly against her cheeks. "Hello, old friend Sketcher," she said.

"Cora's got the butter job at the pool," Toby explained.

“You mean Cora yells at nine-year-old kids who expose themselves to each other in the pool,” she corrected.

Snatching the bag from Toby, she dropped down on a bumpy root and straddled the popcorn. “What do we have here, boys? You’ve been holding out on me?”

I tried to warn her. “Cora, you might not want to...”

Then I stopped, realizing it would be much better not to finish the sentence. Plus, even if I had finished, I somehow figured she wouldn’t have listened.

She scooped up a fistful; it crunched in her hand like gravel. A few lucky kernels took the plunge, slipping between her fingers before she rammed the whole wad in her mouth. Her cheeks swelled. That’s when the weird, burning aftertaste hit. Her lips “pffizztered” and wet yellow blobs spread across the dark dirt. She fanned her drooping tongue with her long, flat hands.

“Shit, Sketcher, why didn’t you warn me this is food that only stoners can digest?”

Toby cackled, sinking lower and lower against his tree. Laughing, my legs tingled, so I leaned against the ass tree. I slid down the trunk and down into the dust. I only shrugged and kept on laughing, as she flicked flecks of popcorn off her hanging tongue. It was all I could manage to do. My senses, along with my basic motor skills, stopped working at that moment.

HITLER'S TREE

Elijah once said that the most beautiful sight in the world is what he sees when he first closes his eyes to go to sleep. He had said that during one of those get-to-know-you activities during freshman orientation week at Wesley College. The girls cooed with sparkling eyes, and Chip, our hunky orientation leader whose most beautiful sight was "his mother's smile," bobbed his head approvingly. I panicked, quickly trying to think of something equally awe inducing to replace 'leaves swirling in the air in autumn' before it came around to my turn. I didn't of course, and nobody really cared, because they were all still dripping from Elijah's brilliance. As I got to know him, and even shared an apartment with him during our senior year, I found he usually had that effect on people. In our Political Fiction class senior year, he always sat in the front row, gently rocking back and forth with his eyes clenched tight and arguing theories that reduced our teacher, Dr. Scherner, to a jittery fourteen-year-old girl with a sequined scarf and sweating mass quantities of Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds perfume.

He once proclaimed that it was his job to "constantly challenge people's beliefs and make them think at our stick-up-the-ass conservative Methodist school posing as a liberal arts college." As horribly pretentious as that sounds, I think he tried making up for the years of being a smoked-out dope head in high school. Etched on his right shoulder blade was a faded blue tattoo of a cannabis

leaf with the words “My Oxygen” circling it. I noticed it one morning when I saw him coming out of the bathroom without a shirt. Anyway, I guess if I had a tattoo claiming that my very existence depended on daily drags from a blunt, I’d spend every waking hour flexing my intellectual triceps, too.

This one Friday, in Political Fiction, Dr. Scherner took us outside to the athletic track for a lively debate about “Hitler’s Tree.” In the corner of the field, near the main gate, hung a still gray oak. The gnarled black branches spiraled towards the lush ground, some weaving through the chain link fence. Our only famous alum, Duff “Got the Stuff Thompson,” donated it in the fall of 1936. Thompson ran in the ’36 Olympics in Germany with Jesse Owens and John Woodruff, the “Black Shadow of Pittsburgh.” During the games, the German government awarded each of the medallists, including Owens, Woodruff, and Thompson, a sapling from Germany’s Black Forest. Victorious, Thompson returned to the states, planting the sapling near the track where he had practiced everyday. Now 60 feet high, shedding bark, and—oh yeah—dead, the school proposed tearing it out of the ground to make way for a new athletic center and topiary garden.

Sitting in a half circle under Hitler’s wilted fingers, Dr. Scherner relayed the tale, as her leopard scarf twirled in the wind. Off to the side, near the wilting trunk, Elijah reclined in the grass in a worn pair of green corduroys and a faded black t-shirt turned inside out. His “Jesus sandals,” small brown sandals with

wicker tops, sat on top of his textbooks. He rocked gently with his eyes closed, as usual, balancing a bag of overripe, purple grapes on his belly.

“The question I pose to you,” Dr. Scherner concluded, “is should an effort be made to save this tree?”

Instantly, a stringy sophomore with a tuft of curly hair and a Grateful Dead t-shirt leapt up. Everyone called him “Peacock.”

“Of course. This tree is honoring an accomplished athlete, who won a victory for the United States against the machine of fascism.”

All heads in the class swiveled to Elijah. Lying on his side and popping a hand full of grapes in his mouth, he said offhandedly, “You realize he won the bronze, and that was only because his team won the 400 meter relay. They replaced him at the last minute for a pulled hamstring.”

“Let me revise,” Peacock said, rolling his hands.

Dr. Scherner leaned in. “Find a new angle.”

“Okay. While not known for his athletic prowess, he still contributed in the effort to trump Hitler’s vision of the ’36 Olympics as nothing but a demonstration of Aryan supremacy.”

“Better,” Dr. Scherner commented.

Elijah picked seeds from his teeth with his long, pointed fingernail. “Jesse Owens was black. John Woodruff, the “Black Shadow of Pittsburgh,” of course, was black. Thompson was white. You do realize that, right?”

“You’re basing your position on his race? Isn’t that a bit hypocritical?”

“Not at all, curly. I’m saying that as a Caucasian, Thompson didn’t have to overcome the same level of adversity as Owens or Woodruff.”

Dr. Scherner clasped her hands together. “Support.”

Elijah yanked himself up with a groan. “Should we cut down Owens’ tree or Woodruff’s? No, absolutely not. They are now symbols of unrelenting spirit and are greatly respected. They were black men, proving that the fascist assholes sucking on Hitler’s teat had a cracked vision of what the ideal race should be. Thompson’s tree, on the other hand, hasn’t garnered the same amount of respect.”

For effect, Elijah strode over to the tree and soothed a worn spot on the trunk with his hand. “In 1984,” Elijah finally began, “the same year a German magazine supposedly published Hitler’s private diaries—which turned out to be fake—six students, all confirmed neo-Nazis, carved swastikas in trunk and held secret meetings here. On April 20, 1984, Hitler’s birthday, they dragged an African American student here and beat the living pulp out of him.”

Peacock’ hands began trembling. “That was 1984.”

Dr. Scherner pushed out her bottom lip and nodded, nudging him to continue.

Coolly, Elijah turned his back on the class and lowered his head. Peacock smirked.

“Two months ago,” Elijah began, “the security bulletin in the school paper stated that our president, President Laughlin, arrived at a football game on Friday

night with his daughter, little Kelly. They parked in the spot over there by the gate.”

Elijah gestured to the empty spot to his right. One of Hitler’s tendrils reached over the high fence rail and spread menacingly from one cracked yellow line to the other.

“After the game,” he continued, “a dead branch, about as thick as my arm, came loose and fell on his car. It cracked his windshield, almost braining poor Kelly.”

He turned to face us, his hands pushed together and against his lips, as if he were praying. “So, not only has the tree come to be known as ‘the place where them Nazis hung out,’ it is also dangerous.”

Peacock bit his lip, unsure of his next move. Elijah moved in for the kill.

“So, while lightening quick retorts like ‘That was 1984’ were effective on the group of teddy bears you rehearsed in front of last night, they’re not going to work on me. The fact is, this tree meant little when it was first planted and now it’s associated with a dubious chapter of Wesley history. And if the administration won’t get off their ass and take care of this problem, then maybe we should take action.”

Sufficiently won over, the rest of the class chimed in with pattering applause. Dr. Scherner joined in, clapping lightly while taking center stage before we stoned Peacock.

“On that note, let’s call it a day. Read *Catch 22* for Monday, and watch out for falling limbs,” she instructed, spreading her hands to the open sky.

In a dash of book bag zippers and crunching handouts, the class scrambled off to the Union for lunch, the defeated Peacock trailing behind. As I went to congratulate Elijah on yet another successful conquest, Dr. Scherner sidled up. Like an exotic dancer, she rested her folded arm on his shoulder and slung the loose end of her scarf over his head.

“What am I going to do with you? You need to wait until after the withdrawal date before scaring my students like that.”

He tipped his head forward, grazing her forehead. “Where’s the fun in that?”

She playfully waved him away with her hand and turned towards me. “How do you put up with this all day and all night?”

Elijah cut me off before I could make a witty comeback.

“Don’t try to pretend you wouldn’t want me around twenty-four hours a day,” he said to Dr. Scherner.

“No comment,” she retorted, accentuating a flirty wink with a clicking sound from her mouth. She pulled her arm back and headed off through the gate. “Behave yourself, boys.”

“Shall we hit a strip club to celebrate?”

“It’s noon,” I said, gathering my books.

“Tonight, then.”

“I think I’m hanging out with Nicole tonight.”

He lowered his head and scratched furiously at the space between his eyebrows.

