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# Dog Be with You, and Other Blessings

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WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY IN ST. LOUIS  
Department of English  
Creative Non-Fiction Writing

Dog Be with You, and Other Blessings  
by  
Ryan Masters

A thesis presented to  
The Graduate School  
of Washington University in  
partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree  
of Master of Fine Arts

May 2018  
St. Louis, Missouri

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# **Acknowledgments**

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## In Case of Apocalypse, Break Glass

I had been living at the Finn House for a few years by the time Kaleb accidentally killed the dairy goat. I was walking the short distance back from campus through the weird mist of a Lynchburg autumn when I saw the goat hanging by a rope from the tallest tree in our backyard. Kaleb, stooping with the lanky posture of a tall lifelong homeschooler, peered around with his headlamp and hacking at loose meat with a saws-all.

“I didn’t know you were planning to kill the goat,” I said.

He turned off his saws-all and turned to me, surprised. His headlamp obscured my vision, so that all I saw was a pair of lips, as flat and neutral as an equals sign.

“I wasn’t,” he said, and then turned the saws-all back on.

I found out from him later that, after the high-powered dog bark collars proved worthless against the terrible noise of hungry dairy goats bleating their demon-baby-like cries through a chilly suburban night, Kaleb had resorted to duct-taping their mouths shut. Once he had taped the loudest one’s mouth, he turned to the next. Moments later he turned, and the first goat was on its side, dead from shock.

“The neighbors were complaining,” he explained and shrugged, deep by then into a steaming bowl of goat stew.

The federal government had recently rewarded the banks that caused the Great Recession with billions of dollars in taxpayer money and Ron Paul was cranky as hell about it. My roommates couldn’t stop talking about the gold standard. Suddenly, everyone knew how to pronounce *laissez faire*. Absolute power was corrupting absolutely, and soon the government

would impose martial law and confiscate all our private property, which in my case could've been carried out in a duffle bag by a small child.

Kaleb reacted by implementing an in-case-of-Apocalypse plan. Perhaps “plan” is a generous way to put what appeared to me to be a long and sustained series of baffling decisions. This “plan” was a hodgepodge of different paranoias, a little economic anxiety and religious fervor mixed with a lot of government distrust, finished with the *piece de resistance*: nuclear fear. Over the next few years Kaleb would become an active member of the local chapter of the Libertarian Party, start raising livestock, and learn how to find resistance communities using a personally-programmed and untrackable CB-radio.

Under the Livestock Phase of this plan he would start with chickens before moving to dairy goats and completing the barn and bomb shelter. Chickens, he reasoned, were Farming 101. Surely he, having been raised far enough in the backwoods of Western North Carolina to assume a certain acuity in all things farming, could figure out how to raise chicks in the carport of his ranch house in suburban Lynchburg. In a single day he erected a 7-foot cage with three tiers, and that evening stuffed one tier with a dozen chicks.

“Soon we’ll have eggs,” he explained to me, “And the government can’t touch a bit of it.”

I asked if there were local ordinances governing the husbandry of livestock in our suburban neighborhood, though it was dense of me to ask. The six of us that currently lived in what was a revolving door of rental rooms had never seen or been offered either a lease or a key. The doors remained unlocked, sometimes swinging to-and-fro in the wind, and people came and went as they pleased. The way a “lease” became official was that you fell asleep in the same place for a certain amount of days consecutively. After maybe two weeks of staying over Kaleb

would negotiate a handshake agreement, and that was that.

“There’s some—you know, red-tape,” he said vaguely in response to my livestock in the ‘burbs question, as he shook chicken feed into a cereal bowl. “You know how government is.” His pale cheeks flushed as he smiled the angelic smile of the innocent-by-willful-ignorance. “Can’t mind their business.”

I pointed out to him that, though I admittedly knew little about animals, I didn’t see how chicks could eat the chicken feed he had given them. Each pellet was as big as their heads.

“And they don’t have teeth,” I added, “I think chickens swallow their food. Which seems a little impossible in this case, given the size...”

“Well, we’ll see,” he said, and patted me twice on the shoulder, as if to say, *there there my suburbanite friend. You may be the writer of the house, but I know a thing or two about animals.*

The next morning, I woke and took my morning coffee out to the carport to have a cigarette. The chicks, fuzzy and docile just 12 hours before, seemed suddenly agitated. They paced the cage like suspects in a family member’s death. Had they hands, they too would have been smoking cigarettes.

I peered inside to see 4 chicks lying on their sides in a hill, like bodies collected during a neighborhood famine. Their little chests were crushed, their eyes bulged out cartoonish. A pool of blood surrounded them, so thick and complete that it didn’t occur to me right away that Kaleb hadn’t awoken in the middle of the night to half-finish a paint job. The pacing chicks started walking faster. *You don’t understand*, they seemed to say, *it’s not who I am. Something came over me. I’m innocent, I tell ya!*

I peeked my head inside. “Kaleb!” I said, “Your chicks are cannibalizing!” Then I walked

back out, lit my cigarette, and peered inside again.

Kaleb came out in his underwear. “Shit!” he said, opening the cage and grabbing up the dead animals, “What the—shit! Ah, shit! What happened?”

“The feed,” I said.

“The what?”

“They don’t have teeth.”

“Shit.”

“Right.”

“Shit shit shit.”

He took the dead chicks into the kitchen in two handfuls and tossed them quickly into the garbage can. Then he climbed onto the counter, his steel-toed boots forcing a groan out of the linoleum countertop, to search through a high shelf, where a couple years’ worth of the barely used appliances of past tenants were stored—rice cookers, skillets, pots and pans, the detritus of dozens of well-meaning parental send-offs. Kaleb managed to find the one appliance that was used often, Dave’s giant, high-priced blender, which he used to blend protein smoothies and cleanses aimed at various toxic internal organs.

Kaleb set the blender down heavily on the counter. The linoleum again gave a groan. Then he rushed back onto the carport, reached in to grab the dish of feed. I stood there, grinning and smoking, reveling in the joys of being right, waiting for him to admit defeat. Instead he rushed back into the kitchen, filled the blender with the feed, and pressed *puree*.

I watched in amazement as the pellets sifted down into the blade, pulverized into dust. He poured the dust back into the bowl. He passed with the bowl full of pulverized feed, his boots thump thumping like I suppose his heart had been. He set the bowl in the cage, latched it. The

chicks attacked it greedily, swallowing down the yellow dust like dying desert wanderers drinking sand.

Kaleb settled down, his bony, hunched shoulders finally relaxing and falling back, like a bird at rest.

“Soon,” he repeated, picking the thread of his plan right back up, “Soon, we will have eggs.”

Sometime later that day Dave came out, looking lean and pale from what must have been another week of colon flushing.

He picked up the blender, held it to the light, tilted it side-to-side. Yellow meal sifted and tumbled around in the form of powder and tiny, sharp rocks. It looked like someone had blended together a bushel of dandelion flowers.

“Kaleb!” Dave shouted down the hall, and he rushed off with the blender in his hand.

By the time Kaleb bought the dairy goats, he had decided to add rabbits to his plan. Rabbits would actually be perfect, and hell he should’ve thought of it earlier, but they *multiply*.

“You know,” he said to me discretely, “*“fucking* like rabbits?” He lowered his voice and made a protective gesture with his hands on the word “fucking,” laying it before me like it was the offspring of a wild animal. This was a remnant of his fundamentalist background, where the utterance of such a word would provoke the punishment of eating a bar of soap for dinner, under a garnish of weeds, with a fork and knife.

He raised the rabbits on a plot of land owned by some hobo friends of his who had settled in town, clay-stained, bearded men that stank of the loose metals they harvested out of old buildings. They were about our age and were aggressively anti-establishment. Most of them were Christians too, which added a spiritual dimension to their suspicion of authority, given that Jesus

was as poor and nomadic as they were, not to mention just as stinky. Also, Jesus had been crucified by an imperialist government, which somehow roughly corresponded to their own position as “subjects of the American Empire.” The land-owning hobo (LOH) had purchased the land from a company that owned a defunct glue factory that the land sat on. The factory was abandoned, rotting from the inside, and in more ways than one. It was what the “establishment” called a sunk cost, and what LOH considered a reclamation project. Besides myriad tangles of valuable copper wire, the building was filled with giant, long-abandoned vats of partially rendered horse parts.

“God’s desire,” said Chris, the leader of what my roommates and I referred to as the Hobo Church, “Is to reclaim the abandoned outposts of Empire.” The church met in another abandoned warehouse which was, at the time, being used as a sort of Hobo Hotel. I went a few times, but the combination of poor ventilation and poor hygiene was just too much for my flimsy idealism to sustain. Cleanliness, it turns out, is essential to the maintenance of my virtue. I once tried to have breakfast with a homeless man but couldn’t eat past my second bite. I still remember the way he smelled, like a cardboard box sitting in the sun, filled with old men and aluminum. I wanted to act like the poor and meek were blessed, but only if they could meet me halfway and dangle one of those pine tree car fresheners around their necks or something.

Another reason I couldn’t buy into this anti-establishment-God-of-the-land worldview was that it involved so much work. By the time Kaleb bought the dairy goats he was maintaining his livestock from 5 AM milking-time till sundown. I spent a lot of my time watching him from our kitchen table, drinking coffee in the morning and wine at night, shaking my head and saying things that amounted to, “Gee, I wish I could help out, but I just don’t anticipate the crash of the dollar and the imminent return of Christ quite yet.” I was already working 15 hours a week at

Subway—that left 5-10 hours to smoke cigarettes with my new housemates on the carport, then 10 hours to read Wodehouse’s Jeeves novels at the Barnes and Noble, another 5 to have dinner and talk about the crazy ideas circulating our house with Jeremy.

“Do you really think it’s necessary to fill a bomb shelter with that much *Ramen*,” I would ask him.

The smiley-face he had drawn on his white shirt would tremble with laughter. I considered Jeremy a kind of monastic figure. Instead of buying new shirts he bought packages of white tees and wrote phrases on them like, “Have a Nice Day” in black Sharpie. He slept on an egg-crate mattress topper rolled halfway into his tiny closet for no apparent reason but to quietly inflict discomfort on himself. Jeremy homemade slow, contemplative spaghetti sauces, simmering them in pork bone half the day. I pitched some noodles now and then, and we’d share a meal.

“It’s not about the Ramen,” he would say, mysteriously, “It’s about the Resurrection.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” I said, and I meant it, because stuff like that made complete sense to me at the time. To Jeremy and me, the belief that Jesus was God Incarnate, killed because of his love for the wrong sort of people and raised to new life by the sympathetic power of God the Father, was at the base of all we considered beautiful. Later God would come and raise us too, and all those we loved, and we would understand things that were way beyond us now. We used Resurrection as a shorthand to say: *That’s weird and strange but beautiful in a way we can’t explain.*

“What do you think,” I asked him on several nights, because it was always on my mind those days, “Are we headed toward destruction? Are we abandoning the freedoms of Christ for the comforts of empire?”

I took a long, thirsty gulp of the cheap Cabernet Jeremy usually used for cooking. The 13% ABV buzz of a cheap red wine is subtle and warm, like a small fire built for two. As much as I hid from work, I still didn't feel comfortable, except in moments like these. Eating, talking, wondering about the world's strangeness.

Jeremy paused, staring off in thought, in complete stillness for a few seconds. Dusk had pulverized the sky orange and purple, and there were birds flying out of it.

"Probably not," he said, finally, looking through the window. He took a slow, thoughtful sip of wine, smiled contentedly. "But maybe. We'll find out one day."

"At the Resurrection?" I asked.

"At the Resurrection," he said.

\*

The summer that the Plan began implementation, I watched Kaleb from the carport while I smoked. When he started, the backyard was just a lightly sloping hill of grass, terminating in a tangle of maple trees and weeds. He had originally recruited me to help--I didn't seem to be doing anything, after all, and the Bacardi 151 he was storing in his cabinet of medical supplies was disappearing rather quickly.

"I left an IOU," I told him, sheepishly, "Did you get it?"

I was pretty behind on rent—he suggested maybe we could work something out, and I said sure, sure. I hadn't yet found the Subway job, and it seemed like no one was hiring. He smiled, slapped me on the shoulder, and handed me a shovel.

"Dig from here," he said, gesturing vaguely in one direction, "to over there," gesturing way in the opposite direction.

I lasted 3 hours, minus about 8 or 9 smoke breaks. The hole I dug was just big enough to

bury a dairy goat in. My shirt was soaked and muddy and smelled like last night's rum.

He regarded the hole with quiet pity. "I'd say that's a day's work eh Ryvo?" He knocked a hundred dollars off my debt and I rushed off to the nearest air-conditioning vent. The next day I watched him from the carport as he drove up in a rented backhoe. The chicks chirped drily in sympathy for me, their throats full of yellow dust.

From the carport I watched him work with a ragtag crew of people, digging foundations, setting footers, directing cement trucks into the tiny yard. Once the foundation was laid, his brother came to help build the barn and the supply shed that housed the bomb shelter. The whole thing took about a month from start-to-finish.

On good days I'd manage to drag myself to the public bus, where I'd bring two plums, a notebook, and a pen in my bag. On the ride, I'd write observations about the people around me. It seemed like everyone on the bus had some implied backstory—the young, agitated mother, complaining about Nick or Jerome or Charlie while her toddler sat in her lap and ate zebra cakes, the retired men in the beat up hats that presented their military designations, the tall, uncomfortable men standing in their suits and ties, who were, no doubt, on their way to a DUI hearing. More and more bodies were filling up the bus as the recession wheezed lazily on. I filled up my notebook with them until I hit my stop, at the 12<sup>th</sup> street ABC store, where I'd buy two airplane bottles of gin and take it to the cafe. There I'd take down the shots in the bathroom, careful to cover the bottles up with toilet paper. Then I'd take a book from their shelves, buy an Americano and some fried mushrooms, and read until the sky started to gray.

On bad days I would just stay home, hoping someone with just as much time to pass as I had would keep me company. I spent too much time on that carport alone, drinking, smoking, watching as other peoples' histories unfolded around me. Couples fell in love in our driveway,

fogging up the windows of their sedans. Smoking buddies disappeared for months on backpacking trips. An entire self-sustaining, post-apocalyptic community was sprouting up in our backyard. Even the chicks had moved on to their new life in Hobo Land. Possibly Kaleb had already started an official cult with my remaining roommates, and would be halfway up the tail end of a comet by the time I moved out.

One night Kaleb sat next to me on the carport. He took a cigarette and lit it, though I'm not sure he'd ever smoked one.

He asked me if I was alright and I told him no, but I didn't know what else to say about it. How to describe to a man who fought his demons with a backhoe and a hammer why it was that my demons were the type that could only be drowned?

He gave that cigarette a valiant effort but couldn't quite push through. It was the one time I bested him in a feat of stamina.

We sat there a long time, talking under stars that burst with light that was very very far away. I don't remember what we talked about, but I remember Kaleb's straight-ahead eyes at rest and him working at that cigarette while he tried to intuit what ailed me.

\*

At the beginning of autumn in Lynchburg, as the oak and maple leaves begin to drain their green color into the trunks of their trees, the sky goes overcast and a mist falls over the town, sometimes for days. It isn't rain. Rather, it is as if the rain has hit some second firmament above the town, perhaps that "hedge of protection" preachers were always praying over it, and then passed gently through cracks it's found on the way down. The precipitation, sifted into a sort of cool dust of water, floats sideways, or in spirals. It is as if the tired rain has lost most of its momentum, and instead of appearing daunting, foreshadowing the coming of gods or storms, it

merely portends a sort of lingering presence.

That autumn it seemed like everyone was buying their first gun. Monkey, so named because he was 5 foot nothing-and-a-half and had the veiny, tree-like hands of a climber, bought a silver pistol that went half-way down his thigh. He bought a holster for it, brown suede, with decorative markings.

“I really like it,” he announced, shimmying his hip and peering down as if to check out how it made his ass look. “I like the color, the fit.”

Kaleb bought a black pistol and wore it like he was about to appear in a buddy comedy. He tucked it into his belt and walked up and down the house, wriggling uncertainly in his tattered jeans. “It’s a little uncomfortable,” he said, “how much did that holster cost, Monkey?”

“Oh it was a steal,” he said enthusiastically, “Just go to [holstermypiece.com](http://holstermypiece.com). 40% off, free shipping.”

“What a deal!”

Small pistols jutted out of people’s shoes, Western-style revolvers lounged on the dashboards of tiny sedans. Rifles leaned in the corners of various rooms alongside digeridoos and guitars.

“Hey,” I would say, trying to fit in, “This one’s heavier than it looks!”

“That’s Dave’s Stratocaster.”

“Oh, right.”

The era of the end of the world had moved into its arms-bearing phase. Everyone was packin’ heat and enthusiastically accessorizing. It was exam and term paper time, and gun talk provided a useful and empowering diversion.