“The beanpole? Tough luck, pal. I guess there’s no chance of getting her to come to the Toy Box?”

“Doubtful.”

“Man, that girl bugs me.”

“Hey!”

“She bugs you, too, sometimes. I see it.”

“Elijah!”

“Sorry. Look, good luck, buddy. Hey, I’ll get a lap dance for you.”

I tagged him on the shoulder with my knuckles. “Thanks for taking that bullet, buddy.”

“No sweat.”

He scooped up his books and headed off to the Union. I went back to our apartment to eat the same lunch I had everyday that year: grilled cheese with a side of potato chips on a blue and white checked plate, a chocolate cupcake for dessert, and a glass of milk. I flipped on the 12 o’clock news and sat down at the little wooden table behind the couch, as my good friend and neighbor, Nicole Evans, wrapped on the door. With Nicole, yelling, “Come in,” wouldn’t work; I had to walk over and open the door for her. She was old fashioned that way, I guess.

“I’m sorry. You’re eating,” she said, spying my lunch.

“Not at all,” I stuttered.

She cocked her head, precariously.

“I mean, yes, I’m eating, but it’s okay. Come in.”

Nicole set down in the chair next to me, folding her right leg underneath her body to give her a boost. She carefully slid her “Grad School Application Stuff” folder—divided into neat sections by red, white, and blue tabs—onto the table. Her long, but soft fingers fiddled with a rolled flier balanced on top. With her elbows propped on the table, the thick collar of her red turtleneck scrunched under her pointed chin. I studied her wavy brown hair clenched back tight in a ponytail and brown eyes set under her thin scattered eyebrows. The urge to get a steady job as a postman and marry her swelled behind my eyes. At least I think that’s what it was, anyway.

“I hope you don’t have a question for me about that stuff,” I said, nodding towards her folder. “I haven’t even read the pile of junk on my desk.”

“Oh, no. I just came from the library. I wanted to show you this flier,” she explained, smoothing it out across her folder. The tiny gold horses on her charm bracelet tingled.

“Is that for James Taylor’s brother’s concert?”

“Yes, it starts at eight, not nine, like I thought. Can you still go?”

“Sure, yeah.”

Tipping her head, she flashed her slight smile. “And his name is Livingston, by the way.”

“Sorry. Have you heard him?”

“No. But it could be good. Do you want to go?”

“I just said I did. Yeah.”

For a few minutes, she studied the flier, while I finished off my limp grilled cheese. Just then, in a surprise burst of energy, she leapt out of her seat.

“Hey...”

She froze, frantically pitching from side to side, like a little kid in a school play with stage fright who’s shoved on stage against her will. She reeled back and grasped the rolled flier. With her prop in place, she batted it lightly against my arm in a moment she clearly rehearsed.

“Let me cook you dinner.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t know. I want to.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

“That’s really nice of you, but I’d feel weird.”

She crossed her arms in a fake huff. “Eric. Nobody is going to think you’re a chauvinist if I cook you one meal.”

“I’d still feel weird. What brought this on, anyway?”

She drew back in her chair, studying the ridges of her sweater. “You’re so skinny, Eric. I, I just always have the urge to take you and feed you, I guess. I just worry about you.”

“Oh,” was all I could muster. I gritted my teeth behind a limp smile in a vain attempt to stop my cheeks from blushing red.

“And because you have the eating habits of a four-year-old.”

“You know you want some,” I tempted.

Impulsively, she leaned forward and snatched a chip off my plate. She covered her mouth in horror before chewing. “I’m sorry. I’m eating right off of your plate.”

“No. It’s okay,” I exclaimed, pushing the plate between us.

With our shoulders hovering closer together, we both locked our eyes on the stained tabletop and attempted to crunch our chips as quietly as possible. As the pile dwindled to a few greasy shards, Nicole stood up and yanked a paper towel off the roll by the sink to wash her hands.

“So, can I cook you dinner? And be the first person to actually use your oven,” she asked.

“Well. Are you sure it won’t make me look like a pig?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Then, yes. Okay. That’s really cool of you to offer.” That image tugged on the back of my eyes.

She inhaled, about to say something else, when Elijah tumbled through the door, hunched over like an eccentric professor with his jacket hung loosely on his shoulders and balancing a cup of coffee on a stack of books. Clenching the

rim of the cup between his teeth, he stiffened his back and let the coat and books crash to the ground where they'd stay until next February.

"Hey, man," I said, making our presence known.

"Great, the pseudo couple." He stretched his arms to the roof. "Welcome to Awkward City, Indiana," he boomed in a pompous announcer voice.

Nicole shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Elijah clomped over in his Jesus sandals and threw his right leg over the back of the chair to sit down. Instantly, he snatched my plate, turned it on its side and dabbed up the remaining potato chip crumbs with his tongue. Nicole winced.

"How great was it today, when I reamed that Peacock kid in polit-fic?"

"Dr. Scherner was impressed," I replied, repulsed at my now glistening plate.

"Did you see her get wet when I said I'd have to take action into my own hands?"

"I think she was happy to see a heated debate."

"No. That woman loves me, Sketcher. Loves me."

"Dude, she's our professor, not to mention like forty."

"Come on. Are you trying to tell me that if you came home one day and she was naked in your bed and ready to go that you wouldn't slap uglies with her?"

"I'm not even sure what that means."

"It doesn't matter. You wouldn't answer with turtleneck in the room, anyway."

Nicole bit her lip. I swore I saw streams of smoke snaking from her collar.

"Elijah," I objected.

"I have another question for you, but you probably won't answer that one either."

"What is it?"

"Nah. Forget it."

"Fine."

Elijah stood up, heading back to his room. In the doorway, he stopped and pitched his head over his shoulder.

"Want to help get rid of the Hitler Tree?"

Collectively, Nicole and I twisted up our brows. "What?"

He skipped back over and sat down. Gesturing with his hands, he laid out the night's plan. He and two other guys from the student Jewish council were going to sneak into the stadium that night around nine and "smoke it out once and for all."

Nicole scrunched up her face. "You're going to cut the tree down?"

"No, just light it on fire," Elijah retorted, flicking his cigarette lighter. "One leaf catches, and, oops, look at that, the whole fucking thing blazes up."

"You're not serious?" I asked.

“You know, Sketcher, we could use a lookout. We’ll give you a cool criminal code name, like Tripwire or Hutch.”

“Me?”

“Yeah, what experience do you have in this dubious line of work?”

“I helped kidnap a pig once.”

“Great! That’s exactly like torching a tree that once belonged to Adolf fucking Hitler.”

Nicole looked horrified. “You’re not actually serious? You could be expelled from school.”

“Who asked you, Nicole? Let your pseudo boyfriend do whatever he wants.”

Nicole shrunk down in her seat and muttered, “Why would you do this?”

“Because, it’s the right thing to do. Do you know that just this month, German authorities discovered larch trees in the shape of a swastika growing in an evergreen forest, just north of Berlin? In the fall, when the leaves turn yellow, it’s visible from the air. Within a matter days after it was discovered, forest rangers moved in with chainsaws. They don’t tolerate this type of shit over there, so why should we?”

“The tree here is not honoring Hitler, it’s honoring Thompson,” Nicole argued.

“There’s a plaque and a whole trophy case honoring Duff “Got the Stuff” in the athletic center lobby. We don’t need the tree. Scherner’s been trying to tell the alumni council this for years.”

I stood up, shaking my finger. “Wait. You’re doing this for Dr. Scherner, aren’t you?”

Elijah shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe that’s part of it, okay?”

As we talked, Nicole quietly got up and retrieved her coat. In front of the door, she paused for an instant, her eyes fixing on her white canvas shoes. A smile crossed Elijah’s lips.

“Wait,” I said, trailing after her.

Elijah pitched his chair back and crossed his arms.

“Nicole and I have plans tonight,” I said, opening the door for her.

We stepped out onto the landing. Wisps of hair escaped from her tight ponytail and streamed across her face. Her spindly lips bent in a tight smile, as her wide eyes bent around the sides of her face. I stepped in close between her feet, about an inch from her body. The lining of my stomach itched, while the insides began boiling furiously.

“I’m sorry about that,” I offered. “He was just joking around.”

“Will you still go to the concert with me?”

“Of course.”

“I...”

I leaned down and kissed her. My lips sloshed repeatedly over her clenched lips, tasting the salty sting of sour cream and onion potato chips. I massaged up her arms to her chilled cheeks. She smiled widely, showing her teeth, so I pulled back.

“Pick you up at your dorm at seven thirty?”

“Okay,” she murmured, while trotting backwards a few steps before whirling around and heading down the staircase. I wanted to say something witty, like “I like chicken ala king,” but I didn’t. Instead, I leaned on the railing and watched her mall-walk swiftly through the swirling leaves back to her dorm.

A few hours later, at Chivington Hall, Nicole and I discovered Wesley College’s newfound disdain for James Taylor. In front of a packed house, a tiny elderly woman in charge of the college’s folk concert series presided over the aging folkies from town and the few nerdy students and explained how awful it must be to go through life known as James Taylor’s brother.

“So tonight,” she explained, clasping her fingers together, “let’s refer to that other guy as Livingston’s brother.”

Applause and cute chuckles rippled through the crowd. Someone in the balcony screamed, “Take that, James Taylor!” Nicole and I huddled close and exchanged quick, rolling glances. She had changed into a black turtleneck and cream-colored pants. Sitting properly with her legs tightly crossed, her left hand clasped her knee. I drifted my hand to the edge of the seat in hope that she would move hers down close. But, she didn’t. She clapped excitedly, forgetting I

was even there, as Livingston Taylor strolled on stage. Smiling a dopey grin that wrinkled his brow, he waved with both hands. With his guitar fastened just under his neck by a rainbow guitar strap, he thanked us for the warm welcome and instantly launched into a whimsical ditty about all the people a single dollar bill encounters in a day. His tasseled loafers acted as his rhythm section, thumping along loudly without the aide of a microphone. The flurry of phantom hairs wavering at the edge of his receding hairline, lit up like a heavenly halo by the spotlight, waved frantically with each stomp. Livingston sang, like The Brother Who Should Not Be Named, soulfully and with his eyes closed. He looked like his brother, too, sporting a bowtie and a busy sweater vest, which boggled our minds with its complex pattern of overlapping rhombuses.

Three rows ahead of us, Dr. Scherner and a tall red-haired man in a blue sports coat whispered apologies while bumping knees to their seats. Dr. Scherner crept down into the first open seat, forcing her companion to climb over her. She wore a green silk scarf peppered with silver sparkles that capped the plunging neckline of her little black dress. Smoothly, as her male escort slid down into his seat, he ran his freckled hand along the back of her seat and palmed the half-circle of pale flesh below her scarf.

“Will you look at that old maverick moving in on Dr. Scherner?” I whispered to Nicole.

I repeated it two more times before she took her eyes off the stomping and strumming troubadour on stage. Her eyebrows lifted; her lips pursed. She looked furious. She looked like my damn mother.

“Shh,” she hissed.

“What?”

Her eyes ballooned, shocked that her first warning had no effect. “Shh,” she snapped a second time. About to turn back to the concert, she paused, unsure if her point was made. For good measure, just to show that she wasn’t fooling around, she leaned in and mouthed: “Settle.”

Settle, for God’s sake! She told me to settle. I had kissed her, and she told me to “settle,” as if I were at Mass, bumping my ass on the pew because she wouldn’t give me a fuzzy mint from her damn purse. She leaned forward in her seat to block me out of the picture, so it that it was just her and Livingston. Three rows ahead, Dr. Scherner leaned into her man friend and whispered to the crinkling hairs sprouting from his reddening ear. He turned, muffled a chuckle, and responded by brushing his bulbous nose against her cheek. Disgusted with all of them, I lunged from my chair and rumped past the annoyed knees of the couples next to us. Out in the dark, carpeted aisle, I turned back to Nicole. Still perched on the edge of her seat, she stared up at the stage with the same beaming eyes that made me kiss her. I paused, reluctantly. I wanted her to see that I was mad, but at the same time, I didn’t want her to turn and smile or even mouth, “Where are you going?” The sight of her eyes and flushed cheeks made

me wince. I shoved my hands deep in my pockets and trudged up the aisle to the exit, fighting the urge to shout, "Play 'Fire and Rain!'"

I originally intended just to hit the head but passed the door and continued through the lobby to the concrete steps outside. As a steady stream of needles drizzled down, I leapt off the curb and sprinted across the cobblestone road. I veered left at the science building and rushed through the alley behind the girl's dorms, heading to the outskirts of campus. Low thunder grumbled over the athletic field. My face sticky from the light rain, I blinked, expecting to see smoke blackening the purple sky and fire engine sirens screaming towards the athletic field. I found Elijah reclining in the front row of bleachers near the Hitler Tree, sitting where people usually put their feet. His arms stretched out on either side of the seat behind him, while his legs hung up and over the seat in front.

"Finally," he sneered.

"Did you do it yet? What's going on?"

"For awhile there, I didn't think you were coming."

"What?"

He pivoted to one cheek. "I really should have brought a book or something. Hey, have you ever read *The Tennis Hustler*? I've heard good things."

Puzzled, I shook his words away with a quick nod and gestured towards the Hitler Tree in the corner. "I thought you were going to burn this thing down."

"And you said you didn't want to help. What are you doing here?"

I licked the raindrops off my lips and thought. "I'm here to stop you, I think."

"You think?"

"Yeah."

He chuckled, wringing his neck from side to side to pop the joints. "I don't. Hey, do you remember over the summer, when you broke up with that hot Filipino chick, who was insane over you by the way, after only a month?"

"Elijah, the tree, I..."

"Answer the question."

I huffed. "Yes, I remember. What does she have to do with this?"

"Do you remember what you said when I asked you why you broke up with her?"

"No. I don't."

"You said that you wanted to take 'a sabbatical from girls' during our senior year so you could figure out what the hell you wanted to do with your life. Now here you are, putzing around with this girl, and you don't have a clue what you want her to be."

"Nicole? That's what this is about?"

Shielding his flickering lighter from the drizzle, he lit a cigarette and squinted as it huffed to life. He set the plastic lighter down on the steel bleacher with a clink. "Of course, and you fucking failed my test."

The crusty limbs of the Hitler Tree waved in the wind, mocking me. A chill, not from the slight rain or the wind, but from the middle of my brain, jostled loose and quivered down passed the lump in my throat and pulsated through my chest.

“Why does everything have to be a test with you?”

Elijah just smirked. I drooped my head, touching my chin flush with my collar and glared at him out from under my brow.

“Fine. You want a test?”

Before I realized what I was doing, my shoulders lurched forward, and I dove for his lighter. Stunned, Elijah snatched at me and missed, his splayed fingers frozen in the air. He swore at me while fighting his way out of the bleachers. I sprinted through the grass, flicking the lighter. Sparks nipped at my knuckles. Squatting against the trunk for shelter, I huddled over the lighter until a small flame with a blue sizzling center finally caught. Carefully, like carrying an egg on a spoon, I rose, bringing the flame to a curled leaf. Instantly, the edges burned blue; the ashes fluttered into my eyes. I cupped my hands around the leaf to coax the flame up the branch. Behind me, Elijah’s Jesus sandals slapped through the grass. My heart dribbled against my chest. Expecting to get tackled or even a spotlight to snap on, I lit up three more crusty edges.

Finally, Elijah scrambled up behind me. I snapped around quickly and thrust my hand up in the air for him to stop. He threw up his hands in surrender and backpedaled a few steps. Lowering my hand, I turned back to the flames. The leaves flared up impressively in a matter of seconds. Then, the fireball

sizzled down to a sure and steady flame, which ate its way up the branch to a large knot. As I watched the flame, Elijah carefully stepped up next to me. I turned to scowl at his stunned, dopey face, as the rain prattled down hard, pasting his thinning hair against his forehead.

“I think you’re so full of shit,” I spat. “About almost everything.”

“You’re probably right. That’s why I like you, Sketch.”

I turned back to the tree, knowing my flame didn’t have a chance. About halfway up the knotted branch, the flame simmered out; a trail of sooty smoke lofted through the tangled branches. Red embers glowed softly in the nooks of the knot for a few lingering seconds and then went out.

Elijah laughed. “They grow them tough over there in Germany,” he said.

Relieved that the fire petered out, I exhaled sharply and wiped my eyes with my wet hands. “I think you’re right about Nicole,” I admitted. “One minute she’s just comfortable and, hell, borderline annoying but then the next minute I think I might love her.”

He clenched his eyes shut and drew in a loud breath. “I found that if you close your eyes and think an answer comes, or starts to, anyway.”

I took one last look at fading smoke and closed my eyes. A shadowy image of the tree floated across black space. Feeling the smoke sting the insides of my nostrils, I began gently rocking back and forth. He definitely had a point there.

SIX

The frayed gray rope on the tetherball pole swayed limply in the wind. Cora slumped in the grass next to me, smiling her wide smile and gabbing on about three kids from rowing camp that she had to eject from the pool for urinating in the water. After we met that one night at the ass tree, we started meeting in the playground in the evenings after she finished work and I got done with soccer practice. We started out just bumping into each other, but it quickly became a planned thing. That evening, I sat on a flat rock by the swings and listened to her while sipping a plastic spoon through a dish of sugar free ice cream that I bought from the camp snack shop. Cora, as usual, leapt up on her knees to tell the climax of her story with sweeping hand gestures. Her relentless curly ringlets piled on top of her head bounced across her forehead. She had on a pair of jean shorts, a white top, and a gray hooded sweatshirt; the muted colors accentuated her toasted brown skin and white toothy smile. With each shake of her head, a blast of coconut scented oil wafted in the air and pricked up my shoulders. All we ever did on those evenings was talk, but, really, that's all we needed to do.