“I’m thinking about getting a rubber grip,” Monkey said, no doubt in an effort to forget

about his unfinished essay on the dynamics of Chinese hegemony. “Maybe mahogany,” he wondered, “or brown. I like brown. Brown is fine by me.”

“Brown?” said Dave, whose 20-page report on the previous year’s performance of the S&P 500 was overdue. “How about silver? I mean, James Bond, c’mon?”

Jeremy and I didn’t buy guns. Jeremy believed that the prophet Isaiah’s image of the lion laying down with the lamb signified a future toward which the kingdom of God ought to be headed, a place of perfect peace in Christ, who defeated the violence and rage of the devil by giving himself over to be crucified.

I, on the other hand, found guns terrifying and expensive. When they were in the room, I felt antsy and broke. It made it hard to concentrate. I had given up completely on finishing, or even really starting, *Ulysses*. But I liked Jeremy’s reasoning and I played the peace card pretty well. I knew my Bible.

“He who lives by the sword, dies by the sword,” I said, “the Romans used violence to control the Christians and where did it get them?”

The usual defense, from the armed parties of our house, was something like: if the good guys didn’t have guns, then only the bad guys still would. Therefore, good people should have guns, to protect the innocent from bad people.

This is, as I experienced it, the logic of the ending of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, in which the normally anti-violence, pro-rule-of-law character played by Jimmy Stewart eventually resorts to the John Wayne peace-by-the-pistol ethos. Stewart ends up shooting Liberty Valance, the villain who has been terrorizing the town, but not really. We find out later that it was John Wayne’s character, the better shot, hiding in the shadows that murders Valance and saves Stewart’s life. So Stewart goes on to a meaningful political career that’s basically a

sham—he's a hero, but he's not really, a symbol of the hope of a peaceful political process in the West, but not really. Wayne, meanwhile, has been reduced to transgressing his fair-fight principles to save a yellow-bellied politician from back East.

“Cold-blooded murder,” he says, “but I can live with it.”

He can't. In the logic of the duel there are two men, equally armed, looking each other in the eye. An honorable means by which to seek justice in an unjust world—the justice of the quicker draw. Given the question of who belongs in this town or not, who's on the side of right, the gun decides. The worst kind of person in this ritual is the coward, who kills under the protection of darkness.

By the end, John Wayne is drunkenly setting fire to his house with himself in it. Jimmy Stewart has become known for a lie that represents the opposite of his own principles of the rule of law. He's “the man who shot Liberty Valance.”

What makes the movie work is its fierce cynicism. The West is dead. Progress is a fraud, and the government is the main apparatus for that fraud. A symbol of security and hope, but only a symbol. Honor is an impossibility in such a system. Once trust for that system erodes, as it inevitably will, it will fall to the people it has failed to pick up the pieces, and to do so without devouring each other.

The government had overthrown plenty of freedoms around the world, Kaleb was quick to point out whenever we talked about it. How were they to be trusted? What about Iran in the 70s? A Chilean student that lived with us during the summer would mention Pinochet. Another friend of ours, a history major with hiked-up pants and little tact had a bumper sticker that read SURE YOU CAN TRUST THE GOVERNMENT. JUST ASK AN INDIAN.

Eventually I could only shrug. I had no skin in the game. My principles and beliefs

l lounged, unbothered, on the dirty couch of my mind. Sure, I believed in the little guy, the poor, the meek, the insignificant. But by then I had accepted that the massive and complicated machinery that held up my drunken meandering was of a corruption so vast and minute that I could only go on enjoying its fruits. It was hard enough for me to make even the smallest of differences to people in my own life, to have anything at all to give to the little people in my own life, even rent. I lived a vivid life of the mind, but it was lived under someone else's roof. I had big ideas about God's plans for the world, but no real place in it.

Outside, the firmament above us had cracked and the wet fog turned into a driving rain. Kaleb went outside to check on the farm. I went outside to smoke and watch the world drain off into various ditches. Water rushed through the gutter and disappeared into red puddles. The grass in the yard felt loose and slick, like the skin of a decaying horse. The neighborhood stank of cooling concrete and over-saturated junipers, the way a cemetery smells in a spring shower.

When I went back inside, Kaleb was standing there in a puddle. "It's totally flooded," he said. He hurried through, agitated, the black pistol shifting uncomfortably under his belt. The wheat, the corn, the Ramen. All had been lost. "It's totally *fucking* flooded," he said. This time the quiet delivery of "fucking" seemed like utter incredulity, like he planned for every conceivable abuse of power but this one, the goddamn rain, sent by You Know Who.

I briefly considered helping, but caught myself before I could offer. Why pretend? I didn't have much, but at least I had my integrity. I made no bones about my uselessness; it was an important part of my charm, I figured, a reason they kept me around.

Still, he roped me into it. "We need an extra hand," he explained the about a week later, once he got around to cleaning up the mess. He set me on one side of a giant white tube. Jeremy stood next to me, his white t-shirt announcing "Jesus is Lord." Monkey and Dave were on the

other end. “Direct the mouth into that gutter,” Kaleb explained, and we all nodded our heads. When he threw the switch the tube twitched and gurgled in our arms, like a goat trying and failing to cry out. A sludge poured out of the open end whose smell and color was indescribable, like all the rot of the World Wars had taken liquid form. All the grain had started to ferment as it sat in the pool of rainwater.

All of us shouted expletives as the tube worked. We were blinking involuntarily. We choked and coughed and shook our heads. But I could hear a little undercurrent of laughter, and I swear if it wasn’t for all that fermented Ramen gagging us we would’ve fallen all over one another, laughing hysterically.

## Dog Be with You

On a Thanksgiving break visit to Mom and John's house in Jacksonville, NC, I came upon the sickest dog I'd ever seen. It was a hound, very old-looking. Its eyes, already bred to instantly provoke pity, were as deep and long as garbage chutes. It sort of wore its skin like a badly-fitting jacket taken out of a donation bin. When I came upon the dog I had been walking with Greyson, my 11-year-old sister, trying to convince her that God loved the world and all of its creatures unconditionally, a point I could tell I would have trouble bringing home in the presence of this dog.

In the chemical cleanliness of the middle-upper class neighborhood, whose TruGreen lawns were a windmill away from mini-golf ready, this dog was a really horrifying sight. Any living thing at all that strolled around without at least a nice pair of slacks and boaters was an object of quiet, modest revulsion, but this hound, dressed in its oversized flesh coat, eyes sagged down to its chapped paws, was a full-blown crisis. Also, I myself was wearing sweatpants and a white t-shirt, and likely hadn't bothered to shower because God loved me whether I showered or not, and not showering was easier. Greyson was wearing what I thought of as her Mood Hoodie, which was essentially the same hoodie but shades darker as the years passed. A few years before Greyson wore a pink one and sent me books of her animal drawings to me while I attend college, lions with enormous, colorful heads, big red hearts for clouds above them with my name written in crayon. Now she wore dark gray and told me to shut up a lot, especially when I got too "preachy." Just a few years after this she would wear pitch black, watch TV shows about vampires almost exclusively, and start taking selfies of herself covered in red corn syrup.

Her face registered total helplessness. She stared at the dog so hard she started to take on parts of its nature. Her eyes sunk, her jowls hung in utter disbelief at the suffering in the world. When she opened her mouth I figured something horribly difficult to respond to would come out of it.

“That is the saddest thing I have seen in my life!” she said, finally.

She looked over at me. Then at the dog. The dog made a noise, kind of a whimper but with much less caloric energy to burn. She looked over at me. I was making a lot of useless movements by now, reaching for things that weren’t in my pocket, sighing and muttering sounds into the air, bouncing on my heels. John had long been complaining about my Mother’s pets, the Malte-Poo that constantly threw up on the carpet, the 100-pound Great Pyrenees whose shedding would cover the Malte-Poos throw up so that it wasn’t discovered right away, the four rabbits that had annexed the sun room and marked it with the scent of their piss-soaked hay. Not to mention the stray tabby cat that was living in the garage, who would disappear for days and return smelling like a sewage canal. My entire time home John had a vacuum cleaner or a mop in his hand and muttered violent curses on the heads of every animal, head-by-head, naming them like he was praying a rosary.

The neighborhood was brutally quiet, and the dog had at this point started to lift its body from the squatting position, which visually looked a lot like a ghost picking up an old cloth bag and walking very, very slowly forward. It tried to bark but it only made a smell, a horribly specific smell, like the fart of someone you love.