“How did practice go?” she asked, finishing her illicit story.

My spoon hung in the air just under my mouth, as watery drops of vanilla plopped back down into the bowl. I closed my mouth and licked my lips before

responding. Oblivious, she waddled over on her knees to peer into my bowl.

“Your ice cream looks good, Eric.”

She grabbed my wrist to hold the spoon steady and took a bite. Her eyes snapped shut when her pink lips connected with the plastic spoon. A spark, like an itch deep under the skin, exploded in my wrist and rippled up my arm. As she drew back, the spoon seemed to wilt in my sweaty hand. Instantly, she wiped her mouth on her sleeve and opened her eyes.

“Gross!”

“It’s fat free.”

“What? Are you trying to knock off a few pounds?”

“Actually, I’m trying to gain a lot of weight this summer, yeah.”

She rolled her eyes and smiled. “Now I’m just confused.”

“I’ve been trying to beef up, but it’s kind of hard here, you know?”

Leaning back at a steep angle, she cocked her head to one side.

“I think you look good just like that.”

“You’ve never seen me without a shirt on. You have no idea.”

Impulsively, like everything else she did, she tagged the side of my knee, signaling for me to “scotchies.” She hopped up on the rock next to me, her warm thigh settling against mine.

She shrugged. “Ehh. So what.”

THE TRADE SHOW

I decided to interview the Mushroom Lady first, since she was all the way in the back of the convention hall and had a portable TV. Now, if I had had any journalistic drive whatsoever, starting with her would have been a mistake. If I had really wanted to uncover a big scoop at the Midwest Pizza and Ice Cream Trade Expo, a trade show in Ohio for pizzeria owners and restaurateurs, starting with the toppings would have been a mistake. They're the extras, the stuff the guy on the other end of the phone asks you about after you've decided between large and extra large and thin and crispy crust. Mushrooms would be the wrong topping to start with anyway. Everyone knows that pepperoni is the most popular topping, followed closely by sausage. Anyway, out of the eight aisles of vendors and food suppliers setting up camp in 8x6 booths for three days to entice attendees with free samples, The Mushroom Lady, a mycologist and shrewd mushroom hunter of the pizza world, should have been my last choice. But as I said, she had a TV. Plus, I somehow doubted that there would be a scoop juicy enough to send a dozen members of the press clamoring for the payphones, like in Jerry Lewis movies. All the big news happened outside of the show.

Actually, aside from a few roving reporters from *Pizza Monthly*, I was the only other journalist covering the event. It was my first major assignment for *Midwest Cuisine*, since I started working for them less than a month beforehand.

My assignment, according to my editor, was to summarize the atmosphere of the show; highlight any new trends; record major sales figures; and get an autograph from Brutus Buckeye, Ohio State's mascot, for his eight-year-old son. It sounded easy enough, but from the moment they made the announcement over the loud speaker that a terrible accident happened in New York, I couldn't do it. I couldn't rove from booth to booth, attending the cooking sessions in the test kitchens and watching the dough-twirling contest. Instead, The Mushroom Lady and I spent the half-hour before the show opened squinting at a 4x6 inch television surrounded by rare crumbling fungi.

I crouched on the floor with my press badge dangling from the collar of my V-neck sweater and silly writer's hair flopping over my forehead and gripped my knees to stop from shaking. The Mushroom Lady sat in a flimsy folding chair, her wide thighs flowing over the side. Her stringy gray witch hair hung in heavy shafts down the sides of her face. Stray hairs, like crooked branches, tangled under the tips of her white collared shirt, which peeked through the neck hole of her blue sweatshirt. A bent fingernail tapped methodically against her exposed teeth.

"Time and chance happen to all," she muttered to herself.

"What?" I asked.

"No one can anticipate a disaster like this."

"How did this happen?"

Her hazel eyes widened. "Have you ever seen them?"

"No."

“They’re tall. I’m actually surprised this isn’t the first time a plane has hit one.”

My ankles buckled under the pressure and I tipped forward. With my hands trembling, I settled down cross-legged. To avoid looking at the TV, I surveyed her collection of chlorine-smelling mushrooms piled in wooden crates.

“What did you say your name was?” she asked suddenly.

“Eric. Eric Sketcher.”

“You don’t look too good, Eric Sketcher.”

I picked up a handful of spongy mushrooms with bubbly heads and squat stems, just for something to hold as I spoke. “I’m fine. It’s nothing. Really.”

“Well then, you’re mashing up my puffballs for nothing.”

She cupped her hands under mine. I spread my palms apart, letting the punctured heads and severed stems roll down.

“I’m so sorry,” I exclaimed, feeling obligated to tell her that my friend worked in the other one.

As she slanted her hands over the garbage can, her thumbs probed the pieces for anything salvageable. In a monotone voice, she said she was sorry to hear that and added, “Look at that smoke. I’m sure they’re evacuating both of them.”

I gazed back at the tiny screen; static lines waved wildly over the picture. They didn’t show any other angle but the aerial view. I wanted to see if people were leaving. My friend Cora was a grad student at NYU. To pay for school she

started temping, and at the end of August, the agency placed her as a file clerk in an accounting firm on the fourteenth floor. Finally, the camera panned around the building before cutting back to the solemn morning show host sitting on a plush couch in a bright studio. Used to interviewing movie stars and having exotic zoo animals crawling on his shoulders, his eyes averted from staring directly into the camera. I slid over into the flimsy chair, hoping they'd cut to a shot of the street, when the picture zapped into a tiny blue dot.

"This isn't doing anyone any good," The Mushroom Lady stated, snatching the TV up by its handle and hiding it under the curtained table.

"Now, get out of my seat, and let's do that interview."

"Now?"

"Well, yeah. The show's starting, kid. I got work to do."

Reluctantly, I flipped open my reporter's notebook, figuring I'd do the interview real quick and then go find another TV. "Okay. Before we get to the nickname and how you got into the business, what exactly do you do?"

Just then, a beefy man in pinstriped pants and sneakers rushed into the booth next to us and wriggled out of his red windbreaker. Underneath, he wore a turn-of-the-century suit jacket with long tails and a thin, western tie. His finely waxed and symmetrical moustache curled into perfectly arched ten-speed handlebars on either side. He chucked the windbreaker under a table and retrieved a black cowboy hat. The sign above his booth read: "Colonel Bill's Golden Breeding."

"I've been hearing it on the radio," he shouted. "It's no accident! I bet that Saddam fucker did this."

The Mushroom Lady and I turned back to the interview. "I supply a lot of domestic Mushrooms, but the wild forage mushrooms really make us unique," she explained, throwing out names like "Black Trumpet, Yellow Hedgehog, and Yellowfoot Chanterelle." My pen scrapped furiously to keep up.

"And where do you get these mushrooms?"

"I have mushroom hunters in South America and most of Asia."

Colonel Bill stormed over to the waist high curtained rod separating the two booths. "I only use American-made products, sorry."

"Your company makes breadings, Bill," The Mushroom Lady protested.

"We also make storage bins for flour and breadings," he retorted. "And we don't use any of that Chinese-made shit, either."

"Do you mind, Bill, I'm trying to do an interview here."

The Colonel noticed me for the first time. "You press?"

"I write for *Midwest Cuisine*. It's a monthly trade magazine. We cover Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania..."

"Pennsylvania's not the Midwest," he said, promptly.

"Well, Western Pennsylvania."

"You mean like, Pittsburgh?"

"Mostly. So, what does Colonel Bill's Breading do?"

He pitched his hands against his hips and tiredly spouted the company mission statement about offering high quality products at a fair price. I scribbled the word “quality” and drew a box around it.

“What trends are you guys noticing in the industry?”

“Trends? Our chicken wing breeding is very popular.”

I retraced the question mark after “trends,” when, crackling over our heads, the loudspeaker squawked to life. Instead of announcing the start of the show, the weary voice announced that the other one was hit.

Colonel Bill shouted over the announcement. “I knew it!”

I hurried passed The Mushroom Lady and shot down the aisle to a bench outside of the “Frozen Dessert Theater.” Sitting down, I dug in my pocket for the cell phone that my parents insisted I buy and never actually used. Her phone rang, each ring stretching out longer and longer until finally her voicemail picked up.

“Hey, this is Cora. I’m not in right now, I’m out...hmmm, where can I say I am? I’m out...killing...puppies. Wow, where did that come from?” *Beep.*

“Cora, it’s Eric,” I began. “Are you okay? Jesus, be okay. Call me, okay. Call me. I heard what happened.”

I continued rambling until the beep cut me off. I set the phone on my knee and stared at the blank screen. A large man in a billowing gray sweatshirt creaked on the bench next to me. He had two fistfuls of wings; the sauce coated his knuckles and worked its way under his yellowing fingernails. A bottle of water

hung from his puckered mouth. Without setting down his precious wings, he jarred his head back and took a long swig. The water gurgled and bubbled, obnoxiously. Didn't he know what the hell was going on? I wanted him to leave, but as he began stacking his chicken bones on the bench between us, I leapt up. I slipped the phone in my pocket and concentrated on weaving between the lumbering pedestrians poking along from booth to booth. I made it to the end of the aisle and turned the corner to the 300's.

At booth 335, Velvet Falls Ice Cream, the founder of the company stopped me to say thanks for writing a profile of his company for the upcoming issue and then slipped a frozen chocolate chipowich in the side pocket of my khaki pants. It clung to my thigh, as I hobbled down the aisle towards the main exit. Out in the lobby, I dislodged the moist chipowich from my pocket and flung it in the garbage. I tried calling again, but she was still out killing puppies.

I met Cora at summer camp, way back in high school, but didn't really get to know her until the summer before I started working at *Midwest Cuisine*. We both graduated college and moved back in with our parents, who lived in the same neighborhood in Pennsylvania. The first time we hung out, way back in May, we went to the movies. She dragged me to this overly tragic Spanish film called *The Scarlet Memento*. For two hours, this voluptuous Spanish woman cried in her bathtub with all of her clothes on, clutching a red scarf from her dead lesbian lover. "Ravadana! Ravadana! This is all I have left of my sweet Ravadana," she sobbed endlessly. The best part of the whole night was when we

bought our tickets. Cora marched up to the counter with a big smile, her right index finger pointing to the neon marquee, and said, "*Uno Momento, por favor!*" The ticket vendor just rolled his eyes. I, on the other hand, almost dropped to my knee and asked her to marry me right there.

The only problem, however, was Tony. She met the "so very funny" Tony in Philadelphia, where they both went to college. He was a dancer and moved to New York to find work after graduation. She got into the masters program in sociology at NYU and planned to join Tony the wonder comic in the Big Apple in August. Despite his lightening wit, she told me Tony disliked public displays of affection and saying "I love you," even in private. She usually shrugged it off, as if to say, "That's my Tony." Of course, I got it in my head that if I could just show her how great and attentive I was, she'd drop her ambiguously gay boyfriend and live with me in the mountains of Pennsylvania. But, it didn't happen that way. She left towards the end of July. Things didn't seem the same without her, so two weeks later, I left to live with a friend in Ohio.

When I wandered back into the convention hall, the morning rush began. I needed to find out what was happening. I picked up my trail and headed back down the 400s. The guys at the WB Berkel Box Company had a tiny alarm clock radio perched on a wobbly tower of empty pizza boxes. As opposed to the usual dose of liberal bashing and circular Republican rhetoric, the hosts of a morning call-in show soberly chatted with emotional callers. A caller from Tampa, Florida,

explained that even though she had never been to New York and didn't know anyone who lived there, she would still pray for "the whole city."

I had only been there once. During my first week in Ohio, I interviewed at *Midwest Cuisine* and got offered the job right there. But, since I wasn't supposed to start until a week later, I took a very long bus ride up to Manhattan to visit Cora for the weekend. She lived in this tiny cabinet on East 83rd. We spent almost the entire weekend curled up on her giant gold couch, talking and watching the shopping networks. The infamous Tony wasn't around. She said he went to a concert in Boston with some old college friends and would be gone the whole weekend. Twice, I asked if he knew I was staying with her, and both times, she only made a popping sound with her lips before changing the subject.

The only time we left her apartment that weekend was on Saturday afternoon, when we went to NYU to see Ray Bradbury speak at the *New York Times'* Festival of Books. We sat in the back of the auditorium, curling our crumbling copies of *The Martian Chronicles* between our sweaty palms, as Ray Bradbury talked about writing. "I wrote a story about a man afraid of his own skeleton, and the damn thing got me more work," he groaned, sitting in his wheelchair behind a black microphone stand.

After the talk, he signed books at the back of the exhibitor's hall. The line slithered outside of the hall, down the stone staircase, and into one of the quads. We took our place at the back of the line, just as they announced that Bradbury would be arriving shortly. Cora danced nervously from one foot to the other. *The*

Martian Chronicles became her favorite book, after she and her dad listened to it on tape during a road trip to Albuquerque.

“What do you say to Rad Yadbury?”

“Rad Yadbury? I like that.”

She karate-chopped my arm. “Shut up. You know what I mean. Now, come on, what do I say?”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Bradbury. I enjoy your work.”

The muscles in her face contorted. “That’s what you want me to say? It’d be less insulting if I stuck my foot up his ass!”

“How is that insulting?”

“That’s what everyone is going to say.”

Before I could give her another suggestion, she threw her hands up and decided to walk up the side of the line to sneak a peek at him. I tipped up on my toes to look above everyone’s heads at that moment, but out of the corner of my eye, I saw Cora charge off into the wave of a large passing crowd. She let out a loud, sudden shriek and then a tiny yelp. I reeled around. A large, scowling woman hurriedly pushed Ray Bradbury’s wheelchair right over Cora’s tiny, sandaled foot. The scowling woman barked, “Excuse us.” Ray Bradbury rolled along oblivious, his giant magnified eyes floating behind his black-rimmed glasses.

“Are you okay?” I asked when the entourage had passed.

“Ray Bradbury just ran over me with his wheelchair!” she shouted, jumping into my arms. The crowd around us patted her shoulder and gushed.

That night, twisted around blankets from her bed, we lay on her gold couch sleeping and talking until morning. At about four a.m., I told her about my job and how I was getting settled in Ohio. She started to cry.

“Today was really great,” she said.

“Yeah, it was.”

“I mean it was great with you.” She settled facedown. “I love you, Eric,” she whispered into the couch cushions.

I sat up. “I love you.”

She exhaled softly. “That doesn’t change our situation, does it?”

“No, but it makes it go away for one night.”

She slid her hands under my arms and smoothed my back. Her face pressed against my chest. “I think it still makes it worse.”

My arms trembled, as I tried to raise them. I kissed her forehead. “Me too,” I whispered.

I had wanted her to leave with me that night. Even then, I didn’t want her in New York.

“New York, New York,” the radio D. J. crooned slowly, after the woman from Tampa hung up. “We have to support New York, today,” he commanded.

A small crowd, pretending to browse the wares on the table, listened intently, as the hosts greeted a mother of three from Milwaukee on the phone.

“This is a day where everyone must hang their flags outside of their homes,” she suggested.

In front of me, an overweight woman clenching a canvas bag overflowing with freebies to her breasts, nodded at the suggestion enthusiastically. That instant, from outside, a siren wailed. It echoed through the overcast and empty city streets, ricocheting off the quivering steel girders of the skyscrapers and then seeped back down to penetrate the domed belly of the convention hall. The narrow aisle suddenly felt like a bomb shelter, as the air raid siren persisted overhead. Exhausted eyes drifted upwards, almost anticipating the falling shadow of flaming debris from the buildings next door to appear on the translucent ceiling. The heavy woman crunched her canvas bag closer to her chest. I clenched my fist, crumbling the sweaty notebook stuck in my palm.

Under the siren, the woman on the radio continued her instructions. “I really just think everyone needs to dig their flags out and hang them outside.”

Deep in the city outside, twenty feet away or five miles away—there was really no way to tell—a horde of fire engines ripped in and out of earshot. A thin man next to me shut his eyes and swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple clanging hard like a bell ringer. The overweight woman muttered something under breath. A balding man in a tuxedo from the Elegant Tastes booth leaned over to the representative from the Ohio Food Bank and inquired if he accepted ice sculptures.

The caller continued: "Hang them outside and let them blow in the breeze..."

I gazed down once again at the empty screen on my cell and suddenly realized that I wasn't getting a reception. I panicked. Shuffling my feet, I sifted through the dazed and dripping faces, until I rammed the immovable object hugging her canvas bag. After three muttered, "excuse me's" got stuck in the canals of her tight perm, I began silently screaming at her fat fleshy neck. I wanted to push my way through and trample all of her precious free samples and trinkets she spent all morning collecting. My teeth gnashed hard, grinding and squeaking loudly.

Then, the siren faded. One by one, people slipped from the crowded aisle, trying to appear nonchalant, trying to appear as if they were simply bored with the radio program and not fleeing the building for a warm hole in the ground. The thin man checked his watch. The overweight woman gazed down over her nose at the contents of her bag and cleared the path.

"Our flags will show them, the people that did this, that we are not afraid. Our flags will do this."

I wandered over to a bench at the corner of the convention hall and settled down. Sliding the phone on the bench next to me, I hunched forward to tend to my aching ankles. Cora's face turned over in my mind. For some reason, I couldn't see her face the way it was that night on her couch in New York. I saw her as a teenager at summer camp, with her hands folded around her tan knees,

wearing a gray sweatshirt with the hood up in 90-degree heat. I leaned back and focused the image in my mind. I preferred seeing her that way. I didn't want to see her crying, not for me, and not for any reason. Really, though, I just wanted to see her alive.