I looked briefly for a way out. “Your Dad is not going to like this,” I said.

“We can’t let him die!” she said.

I performed some ethical exercises.

“Greyson, dogs die every day.”

She shook her head. “He’s not dead yet.”

“If we tried to save every dog that was like this in the world, you know how long that would take?”

“But it’s just *this* dog.” She pointed at it with her pathetically small finger. Her Mood Hoodie darkened. It started to rain, black crows suddenly appeared, and the ghost of Jacob Marley came to me in chains.

“Come on,” Greyson pleaded, “Don’t be an asshole.”

“Greyson, don’t say asshole.”

“Don’t be one.”

“Bah humbug,” I said, which sufficiently confused her.

At this point the dog had been in our lives for at least 5 minutes, each minute somehow making the act of abandoning the dog seem that much crueler.

“*Fine*,” I said finally, “We’ll save the stupid dog.”

“Finally,” she said, and started to take the dog by its collar. Its upper abdomen, if indeed there is an upper and lower to a dog, though in this dog’s case there was certainly some sort of split happening, slid forward and away from the rest of its body. Greyson released the collar, backed away, and reluctantly smelled her hand.

“Jesus Christ,” she said. She reeled over to the sidewalk, where she gagged and spit into someone’s lawn statue of St. Francis blessing a doe and several bunnies.

“Greyson.”

“Oh right, sorry,” she said.

“Let’s just go get the wheelbarrow,” I suggested.

“Can we carry him?” she asked.

“Sure. You grab the ass and I’ll grab the head.”

“I thought you couldn’t say ass?”

“I can say ass. I’m an adult.”

“But you’re a *Christian*.”

“Jesus swore.”

“Why can’t I swear?”

“Because you’re like, 7.”

“*Eleven*, asshole.”

She glared at me. I glared at her. Since my conversion to Christianity I had become the family whipping boy when it came to people’s moral frustrations. If someone cursed or if my 14-year-old brother joked about watching porn or God-forbid someone’s ass appeared on a movie we were all watching, all eyes shifted to me. As far as they were concerned I was a proxy for all of the petty, quotidian judgments of God.

I swore I would never end up in a place so *fake*. This was a neighborhood of endless cosmetics, of craftsmen homes that gradually increased in size down right-angled streets toward their logical end point, a gigantic rec-soccer field, basically a mammoth lawn with a bunch of nets spaced around it. Each lawn seemed to have an SUV in the driveway next to a plastic sign advertising a home security system. I say “everyone,” but it was difficult to confirm that there were indeed human beings in the neighborhood. Even on Thanksgiving Day there were no people outside, though each lawn was big enough to host simultaneous Bocce Ball tournaments.

Authenticity was the thing for me, the chief thing, especially in religion. I practiced my authenticity by not wearing deodorant (olfactory hypocrisy!) and oversharing in my confessions

with my Christian friends. The hardest place to tell the truth was at church, which baffled me. Some days I would listen to the sermon in a panic, thinking at any moment I would be called to the pulpit to confess which church moms I had fantasized sleeping with, a confession that would have taken a very awkward amount of time. The sermon would be about something unrelated—we weren't a fire-and-brimstone church, more like a potluck-and-book-club church, but it wouldn't matter. Something about the gravity of worship weighed on me, pressed my guilt to the surface but held it there, like an air-tight seal. I had to wait to have a pitcher of beer with Mark, an old classmate from Liberty U's Biblical Studies program, to really let my secrets out into the open. We'd go to the *Blue Dahlia*, a stinky little dive that looked from the outside like an out-of-business roadside attraction, and put Counting Crows on the jukebox. The place had been shut down multiple times for serving underage. A local TV personage came in regularly with his young mistress. There was so much musk and perfume radiating out of the boozy sweat of the patrons that I thought an orgy might be going on under the bar. It was so easy there, especially halfway down a pitcher, to just say shit, to confess that there were things in my heart that, if I was allowed to carry them out, could ruin a nice family.

"Yeah but," Mark would say, fidgeting his tattered Braves hat over his prematurely balding head, "You think Jesus is freaking out over that? There's like, people dying in Afghanistan, you know?" I would nod quietly in response, sigh with relief. This was about as close to absolution as I could hope for.

The whole way back with the wheelbarrow I was secretly hoping that the dog would have disappeared. *Maybe it was one of those angels that dwells in secret among us to test us*, I thought, *Maybe we already passed the test!* But there he was, chin down on the concrete road. As we lifted the dog into the wheelbarrow it felt like it was falling apart. The dog, that is. I had

never before considered the skeletal structure of a dog, the way that the spine U-shapes because of gravity. My grandfather, himself old and overweight, has a spine that is sort of buckling at the bottom, going sideways like a losing game of Jenga. But this old hound had a spine like a rope bridge on the verge of collapse.

“How is this stupid thing still so *heavy*?” Greyson said to me as we tried to lift it. The dog slipped briefly from her hands, so that her half, the ass half, straddled the side of the wheelbarrow. The dog gave a couple half-hearted thrusts with its hips, but couldn’t work up enough momentum to get in a good hump. Something creaked and clanked and seemed to snap into place as we gathered the rest of the dog up, probably but not certainly the wheelbarrow chassis. The dog started opening its mouth, which made us realize it was hungry.

“How the hell did we forget *food*??” Greyson said.

“Don’t say *hell*,” I replied.

I made a face, something I hoped communicated that I accepted the fact that cussing, especially in contrast to the festering starvation of an innocent animal, was morally neutral in a general way, but that she should be in no hurry to grow up and use them, a face that was puzzling and exhausting to shape.

She laughed and shook her head with pity for me. I touched her shoulder, just to make contact. I smiled and she accepted it, smiled back. It was just us out there, in the artificial environment, amid carpets of expensive grass. But it was quiet. From way far away you could hear a bird chirping, leaves rustling against one another in the wind. I remembered Greyson’s animal books. *Would she still draw for me?* I wondered. *Or is she too old for that?* I imagined our little scene on a sheet of pink construction paper, sky full of black lower-case m’s for birds, a little sick dog in her red wheelbarrow, her in a dress-up doctor’s cap and me with a red cross

floating above my head.

*We're doing a good thing*, I thought, *We're doing a good thing together!* I felt like I was really kicking ass, big-brother wise. It was a nice moment.

Then the wheelbarrow hit an uneven spot in the sidewalk, causing the wheelbarrow to bounce sharply. The dog's body lifted briefly out of the carriage and then back again, making a wet sound when it landed.

Greyson cried out and then covered her mouth. My stomach churned and my mouth filled with hot, pre-vomit tongue sweat.

"That is the *saddest* sound in the whole fucking world."

I gagged and coughed. "Don't say fucking!"

I turned to glare at her but she was staring at the ground, and she scoffed and wagged her head at me like a cartoon dog that has happened upon the humans doing something foolish.

*It's not the cussing*, I wanted to say, *don't you get it?*

When we got to the house John was outside washing the Escalade and singing U2 to himself with his earbuds in. Most people lose all sense of volume control when they sing with earbuds in. John loses all sense of tone. He sings way up in his nose, and misses the inflection of his consonants, so that it sounds like parts of his tongue are missing.

He was halfway through the chorus of "With or Without You," eyes squinting toward the sky on *liiiiive*, before he dropped his gaze and spotted us with our horrifying parcel in the driveway.

His washrag dropped involuntarily from his hand. "What is *that*?" he said.

I left the talking to Greyson, figuring her sad eyes and her darkening hoodie, combined with the extra-pathetic image of a skeletal, possibly bleeding dog in a red wheelbarrow, was

probably this mutt's best chance.

"He was just sitting there in the middle of the road dying!" she said, anticipating an argument.

"Why is he dying in my driveway?" he said, earbuds out, his tongue restored.

"We want to help him. Look at him!"

John adjusted his hat, considered the dog, then his daughter's sad eyes. Suddenly Blizzard, our Malte-Poo, showed up to sniff out the new dog. Perhaps because of a hunger-induced hallucination, the dog suddenly jumped to life. Its teeth snapped against one another as he made a move for Blizzard's nose, and Blizzard, never one to back down from a fight, went for the flab of cracked skin under the hound dog's chin. I kicked between them as they fought, not wanting to get my hands bloodied. John grabbed Blizzard by the collar and tossed him spinning across the driveway.

"Greyson, get rid of the damn dog."

"You're such a jerk," she said and moved toward the open garage. She grabbed some heavy things that were standing in a heap, threw them clattering to the ground. Metal and wood on concrete, clang, clatter, clang, like something sharp and heavy banging around inside her hardening heart.