The wooden planks whined under the pressure of someone settling down on the empty seat next to me. I opened my eyes and turned to look. The Mushroom Lady stared off down the aisle. Her singed, outstretched fingers tightly clenched a worn cigarette butt.

She spoke out of the side of her mouth, as if blowing a jet of smoke. "You should try going outside," she said. "The sun is out. It's nice."

"No thanks," I muttered.

"It might make you feel better. It did for me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she mumbled, dropping her head to the floor. "I got the damn TV back out. It was the worst thing I could have done."

"Bad?"

She closed her eyes. "People were jumping."

"God." I started to say something else but it just came out like an air pump hissing.

She let the cigarette butt slide from her fingers and turned it over lightly with the tip of her foot. "You know," she began. "The worst part isn't that we can't

go to help, it's that even if we did go, there isn't a damn thing that we could do."

"You don't know that."

"Come on. I dig up dusty old mushrooms and sell them. Don't get me wrong, it's what I do, and I love it, but it still can't do a damn thing. Not for something like this."

The faceplate on my phone lit up. Cora's name appeared, flashing in rhythm with the vibrations and frantic beeps. I stared at it jittering around. With steady, stained fingers, The Mushroom Lady picked it up.

"I hope I'm wrong, kid," she said, tossing me the phone.

I answered it while hurrying off to the loading dock to make sure I got a clear signal. We talked over each other, I repeating "hello" several times and she rambling on about the sky. Her voice sounded different, no longer loud and loose with slightly nasally undertones; it was high and incomprehensible.

"Oh my God, Eric, the city is gone. The city is gone."

I stepped into the back storeroom, near the trash bins. "Cora. Are you okay?"

"The skyline is gone. The whole skyline is gone.

"Are you okay?"

"I can't see anything anymore."

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?"

"There's nothing but smoke. The skyline is smoke. It's just smoke."

"God damn it, Cora. Are you okay?"

Her end went silent. The line crackled and buzzed to fill the silence.

"I'm sorry," I offered.

"I'm okay," she replied, her voice slipping back down to its normal level. "I had class this morning, so I wasn't going to work until this afternoon."

"Thank God."

"It's awful here, Eric, just awful. I freaked out in the middle of my class this morning when they made the announcement. I couldn't stop crying. I think I freaked everyone out," she said, forcing a chuckle.

The line went silent again. I pictured her huddled on the gold couch under a blanket, hiding from the smoke rolling over the city.

"I want to leave. I want to get the hell out of here."

"Then leave," I said. "Go to Pennsylvania."

"I can't leave. I can't. I have to stay."

"Then I'll come there."

She paused, as if seriously considering it, even picturing it.

"Eric. That's sweet. But no thanks. That's really sweet, but Tony's here."

In the background, I heard his whiny voice. He asked if she wanted chicken.

"I miss you," I whispered, not giving her a chance to answer him.

She hesitated, probably to mouth an answer back to Tony and then slip into the bedroom before replying. She whispered how sweet it was for me to call and reassured me everything was okay. Her voice cracked around the edges

when she said goodbye. And then she was gone. I pulled the phone from my ear; her name flashed twice and disappeared.

I wanted to go to her. She needed me. I slipped through the back storeroom to the loading dock. Outside, the sun glinted offensively off the silver trim lining the windshield of a car parked illegally on the loading ramp. I stopped, feeling the heat envelope my face and moisten the scruff of my neck. The sun seemed wrong to me. Everything seemed wrong: cars on the highway beyond the flimsy parking lot fence hissed along carelessly, two women in dark sunglasses leaned against their cars and gossiped, and a man in a blue staff shirt munched on a chicken wing while wheeling an overflowing trash bin down the ramp. I felt queasy.

Finally, I switched off my phone and slipped it back in my pocket. I turned around and pushed through the heavy set of double doors. I didn't want to, but it felt better than being out there, out in the heat. The frosted air-conditioning stunned my face and the greasy air stung my eyes, as I dug in my pocket and retrieved my notebook. Flipping it open to my interview with The Mushroom Lady, I headed swiftly back to her booth in the corner of the convention hall. It was all I could do.

SEVEN

The next week at camp, Cora supposedly slipped and fell while climbing up to the lifeguard tower and twisted her knee. Apparently, she needed me to help her get around. After about two days of trying to walk while standing on my feet, we settled on piggyback rides, which I really, really didn't mind. That Friday, after soccer practice, I picked her up, literally, from the pool, so we could go to the bonfire together. I set her down behind the initial circle to avoid singing any camp songs. She reclined on her elbows, extending her bandaged leg out straight. I settled down next to her, groaning as if my arms were about to fall off.

"Poor guy," she said, grinning. "Are you enjoying camp?"

"I can actually see myself losing weight," I complained.

"Other than that, how is it going?"

"Well, it's..."

Suddenly, of course, she rolled up on her hip and leaned in towards my ear. "Do you want to know a camp secret?"

"Sure."

"I have a crush on you," she whispered.

She plopped back down in the grass. "What do you think about that?"

I drew back for a moment and then leaned towards her ear. "I think I have a crush on you, too."

“You think?”

“Delete the think.”

She pulled back and scrunched up her nose. “So, I, I have a crush on you?”

I laughed, raising my cupped hand to my mouth to whisper back when she bolted forward and kissed me on the lips. My hand fell across her cheeks, and she smiled widely. It was my first kiss, barring the time in kindergarten when Nikki Kowalski and I touched tongues to see what would happen.

I felt Cora’s hand ride up my leg and stuff a crumpled piece of paper into my pocket. Like an idiot, I pulled back to look down and see what it was. I slipped the scrap of paper, actually the torn-off flap of an envelope, from my pocket. Scrolled in looping, fading pencil was her home address.

“Will you write me?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe we’ll see visit other.”

“Definitely.”

I held the scrap up to the firelight and examined the address. She lived pretty far from me, about two hours away, but I promised I would visit her.

When I got home, I taped that piece of paper to my wall, next to my pillow, so I could see it as soon as I woke up. We wrote each other about once a week for the rest of the summer. I can’t really remember what we talked about—probably the usual junk about how much we missed each other and how many

times we'd see each other once we got our driver licenses. Then, the letters dropped off as school started. In October, she begrudgingly admitted that she had a boyfriend named Dane, and even though he always wore a sweater with a picture of a Great Dane, he treated her really well. About that time, I got involved with a girl named Robin. After the obligatory Christmas cards, the letters stopped.

DEFLATED

The pain, which I later learned measured as an eight on a pain scale of one to ten—ten being the worst—began as an itch between my shoulder blades. It hit me in the library, the fifth floor, to be exact, while studying for finals. Actually, to be honest, I took a short break from my cluttered study corner on the third floor to scope out a book my roommate Elijah had told me about. Tucked in a dark corner with the rest of the flaking folios and oversized photography books was *Prostitutes of the Persian Streets*, a colorful coffee table book revealing “the tantalizing yet dangerous nocturnal world of fine cigars and belly curves.” I found myself compelled to explore that world, only to broaden my worldview of course, which was probably the reason why the Wesley College library ordered it in the first place. Kneeling down, I propped the album on my knee and started reading about Luiza Karyn, a lean 22-year-old who was stabbed in the chest by a drunken doctor with a gold tooth, when I felt a needle prick in my back.

Thinking it was just an itch I slid the book on the floor in front of me and stretched my arms over my shoulders in a two-pronged attack to scratch it. While continuing to glance at Luiza’s story, the itch pulsed and stung. I flapped my shoulder blades up and down to shake away the sharp pain, but that only seemed to make it angry. No matter which way I twisted my back or pivoted my shoulder blades, the pain swelled, enveloping my entire upper body. It curled

around my mid section and hung on my lower ribs, like someone had looped a rope through the spaces and yanked down hard. I caught a last glance of Luiza posing under a smudged neon sign with her shirt slipping down over her pink stab wound before my ankles gave out. With my face smashed against the grainy beige carpeting, I felt warm streams of sweat trickling down from my armpits. Behind me, the finicky wheels on a pushcart squeaked to a sudden halt.

“Oh, my God! Are you okay?”

I recognized the voice. It was Betty Haltman, the periodicals librarian. Locking my sinking chest between my clenched elbows, I pulled myself up carefully.

“Yes,” I muttered. “I just feel sick. I’m going to go home.”

Betty rushed over, throwing her hands out just in case I toppled over again. “I don’t think you should go anywhere.”

“I’m fine. I just live a block away.”

“Please sit down.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re turning gray.”

Before I could squeeze off another “I’m fine,” Betty stepped in close and stabbed my ribcage with her rigid fingers. “You’re not breathing!”