"For the record," I said, "I was against this from the beg—"

"Greyson!" John said, "Get this dog—"

She came out with a silver bowl in her hand, held it up for both of us to see. Glared at us, turned, went into the house. When she came out the bowl was full. She set the bowl in the carriage.

I took the handle of the wheelbarrow and started with her down the driveway. John

popped his earbuds back in, grabbed his washrag, but didn't start singing until we left. The neighborhood again was quiet, except for Greyson muttering what sounded like *assholes*.

Whenever I visited in the autumn I would take Greyson out on bike rides through a little trail cut into the woods around the giant soccer field. The trees were mostly maple and pine, by then colored brown and red, often glistening with rain or dew. The path was, literally, pedestrian—a few turns here and there, a short footbridge, but mostly built for those who wanted to give their German Shepherds room to exercise. So, it wasn't much to ride through it, but it was hers. She led the way, pointing out divots and overly slick spots, proudly taking on the role of wiser sibling for once. I didn't ride bikes much, so I crashed at least twice. On one occasion I had surprised her by picking her up at school, which was a short bike ride away, and then riding with her on the handle bars. We took a detour through the trail. At some point I got nervous because of an underbrush of pine that was on the bridge, and I broke too hard, which sent her flying into the hard, dark ground. I felt an instant of terror and helplessness as I watched her from behind, arms and legs lurching and twisting in the adrenaline-flood of instinct, all rational thinking and trust in me suspended as inertia transformed her, for a moment, from my little sister, who to me still lived in the kind and bloodless world of cartoon giraffes, into an animal avoiding pain. I spent the rest of the ride apologizing, and she spent the rest of the ride insisting she was fine. But I knew she wasn't fine. I knew she wasn't fine because she was alive, and living things suffer, and I knew that even this giant, artificial neighborhood, couldn't keep her from figuring that out eventually.

One day, she took me off the path. I could tell this made her proud, because her voice brightened and she told me a story. Her and a friend—she wasn't her friend now, because of

something that happened and, well, it was *drama*, and *complicated* so whatever—they used to explore these woods and found this little creek running through it, a tiny little line through woods where the rain ran off. The trees were dense over her creek, shutting out even the sun. Rain jumped over the rocks and pennies and toys they had left there, which made a sound like the sound of the breeze just blowing through the seconds of a day. Plus, the creek was small enough that she could jump from bank-to-bank without getting her shoes wet.

“See!” she said, jumping side-to-side. Then, in a tough voice, “This is my creek, bitch!”

“Grey, c’mon.”

“Ha, sorry.”

“You know,” I told her, “you could name it.”

She laughed at me. “Yeah okay. Like Sh—Crap’s Creek. Ha.”

“It doesn’t have to be negative. It could be like, something sweet. Like naming a pet, or something.”

She shrugged, gave it a minute or so of thought. I was in no hurry—I was tired of vegging out in front of the television, numbing the tedium of vacation days with beer and junk food. Still, we gave up quickly, eager to return to the trail that would take us back to our favorite spots on the couch, where we’d unwrap our meals out of plastic and feed them to Blizzard on the sly. Eager, I guess, for time to pass easily, quickly, without much tough decision-making.

It was difficult to drag the wheelbarrow through the soggy ground. The dog weighed a ton for only being skin-and-bones. Its weight seemed almost impossible, or perhaps just metaphorical—like it had taken on a literary quality all its own.

When we got to the creek I set the bowl of food, so far only half-eaten, on its banks.

“I think this is far enough away,” I said, trying to sound as neutral as possible. “So that he

can't find his way back."

Greyson was grimacing, somewhere between sad and angry. "Whatever," she said. Then she draped her head in her hood, and walked off into the shadows of the trees.

## Your Body is not Your Own

I dropped out of high school in my senior year and moved to the other, slower coast of Florida to live with my father. He lived in Bradenton, a town of Tropicana workers and retirees from the Northeast who couldn't afford to live in Sarasota. The town smelled like an orange grove that had been doused in chemical accelerant and burned.

The last few years I had only visited my father for a week or so at a time. At one point we spent every summer together. He would drive this '94 Camaro down, a car he took meticulous care of and delivered to me on my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. When I inherited the car it was like new, except for a musty gray odor of Doral Ultra Lights. I had it for two years and don't remember ever bringing it in for an oil change. When Mom and I went to trade it in there was a dent in the side and a hole where something corrosive had eaten through the floor of the trunk.

We'd stop at Magic Kingdom and Universal Studios on our way to North Carolina. He always lived in these petering out tobacco towns whose mail routes were slowly ashing out, places like Kinston, whose entire Main Street was one long, broken window. Their minor league baseball game drew the biggest crowds of the whole city, crowds of quiet white men that smoked and kept careful score on their program, men like Dad. He smoked cigarette after cigarette in the bleachers as he taught me how to keep score, carefully numbering the relevant players and patterns for each out. I loved when a runner scored and I could fill in the diamond that represented his at-bat, even it was for the visiting team.

UPS, the company who employed him as a General Manager, would send him to these places to do what he did best, which was to command the shipping routes from behind the great

map of the city that was pinned along the longest wall of his tiny, cracker-colored office. When I was too young to leave at home he brought me to the store and I watched him move red and blue pins along a sprawling, indecipherable map. He always regarded his work with the solemnity of a man who couldn't avoid doing excellently a job that he hated. He liked to be left alone with his television and his cigarettes, his stoic work ethic and his shrewd, careful strategy with money.

He left the door unlocked and I let myself in. He lived there now with his girlfriend, a longtime Floridian who was bleached and tanned all the way to her tightly-sandaled feet. She made me dinner the first few nights and set it on the table. They took dinner on the patio, where they smoked cigarettes and watched *Everybody Loves Raymond*.

During the day the house was empty of everything except furniture and nautically-themed decorations. It was like living in a gift shop.

I had never been so lonely. I went to Waldenbooks and picked up *Timequake* by Kurt Vonnegut because a smart kid back home who knew the indie rock scene had mentioned him. I was going through my Adderall prescription too quickly, so I went to the gas station for packets of ephedrine. The little packets smelled like car exhaust and were the color of hornets. I took them down with Coca-Cola and Donna's leftover coffee. Vonnegut's alter-ego Kilgore Trout bemused the futility of perpetual motion machines, the pointlessness of ambition. Everything was absurd and funny, funny in an absurd way, somehow maybe deep—like life, like adolescence. I was entranced, I was high. My teeth were grinding and my jaw was always sore. I went back to Waldenbooks and got *The Sirens of Titan*, the tale of a time-travelling millionaire who is being used by aliens to communicate a message about a replacement spaceship part. After Vonnegut I went backwards down the alphabet, reading whatever names I recognized: Voltaire, Verne, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Emerson.

There was no logical pattern to my learning, just a lot of amphetamines and a whole lot of nothing to do. The deepest love I knew was with a Christian girl I had met playing internet dominoes whom I asked to marry one night when I was drunk. I got down to 130 pounds. My teeth felt thin. I was scared to bite down too hard. For an entire day I didn't eat because I thought Donna had poisoned all the food in the house.

I met Jessica when I got a job at Kmart. The place was new and recently bankrupt. Aisles wide and bright and empty. Jessica was cheerful but strangely serious, a petite, olive-skinned girl with dark, guarded eyes. She had the softness of a gradually weathered stone, smoothed by the friction of time running over her. I tried to charm her with Emerson, though I didn't understand him a bit. What I understood was abstract, tripping-on-the-beach sort of stuff, God, Nature, Art, Man. In my reading Emerson was religion without coherence, an ecstasy of diction written in the middle of a wilderness of ideas. I figured that, whatever the hell all this stuff meant, it must relate somehow to beauty and God. Why else would it be so incoherent, and so well known?

I left his collected essays in my backseat and it rained while I had the windows open. The book swelled and smelled like a foot, which I thought made it all the more romantic for its earthiness.

*To be great is to be misunderstood*, I read to her, and then pretended I knew what that meant.

On my days off I would follow her from customer service all the way to the garden center with Emerson's *Collected Essays* opened to an underlined page. She was a Southern Baptist convert and talked about God in the easy, sweet rhetoric of evangelical youth group kids. God is a loving God that cares about you, wants you to be part of his family. God wants to be your friend. That sort of thing. I frustrated her, which made her laugh at me. God didn't have to be so

complicated, did He? Maybe He just wants to get to know you?

She told me God was just a word to me, which was true.

“What else is there but words?”

“God isn’t just a word.”

“So then what the hell is He?”

“You shouldn’t say hell,” she said, looking straight into my eyes, “Until you know what it means.” She had very persuasive eyes.

I took her out one night to Bradenton Beach, hoping to kiss her. At the entrance to the beach a five-foot chain hung between two splintered wood posts, a largely symbolic attempt at barring entry. The Gulf lay there behind us, hiccupping like a drunk. I threw a thousand words at her, trying to find the one that would win her over.

“What would you say if I put my hand right here?” I said, and put my hand on her knee.

“I would tell you to take it off,” she said, and lifted it like a dirty napkin and set it in the sand.

On the phone one night she said, “I had a dream about you,” and my blood started surging.

“A dream, huh?” I said, feigning coolness. My neck was clammy. “What kind of dream?”

“You were in a cave,” she said, her voice low and urgent. “I called out to you but you wouldn’t come out.”

My heart slowed and I stretched out on a pillow with a lighthouse print. “You have weird dreams,” I said. I hadn’t dreamed in months. Sleep came in great, smothering heaps of black. “My mom used to write her dreams in a notebook. You know, all the normal stuff. All her teeth falling out at a Jamba Juice, riding a dragon back to her old hometown, stuff like that.”

There was a pause on the line. I could hear the low purr of her breath. “Sometimes God speaks to me in dreams, you know?” Her voice was gentle, like a child peering around a corner, afraid of the eyes of the adults. She seemed embarrassed, but determined. “I think he wants me to tell you something.”

My teeth clenched. I rubbed my jaw. I thought of the Church of God the Utterly Indifferent, from Vonnegut’s *The Sirens of Titan*. My heart surged in strange resistance to this God. Suddenly I hoped with my whole body that God was bringing Jessica and I together, that she was about to admit to feeling a divinely-inspired connection between us (*There’s just something about you!*). Above me, a dolphin leapt out of the crown molding and down toward a box of blue potpourri.

“Ryan, this might sound dumb but—I think you’re trapped. You don’t think so now, but without God...” she cleared her throat. In her voice was a lonely sound I was only beginning to understand. “Without God we’re all trapped inside that cave. We need someone to call us out.”

In her soft insistence was the voice of someone who could feel the loneliness in other people, a sort of emotional clairvoyance. It made me want to be with her badly. I wanted to climb into the cave of her heart and fall asleep to the sound of her breathing.

“Ryan—,” she said again. To hear my name called out by that voice across a long, empty distance. My heart leaned against the bannister of my chest, listening. “Your soul is dead. That is what he wants me to tell you.” A deep sigh left her belly and filled the receiver. “Can you understand that?”

A week or so later she brought a green Bible to my door and told me to start with Ecclesiastes. It was like Vonnegut with all the jokes taken out. *Vanity, vanity! All is vanity!* I walked out to the patio and lit up a bowl and watched the smoke seep into the sky. The television

flickered in the window of my father's bedroom. The moon itself was a big round flicker of television light, as if the angels themselves were diverting themselves from reality with sitcoms.

At Kmart, they fired me because of some three strike rule I was only just then hearing about.

"You keep bad records," I protested. I counted two at the most. "No wonder you're bankrupt!"

My GED came in a manila envelope a few weeks later with a red "Congratulations" stamp across it. Donna stuffed a graduation card with gift certificates to Chili's and Dad signed it.

Square one. I got high and consulted Vonnegut, who shrugged and made a joke about how meaningful it was to be alive. I consulted Hemingway, who suggested a stronger drink. Voltaire was the worst, really threw it in your face. It was he who first introduced me to the concept of the best of all possible worlds. Which of course was ridiculous. The world was funny, certainly. But good? Absolutely not.

So it goes.

\*

An assumption you make when you're young is that your body parts will always stay your body parts forever. The hand attached to my body is my hand, and where my body goes, there the hand will follow. That's what makes losing teeth so disturbing. It feels like a bone is falling out of your head. Perhaps this explains the tooth-fairy scheme—surely you wouldn't just wrap a bone in tissue-paper and throw it into the trash. Better to sell it to a fairy, who presumably repurposes them to furnish their fairy houses. Somewhere in the clouds there are villages of tiny houses sided with molars, rooves thatched with the loose tatters of gums.

I was working at Bob Evans as a busboy when my leg got infected. I had a scab on my knee that became a sewage dump for dirty dishwater. Within a week I couldn't even limp back to sleep in my own bed, so I just lay on the loveseat hallucinating through the night on Donna's decorative lighthouse pillows. She made snide comments occasionally, mistaking my behavior for laziness. She managed the Bob Evans, and had seen close-up my work ethic, which was more Vonnegut than it was Steinbeck. There was a laughing despair to it that was not much appreciated by management, especially when I was hours late closing up.

"Well I guess you're calling in *again* today," a little blonde hallucination would say, and I'd groan at it until it puffed away into the yellow atmosphere.

At some point there were two hallucinations couch-side, one blonde, one brown-haired, slightly taller. One of them shoved a stick into my face, which I kept there so long it felt like a third tongue. When they retrieved the stick they looked at it, then looked back at me, then looked at the stick. Shook the stick, looked at it again.

"Dizzle dazzle frumden umden hospital?" said one to the other.

Then I was floating with one of them, a weightless cloud man who had infused me with magic and made me buoyant. I floated past steamships and battlecruisers. Seagulls surrounded me with the loose paper of their bodies and fell in heaps all around. My knee gushed red and green streaks of pain, like Skittles spraying out of a fire-hydrant. The cloud man regarded me quietly, grayly, as if considering something for the first time. I could smell smoke inside the cloud, a breeze of Doral Ultra Lights and Michelob Light that made me suddenly lucid.

"Dad," I muttered, but it was the interior voice muttering, and I was already lying on the floor of the van, staring up, waiting for the world to move.

Though, come to think of it, they didn't have a van, and so maybe I was still being

carried. Wherever I was brown light kept smearing through, changing shape all around me like dirty rainwater. I felt soaked, cold. I turned and turned, trying to find a dry spot in the van, or whatever it was. It must have been the Explorer, but it felt bigger, like a ship I was in the hull of.

The emergency room was white and blue and freezing cold. You remember cold in Florida, because it's only found indoors, and it's always an unbearable, over-compensating cold. Condensation dripped in the corners of windows, down the window sill, and into the eye of someone's service dog. While it waited, the dog lapped up the puddle of water forming at its paws.

As soon as the nurses took my vitals they gave me Motrin to get my fever down. Then they looked again at their chart, wrote some things, and shot me with morphine. Only then did they decide to ask questions, which seemed unprofessional, like something you would do to humiliate a cocky teenaged boy.

"Name?" asked the nurse.

"What?"

"Name?"

"I mean, the name of what? What—what do I...name for you?"

"Yours. Your name."

"Ah, yeah. Ryan."

"Phone number?"

"471-8... Seagull Bay Drive."

"No."

"Oh dammit."

I woke up an uncertain number of hours later in the pediatric ward, surrounded by the

most encouraging family of cartoon animals I had ever seen. The walls were the color of green Jell-O. The television was on Nickelodeon, and my nurse was wearing colorful scrubs.

“Can I get you anything honey?” she asked, her smile cherubic, eyes kind and pretty, and eager to help me back to health. She handed me a Vicodin and a box of apple juice. Everything was just absolutely super-duper

I took a dream-like look around, smiled, then sat up in the bed. Suddenly I felt something uncomfortable, and it brought me back to reality. I frowned. “Well,” I said, “I think I shit myself.”

I spent a few days like that—that is, not covered in shit, but blissfully infantilized, drugged-out and ignoring my plight with the PlayStation 2 the nurse had wheeled in. I played *Madden*, a football series I had been playing since we lived in California, when we lived lean, and the highlight of my year was when Mom brought home *Garfield* and *U.S. Acres* comics home from the media syndicate where she worked as a secretary.

Dad had brought my movies from home, chief among them *Finding Forrester*, a movie about an aspiring writer that I watched whenever I got depressed. Sometime during my plunge into literature I had decided that I wanted to be a writer. In the movie Sean Connery plays a reclusive writer who takes a younger, struggling writer under his wing. This meant that I got to fantasize that Sean Connery was rooting me on, cheering for me in his Scottish brogue to take hold of my future, if indeed I had one.

My knee was hard and hot, over-baked by the bacterial war going on inside of it. Every hour a doctor would come in with a clipboard, ask me how I was feeling, then look at the bag of antibiotics and sigh. They had determined that I had cellulitis, a skin infection that I misheard as cellulite. “Oh my, cottage cheese legs,” I thought, “What will the ladies at the country club

think?”