I couldn’t respond. Ghostly echoes of Betty’s face fluttered around me. The next thing I knew, my face smashed up against Luiza’s indifferent stare; her pink switchblade wound, like a set of slender lips set just under her collarbones,

floated above the page. Behind me, Betty's garbled voice boomed through a cardboard toilet paper tube megaphone. I closed my eyes to try to make out the words.

Just then, I no longer felt the prickly library carpet on my cheeks. The steady wash of white noise swishing in my ears slowly faded and separated into distinct voices. Garbled female voices harped about their husbands, doors slammed, and flimsy shopping cart wheels squeaked.

"Come on, buddy, you'll make it," a steady voice sounded.

Opening one eye slowly, a man with a fleshy red face and bristly moustache peered down at me. His eyes blinked rapidly behind his green tinted lenses. "There you go." He turned his head. "He was fading in and out for the paramedics, too."

"His breathing is weak but regular now. Get him signed in and then get him to x-ray," another voice commanded.

I tilted my head back and opened my other eye to see who he was talking to. The back of a white doctor's coat flapped down the wide hallway lined with empty gurneys.

"You're at Lakeside Presbyterian Hospital, buddy," the orderly explained, pushing his face back into view.

"What happened?"

"That's what we're going to find out. Are you in a lot of pain?"

I lifted my back an inch off the gurney. A slight crinkling sound, like someone crumpling up an empty potato chip bag, grumbled from my rib cage. Wincing, I told the orderly that someone was pulling on my ribs with rope.

“How would you measure the pain on a scale of one to ten, ten being the absolute worst pain you’ve ever felt?”

Terrified that if I said anything above five he would gasp and shout, “By God, we’ve got a seven here!” I instantly blurted out “four.”

His eyes narrowed. “Four? That’s it? You’re not breathing so hot, buddy. Are you sure?”

Begrudgingly, I bumped up to 7.5.

“Let’s just call that an eight, okay? Now, I need some information from you.”

Instead of making me talk, he took my driver’s license and plugged away at a computer mounted in the wall. Listening to the snapping rhythm of the computer keys, accentuated by the occasional smash of the spacebar, I suddenly realized that the home address on my license had changed. Earlier that week, my parents had just moved about an hour and a half outside of the city of Pittsburgh into the mountains overlooking West Virginia. They called it their “mountain stronghold.” Pushing off the metal bedrail, I slid off the gurney with my arms tightly wrapped around my chest to hold it in place. The orderly’s head jolted quickly from the blue flickering screen.

“Whoa, buddy! What are you doing?”

“The address,” I groaned. “It’s wrong on there.”

He snatched up a pen and a block of hospital stationary and ushered me back to my cot. “Write it down, and I’ll get it later. You really shouldn’t be walking around until we find out what’s wrong with you.”

My throat tightened at his words. Quickly, before my heart could get going, I clasped a hand on each shoulder to draw my upper body inward, my elbows jabbing painfully into my stomach. Even though the swelling congestion in my chest faded, occasional stints of pain pulsed between my shoulder blades. Sweat beaded at my temples, as I watched nurse after nurse flutter past as if they were late for the morning train. After about forty-five minutes, a nurse wheeled me to get x-rayed, and about an hour after that, a doctor finally sidled up to my corner of the ER. She was tall, with yellowing hair sloped on either side of her face and a row clipped bangs running across her forehead. Her colorless lips stretched wide, running parallel to the edges of her eyes. After flipping the cover back down over my chart, she said hello.

“Well, Mr. Sketcher, it looks like I have good news and bad news,” she explained.

I pitched my head back to say “Oh?”

“The good news, Mr. Sketcher, is that you didn’t have a heart attack.”

“You thought I had a heart attack?”

“We thought there was a possibility, yes.”

I shook my head, aimlessly. "How is it good news that a heart attack was a possibility? I'm twenty two!"

She rolled her eyes and feigned a chuckle. "Well, you don't have to worry, because it isn't a possibility anymore. You're fine."

"What's the bad news if I'm fine?"

Clearing her throat, she shielded her chest with a clipboard. "As far as being at risk of a heart attack you're fine," she corrected. "The bad news, Mr. Sketcher, is that you had a spontaneous pneumothorax."

"What is that?"

"Well, clearly speaking, sir, your left lung has spontaneously collapsed."

Not convinced, I drew in a careful breath through my clenched teeth. A tinge in my back pricked up; my fingers hardened into gnarled shapes. The doctor placed her fingertips at the small of my back and warned me to take it easy. Slowly, and with my eyes lightly closed, I sunk back down into my normal sunken posture, exhaling a bit as each muscle in my back loosened one by one.

"It's very common among young men your age who are extremely tall and thin."

Her chilled stethoscope probed under my shirt. "Smoke?"

"No. Never."

"Sports? Do you play any sports, like curling?"

"Curling? You mean like with those little brooms?"

"You know what I mean," she muttered.

"I think so. Then no."

She "hmmmd." The stethoscope glided between my shoulders blades and then coasted back down between my kidneys, pricking up an exhaust trail of goose bumps as it went along.

"Is it still common?" I asked.

Almost as an afterthought—she inquired if I was currently under a lot of stress. I said that I was two weeks from graduating from college.

"Oh, yes. That would do it."

She sidestepped back into my field of vision, clasping her hands together, professionally.

"Now, Mr. Sketcher," she began, "there are several ways to treat this; however, I..."

I strained to lift my head. "Like what?"

Disappointed, her sloped shoulders deflated under the pointed shoulders on her white doctor's coat. "Well, let's see," she said through a lingering sigh. "We could insert a plastic tube in your chest to inflate your lung."

I gasped and pinched a fistful of flesh on my stomach. "Please tell me that's the worse case scenario."

"No, no. The worst case would be if your lung rose and then collapsed again. In that case, we would go in and staple it to your ribcage."

The sound of a rusty blue staple gun clicked slowly in my brain. I winced, rocking slowly back and forth to jar the sound from my ears.

“Let’s hope it won’t come to that. Now, I’ve been working on a theory about cases just like yours.”

With the fear of having gold industrial staples pierced through my internal organs, I looked up, hopefully.

“Well,” she continued, almost too happily, “since your lung just collapsed, we might be able to inflate it right back up by putting an oxygen mask on you and turning it on high.”

I was skeptical. “Really?”

She reached over and wheeled an oxygen tank next to the bed. Unhooking the mask from the tank, she smoothed out the crinkled tubes and assured me that the latest medical research indicated that her plan would work. As the elastic band on the mask snapped snugly into place, she asked if it would be okay to write about me for a case study, assuming the treatment worked.

“Okay,” I wheezed, over the sharp hiss of oxygen seething through the now plump plastic tube.

Under my eye line, the sloping sides of the mask around my noses frosted over. The rush of air, shishing like the inside of a seashell, froze my wilting lips and blasted down my throat. Breathless, I crumpled over on the steel bed rail, watching the elated doctor clomp down the hall cuddling my chart next to her bosom. The sterile air seeped under the mask and stung my eyes. Blinking and straining to take breaths through my nose, the pain in my back flashed and

bristled under my pocked skin. I tightened my grip to prevent from toppling over and groaned loudly in a pathetic attempt to yell for help.

A nurse rushed up and peeled off the mask while smoothing my back with her other hand. I squinted through the flashes in my back, as I coughed and spat on the bedrail. The doctor came back about ten minutes later.

“I have bad news, Mr. Sketcher. I spoke with my colleagues, and they said that this theory wouldn’t actually work,” she said, pitching her head, as if to add, “I was so close...”

I readjusted my grip on the bedrail and mustered a nod.

She clapped my chart into her open hand. “My colleagues think that there’s a good chance this could heal on its own, considering it hasn’t fully deflated. So, we’re going to admit you for the night for observation and have a lung specialist look at your x-rays in the morning.”

The nurse wheeled me through the catacombs to a room on the sixteenth floor. For most of the night, I lay splayed out on a stiff bed with the steady chirp of the heart monitor plugged into my right forearm and the incessant plop-drip of my IV draining into my left forearm. With my head stale and still swirling from the heavy dose of pure oxygen and a cocktail of antibiotics and applesauce, pictures and faces appeared in the speckled pattern on the ceiling. I saw an eagle in a fine suit flying over a cabin and Hitler dressed as a clown. After about what felt like an hour, the shapes and faces stopped moving, and I faded into a light sleep. The next morning I woke with the yellow sun on the inside of my eyelids. A nurse

came into to fill my water pitcher and adjust my IV. The corner of her lips peeled into a light smile, as she tipped her head to the space on the wall above my heart monitor.

“You’ve had visitors already,” she said, as I opened my eyes.

Taped together on the wall, just under a generic portrait of seagulls on the coast, were two blue balloons—one ripe and bristling and the other crinkled and deflated. Underneath, a note scribbled on a torn shard of notebook paper read:

*Tough luck, buddy!
In the cafeteria.
-Elijah and Marty*

Just then, in a clamor of obscenities and intelligent quips Ph.D. candidates would envy, Elijah sauntered into the room, arguing over his shoulder with our friend Marty Stephenson. With his right hand snugly tucked in the pocket of his corduroy cut offs, his left arm swung madly, almost clipping the wire to my heart monitor. Marty trudged up, throwing his hands between Elijah’s pendulum arm and the white crinkly wires.

“I can’t believe you actually think blowing air, pure fucking oxygen I might add, down someone’s esophagus is a sound idea,” Elijah prattled on, obliviously.

Marty widened his eyes and adjusted his glasses with a quick jiggle of the right stem. “That’s not what I said. I simply said it sounds like a viable option *in theory*. That’s what the nurse said, too, remember?”

Swiftly, Elijah pivoted on his heel with a sharp squeak and clapped my right knee. “Marty’s a moron. How are you, skipper?”

I exhaled, painfully, hoping that would be a sufficient reply.

Elijah shrugged. "At least now we can call you 'One-Lung' Sketcher.

That's a cool blues singer name."

Crossing his arms and surveying my heart monitor with a stern expression, Marty asked what it felt like. I gritted my teeth and wheezed a slight groan, feeling a flash of red in my back. Elijah, fishing a rigid carrot stick from his pocket, squinted intently at the sloping U-neck collar on my hospital gown. I lifted my eyebrows to say "what."

He snapped off the end of the carrot stick with a dry snap and chewed with his mouth open. "What's that?"

"What?"

Plunging forward, he jabbed the wet, bitten end of his carrot against my exposed chest. "That?"

Marty spun around, instantly clutching his hand to his mouth. "Oh, God!"

Elijah drew back the extra material of my robe. A purplish bruise arched over my left nipple marking the place where my lung should have been. Elijah's bottom lip bowed in the middle; strings of warm saliva anchored by orange flecks of carrots repelled to my goose bumped flesh. I shut my eyes and winced through the pain. My heart monitor whistled wildly. I gripped the sides of my bed and concentrated, taking a slow, methodical breath.

"This reminds me of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, when the Nazis put the Ark of the Covenant in that wooden crate and it started burning through the wood, leaving an Ark-shaped imprint," Elijah commented.

"You're comparing my lung to the Ark of the Covenant?"

Chomping on minced carrot, Elijah threw up his hands and backed away. I tugged my gown back over my chest and swabbed it in a circular motion to wipe off the wet bits of carrot.

"Are your parents coming?" Marty asked.

"Yeah, the hospital called them last night."

"They must be freaking out," Marty assessed.

"You have no idea. They want to take me back home with them."

"So?"

Marty nodded his head enthusiastically. "Yeah, go home, Sketcher. You could use the rest. Besides, there are only two weeks of school left."

"I just can't leave," I protested. "There's finals and graduation."

Zapping his temples with his fingertips, Elijah's upper body quivered impatiently. "Sketcher! You're fucking chest is practically caving in where your left lung used to be. I think tending to that should be higher on your to-do list than your term paper on the significance of figs in *Portrait of the Artist*."

"Okay, fine," I admitted. "Maybe you're right about that stuff, but I'm afraid to go home. My parents are moving way up into the mountains, and I'm afraid I'll

get too comfortable there. If I stay here, I can graduate, hopefully get a job, and live on my own.”

“But shouldn’t you just worry about getting healthy?” Marty suggested.

“Yeah, Jesus. You can’t do any of that stuff if you can’t breathe.”

I turned the TV on to end the conversation. After about an hour of morning talk shows, they got up to leave. Elijah took one last peek at my bruise.

“I don’t want to see you back on campus,” he said, jabbing his finger at me.

Marty clasped Elijah’s shoulder. “For once, I agree with him,” he said with a warm grin.

After they left, I curled under the blaring squabble of the early afternoon soaps and stared out of the plate glass window. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted my book bag under the chair in the corner of the room. The laundry list of term papers and exams plunked back into my brain with a heavy dull thud that sent shockwaves down through my stomach. I groaned, reclining back to rest for one more minute before shimmying down the bed with my IV in tow. My toes crinkled up on the icy floor. The heart monitor chirped in excitement, as I drew a painful breath through my teeth to suck up the sensation. Shifting on the sides of my feet, I tramped over and slid my bag out from under the chair. On the top of my pile of books was *Prostitutes of the Persian Streets*. The paramedics must have thought it was mine and stuck it in there. Immediately, I slipped down on the floor Indian style and plopped it in my lap.

As I continued reading about Luiza, a chill from the linoleum shivered up my vertebrae, triggering a flash of pain in my back. For some reason, I reclined back, figuring the cold hard floor would act like a cold compress and make the pain simmer. It seemed like a good idea at the time. Like slipping carefully into a cold swimming pool, I slowly flattened my back against the floor. The book sat open on my lap, the two halves imitating the sloping angles of my thighs. Surprisingly, the pain dimmed. However, lying there on the floor, nursing my collapsed lung with a picture album of Persian prostitutes on my lap—like people who make kissy faces in the mirror or sing “We are the Champions” into a hair brush—I felt someone standing in the doorway, watching me. I rolled my head back to look.

“Mom! Dad!”

In matching white windbreakers and red eyes, my parents stood leering at me from the doorway.

“Eric Sketcher?” my mom blurted out, “what are you doing on the floor?”

“Damn Presbyterian hospitals,” my dad muttered.

My mom jabbed him in the gut with her elbow. “Help him up.”

Dad cinched his hands under my armpits and yanked me up, letting the book crash to floor. They ushered me back into bed, tucking the sheets tightly around my legs. Mom settled on the edge of my bed with her hands folded neatly in her lap. Unsatisfied with the accommodations at Lakeside Presbyterian, my dad paced the length of the plate glass window. Hilariously enough, despite his

two doctoral degrees and brain the size of an Oxford English Dictionary, he never quite mastered casual figures of speech. He stood around all day, muttering, "Tongue in cheek, tongue in cheek."

"Dear," my mom said, rather sternly. "Take his book bag out to the car and lock it up in the trunk."

"Yes, dear," my dad replied, snapping from his tantrum.

"Mom," I protested.

"Nope, you're done working until your lung is better. We met with the doctor outside, and he said your lung should rise on its own in a few weeks."

"Mom."

But the debate was over. She turned slightly and stuck her nose to the air. Light from window laced the silky gray hairs on the back of her head. Dad snatched his white handkerchief from his pocket and used it to pick up the book off the floor and place it in my book bag. With one hand on top and the other supporting the bottom, he held my bag aloft two feet from his body like a block of plutonium and breezed through the door.

She ignored me for about ten minutes. I fought hard not to think about all the times I got sick as a kid. It was almost enviable to be sick in my house, assuming that most of the colds and stomach viruses cleared up within a few days. I used to sleep on a special bed made up on the couch while sipping orange juice from a rocket-shaped thermos I could only use while sick. Just then, without breaking her gaze from the TV, my mom reached back and put her hand

on my calf. I inhaled deeply, closing my eyes as my chest rose. Stretching my arms high over my head, I yawned until water formed in the corner of my eyes. The pain never came, and the heart monitor stayed silent, for once. She turned and smiled.

“So mom,” I said, contently. “Tell me about this mountain stronghold.”

EIGHT

After that summer, I never tried to get fat again. I never tried to gain weight either, because let me tell you, that stuff about scrawny kids growing up chunky is a pile of horseshit. I'd tell my mom that, but she'd shit kittens. Anyway, two weeks before I graduated college, I was so skinny my left lung collapsed. Yeah, yeah, the doctor said that it was typical for guys my height and weight, but still, the idea that someone can be so skinny their lung just deflates for no good reason is just ridiculous. Even so, the damn thing inflated after about two weeks. I left school early to move back home with my parents to recuperate, even though they had just moved way up into the mountains.

During my first week there, my parents' new neighbors came over for dinner. Not being in the mood to tell the collapsed lung story for the sixteenth time that week or explain what I planned to do with my English degree that had just arrived in the mail, I opted to stay in my room. From my window, I watched a family of three hike up the blacktop driveway. In the lead, a stout woman with a swirl of grayish blonde hair marched happily while carrying a glass tray topped with foil. Behind her, a thick burly man decked all in khaki from his loafers to the gold chain around his neck, shielded the woman from the light summer rain with a blue windbreaker. Falling about five feet behind them, a slight girl strolled giddily through the rain, flashing her wide teeth at the clouds. A tight ringlet of

hair, locked in place with a plastic hair clip, wiggled in the wind.

My head knocked against the window, as the pain in my back buzzed sharply. I coughed violently, sprinkling the window with dots of saliva. Tasting blood in the back of my throat, I was sure that both of my lungs had deflated and now hung from my ribs hung like popped balloons. As I watched her walk up the drive, I leaned against the window to prevent from falling over. Sometimes, skinny guys get all the luck.