I was responding to the antibiotics in a similar way that I was responding to life: badly. The infection was spreading, though a bit slower than before. Dad kept looking out the window before saying he was sure it would be alright. Mom chewed her thumb bloody, and kept herself busy bothering the nurses to make sure I was properly entertained and medicated. I was left to sit there attached to a bag of medicine, watching TV, eating, and shitting, which basically summed up my life up to that point.

My despair, usually broad and vague, more a mood than a situation, suddenly took on specific dimensions. “Does life have no ultimate purpose?” became “Does my life have no purpose?” A general fear of failure and alienation and death that had always bewildered me became a very specific dying part of me, a part I could touch, that I could feel was as firm and unyielding as the hot summer pavement that the lizards shimmered through outside.

I thought of my sister Greyson and brother Matthew, who sent me letters when I left home. Greyson’s had animals drawn on them, and Matthew’s were full stick-figure comics that were setups for pratfalls and absurd humor. I thought of Jessica’s God, concerned God of the dead soul. Mom’s medicating love. Dad’s love, quiet and hidden as a pack of cigarettes smoked in private.

One night, the doctor came in, looking rushed. He warned that we were very close to “going the amputation route.” He told me they had one more idea, and that he thought it would probably work but that there were no guarantees in life. Not to freak me out, of course, but merely so that...

The words took on a fuzzy quality. I wanted to get back to my video game. The bacteria inside me was resilient, ambitious, full of life. I was overwhelmed, underprepared, resigned to let

the world be what it wanted to be. And yet—I had laughed that day and been terrifically stoned on opiates and I feared the death of each of my family members, which must have meant that there was something there that I would miss.

The procedure that we would try would be a small incision in my thigh. The way I understood it was that my leg was a giant log swollen with swamp water, that needed to be punctured and drained. This would make my leg flesh again. That or chop-chop, cut off thy offending limb.

The night of the procedure, a sleepy anesthesiologist in a dark coat came into my room, seemingly out of Grimm’s fairy tales, and asked me to sign a waiver.

“What is this for?” I asked

“Welllllll,” he said, “I suppose. Have you—eaten in the last, 24 hours. Perhaps?”

He yawned and scratched his gray head. The magical dust of dreams fell from his head. Or perhaps it was just dandruff.

“Yeah, I ate, so what?”

“Yes,” he said, his eyes red and nearly closed, body disappearing and reappearing under the breathing of his dark coat. “It’s just in case, you know. Sometimes—they go under. They vomit. You know.”

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Well now. You know.”

“Thanks.”

“Well. Of course.”

I signed the paper, releasing his sleepy spirit back out into the night. He sizzled out the window in a strand of black smoke. That left just family in the room, trying to look supportive. I

sent them out. I shut the television off. I could hear the cold, heavy breathing of the air conditioning units. The windows wept condensation down their panes, suggesting a dark warmth outside that I was apart from.

Alone again, and resentful of it. Thinking: maybe, Ryan, maybe if you didn't spend so much time in front of the television you would be better read, or maybe you would have even written something other than bad poetry to the girls in your dominoes league. Maybe the self-indulgence is finally catching up, the privilege and comfort you take for granted, resent even for being so *fake*. You farce. You giant worthless mouth. You eat a hole in the world and there you are, alone in the hole you've chewed out and weeping on your hospital bed because your body has followed your lead and is giving up on you.

My whole body was as heavy and hard as my knee. I couldn't lift my head. I started crying. Was this what death felt like? To be glued to a stationary point in the world, never to move from that spot again? Never to touch another face, to hear another voice?

I've had this powerful fear almost all of my life that jars loose sometimes when I close my eyes. Everything around me is as usual, palm fronds crunching underfoot, I'm walking to the store or something like that, nothing important, just the town around me lit up by the sun. Life ends suddenly. That closed-eyes darkness becomes permanent, a vault I am sealed into. I'm still conscious, but I'm trapped inside myself. It's just me and nothing else, no one else—in death I became only a thing that thinks, not a person that feels, that moves, that interacts. My body is a cave I fall deep into. I can't hear the voice of any other person but myself.

In that hospital room was the first time that I realized that, whatever life was, it was out there. When I opened my eyes, when I looked from living thing to living thing, I was alive—whatever that meant.

I prayed for mercy, because I was scared and I didn't want to die alone but somewhere deep inside I knew I deserved to.

As the dark-coated man slipped the mask over my face, I looked at the other masked faces hovering above me. Their eyes sharp with intense but neutral focus. Strangers watching over me, backlit, celestial, their eyes pixelate and wash out and I am at the mercy of forces greater than myself.

## The Prayer of Faith Shall Make You Well

When my friend Jessica's grandmother was dying of cancer, she came to live with Jessica and her mother. At this point chemo had eaten away at her. She was frail, skinny, near death. The family had reached the point when all they could hope for was a miracle. Though not necessarily religious, there was a strong sense within the family that "God answered prayer." Especially prayers for the sick.

The caveat being that God only answered the prayers of the faithful. You had to really believe that God was going to do it, or else he wouldn't do it. This sort of belief is very common on television. It gives televangelists a point of interaction with the home audience; also, it gives them an out when the congregants at home press their palms to the TV screen and recite a prayer in sincerity and their cancer fails to go into recession. I should note that most people that I have known that are committed to such preachers are homebound—retired, convalescent, broke, lonely, desperate, etc.

Jessica was newly converted, young, but absolutely dubious of all this "prayer of faith" stuff. It seemed like hocus pocus, like it had nothing to do with God at all. She always seemed concerned about people exploiting God, like God was a vulnerable brother, handicapped by His silence in the world. But what do you do when you're not even high school age and you're the only one with questions and people you care about are saying that this is Grandma's last chance?

She prayed for comfort for her grandmother, and for all sorts of other lovely things. But she couldn't pray for healing. It didn't seem right.

So Grandma died. I didn't get the rest of the story, but the gist I got was that things were

awkward between her and the family. I guessed, by the way she wept when she talked about it, that a little part of her couldn't help but blame herself.

She told me this story after she ran out of a Sunday school class I was teaching at her church. The class was centered around a verse in James 5: "And the prayer of faith will save the one who is sick." Though there were only five of us in the tiny room in the trailer where our youth group met, I was standing, pacing the room. Since my conversion I was happier and healthier than I had ever been. I had quit smoking, prayed and read my Bible regularly. I had straight A's at the community college, though I hadn't had an Adderall in months. My friend Robert, an enthusiastic future Pentecostal preacher, taught me how to pray in tongues, a sort of ecstatic practice meant to channel the prayer language of angels. This allowed me to drop my normal inhibitions and "worship God in freedom," as he put it. Each night I lit incense and played a mix-CD of Gregorian chants that my youth pastor had burned for me, and prayed with the angels, who for some reason sounded like bad Indian stereotypes hyped up on ecstasy. Once I became so worked up during prayer that I rushed weeping out to the laundry room, where Donna was loading her colors.

"Forgive me Donna! I have sinned against you!" This was my actual phrasing—I was trying out Christian language—"rebuke" fascinated me, "longsuffering" was right on the nose, "temperance" I thought had something to do with drinking.

"Oh well, you know, um, okay, thanks?" she managed, among other uncomfortable noises.

It was an incredible feeling, the feeling of innocent and irrational rapture that had evaded me since 5<sup>th</sup> grade, when the cool kids started to turn on me and I started to realize that there was a certain cruel politics to just being alive. Now that I had the Holy Spirit, I had renewed access to

this earlier feeling. I felt forgiven. I felt healed. This was an actual physical feeling—I felt less guilt, had less stress, got sick less. I wanted others to experience this healing in the same way.

“Think about it,” I told my College and Careers class-of-4, “God doesn’t want you to be sick. Yet we are sick. What’s the missing link? Faith!”

I was very proud of logical chains like these: sin=faithlessness=sickness, therefore faithfulness=goodness=health. I also came up with: God is love, therefore love is God. I was sweating, both because of excitement and because of poor ventilation.

Around that time, Jessica raised her hand.

“But don’t you think—” her voice, always cautious but never so brittle, broke through my focus and jarred me a little. “What about suffering with those who suffer? Is everyone who suffers therefore sinful?”

“Well,” I said, regaining my balance, “there are levels to faith.” I had only been a Christian for a few months, so I was considering all this on the fly. I acted with the same medicated confidence that got me through driving lessons with Mom. “You learn to pray better, your faith gets stronger, etc.”

“What about blessed are the poor?”

“Well you know money’s a different thing I guess...”

“Or, or, all the ones that Jesus didn’t heal? Do people die because, because...”

She started crying as soon as she made her first move toward the door. Her best friend followed her out, avoiding eye contact with me. That left three of us.

Finally, I sat down.

“Maybe we should just stop there?” I suggested, and the two remaining people exhaled audibly and left the room.

This was pretty typical of my first born-again year. I was all ignorance and exuberance, like an un-neutered Jack Russell. Once I suggested that a woman at our church consult an exorcist to relieve her son's persistent seizures.

"I know a guy, very experienced," I confided, as if I were giving her a tip on a cheap dryer. "I can make some calls."

I had recently had surgery that left me with a hole in my leg a half-inch deep, a surgery before which I was convinced I would die. A nurse came to my house every day to stuff the wound with medicated gauze until I could work up the nerve to do it myself. It wasn't enough to permanently alter my life, only enough to remind me of my impermanence. I still had 99% of my leg, but that 1% piece of it would be gone forever and other parts would follow. It was only a matter of time. I had to embrace the will of God, open myself completely to His voice, lest I find myself surrounded again by the strange and all-surrounding darkness of the hospital bed.

I was baptized just a few months after my body healed, at the insistence of my mother. I protested that I had already given my life to Jesus Christ by prayer, that my soul was saved, that baptism was just a ritual. In our Southern Baptist church baptism played more of an administrative role. It was way more important, existentially, to be saved. Baptism was not necessary, but encouraged, since baptisms were reported to the Southern Baptist Convention and used as a measure of church health.

"Just get baptized," Mom said to me finally, "for my peace of mind."

"What about you?" I asked her.

"Honey I was baptized *years* ago," she said.

"But baptism doesn't—I mean, what matters is being right with God."

A pause on the line. "Me and God are fine, don't you worry."

I knew this to be false. Only a few months before, after a particularly bad argument with John, she had taken a handful of pills and drove off to Kroger with our Malte-poo, parking the Expedition the wrong way against the diagonal parking spot, covering two spaces. This had led to her first stint at rehab, which she was fascinated by, because they took your belt and wouldn't even permit butter knives on the premises.

"Mom, I am worried," I said, delighted by my boldness. I had been praying, in my angelic language, about this. "Who is going to help you to not relapse? God can help you."

It wasn't me, but God speaking through me. That's how it felt. Not the old, passive me, but me the instrument of God.

"Listen," she answered, her voice suddenly firm, "something you need to understand is that you are the son and I am the mother. Got it?"

I felt my heart snap shut, like the slapped-mouth of a back-talking child. Another failed mission.

I had recently left my job at Bob Evans, prompted by a movement of the Holy Spirit I had while reading about the apostles assigning jobs in the Book of Acts. Soon after I saw an advertisement posted at the gas station where I used to buy ephedrine and cigarettes, 90 DAY \$1000 BONUS APLY [sic] INSIDE. The ad was written in black sharpie on a sheet of college-ruled notebook paper with the tattered margins still attached.

I worked with a guy named Edgar who was north of 60 and had worked for Exxon-Valdez during what he called the crisis years. He knew 5 languages, and yet here he was, exalting the pleasures of mass-produced cheddar and grapes and speculating on just who the hell was spreading excrement all over the bathrooms.

"I think it's that little punk with the skateboard, the goatee" he said. His English came out

sharp and brutal, unlike his Portuguese, which he used to flirt with a beautiful middle-aged woman who came in occasionally for Velveeta and lottery tickets. “I can’t prove it but he looks the type. A real shit artist, that one.”

The store smelled like diesel and plastic, and the light filtered strangely through the bad tinting of the windows. Every surface looked dirty, especially right after you cleaned it. Filth was simply a condition of the place, like a series of birthmarks that needed surgery to remove. It seemed like every week I was trying to pray away some small sickness: colds, sores, blisters. I would envision the sickness as a dark, murky cloud, like dirt making its way through water, and pray against it with all the insistence I could muster. If the sickness had a physical manifestation, I would just stare it down, compel it out “in the name of Jesus.” Sometimes the Spirit was with me, and I healed quickly, miraculously. Other times sickness hung over me and left me bewildered, and, as if turning a knob on a device I was learning to use, I adjusted the cadence and force of my prayers.

Once, a strange brown rash made its way across the top of my hand. I took this as another test from God and spent the whole week praying against it. I prayed against it in the freezer as I stocked Olde Milwaukee. I prayed against it while Edgar chatted up the Mexicans in Spanish and processed their money orders. I prayed and I prayed, and it only got worse.

Some days I would run my finger along the bumpy edges of my leg wound and wonder about my faith.

“How do I know,” I asked Jessica, “what God wants me to do?”

“Love,” she said. “He wants you to love people.”

“Is it really that simple?” I asked.

She blinked her hard, clear eyes and sighed at me. “If only it were simple,” she said.

One rainy night a homeless man came in to the store who moved like a turtle, with small steps and great effort. He walked slowly across the face of the refrigerator cases, looking down at their contents. It took him about twenty minutes to cross from one end of the small store to the other.

“What’s this guy’s deal,” Edgar said in his blunt-edged English, “Smells like a horse’s ass.”

He wore a dirty white t-shirt and a tattered trucker’s hat with a faded emblem. I had just finished reading *The Ragamuffin Gospel: Good News for the Bedraggled, Beat-up, and Burnt Out*. The homeless man’s beard was long and dirty, his unfocused eyes like those of the unblinking Jesus from the movie *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Two people offered him money on the way out the door. He didn’t even look up at them. He left, quietly, so bony and awkwardly shaped as to appear completely arthritic, having bought nothing.

“Now that,” Edgar said, “Was fucked. Never have I seen the likes of it.”

For the remainder of my shift I watched him from the window. When he got to the street corner he looked out at the frantically moving traffic in the intersection. He was so still I couldn’t tell if he was still awake, or alive. I was afraid. But fear is the opposite of love, and perfect love casts out fear.

“Lord, help me,” I said, “help me to love without fear.”

When my shift ended I bought two cans of Campbell’s clam chowder and a packet of crackers. The street was wet and dark, tires made sticky noises before splashing in puddles as the homeless man stood there, motionless.

I could see him now in profile. “Excuse me, sir?”

He moved suddenly, turning his back on me.

“I brought you some— “

He started walking, a step for each of mine, *lrrp lrrp*, our wet shoes syncopated.

I stopped. I felt my will shriveling in the awkwardness of the moment. All the sudden I felt Edgar’s eyes judging me from behind the brown window of the gas station.

I briefly considered tossing the cans toward him. But that might just break him, his bird bones crumbling and caving like a house of straws.

“I was just trying to,” I said. “Help.” But I figured he wasn’t listening, so I gave up.

Dad and Donna were already in their room when I got home. I cracked open my cans of chowder and warmed them in a decorative blue serving bowl. Then I opened two Michelob Lights and drank them under the fat, lonely moon, while the television light flickered in Dad’s window.

## The Time of Decision

The year that Jerry Falwell Sr. died, my life was at a standstill. I had just completed an undergraduate degree in Biblical Studies from Falwell's Liberty University, a major I declared when I felt called to serve God. I shared a rented room with a guy who didn't like me because I didn't believe in the Rapture, a guy I secretly hoped would be spirited away, despite it proving his argument. I supported myself working temp at an insurance agency, and already had carpal tunnel-like soreness in both elbows. On Saturdays I would watch college football from sunrise to sunset, even if I hadn't heard of the schools. The clear and simple cosmos of college life had fallen away, the black-and-white moral dictates of deadlines, the red pen punishment-reward system of grading—and I found myself in a state of impermanence.

And that moon-faced salesman of God, Jerry Falwell, was to blame for it all.

I had come to Liberty because Skip, a friend of mine from Bradenton who Falwell tricked into believing he had received a special scholarship. It was late, and Skip had been studying all night. He was a Calvinist, one of the first to encourage me to seek spiritual development exclusively through rigorous study and the development of impenetrable theological arguments. He had the most sanctified collection of books I had ever seen: rows of glossy spines printed by small Christian presses that gave contrarian opinions on theological arguments as minute as the difference between *an* angel of the Lord and *the* angel of the Lord. Christianity, as I learned it from him, was as delicate as a conjunction, and had to be read and diagrammed with prayer and diligence.

Skip was knee deep in the syntax of God, sometime around 2AM, the hour when most every basic cable channel is selling some complicated kitchenware, or a shockingly effective

new adhesive in case you need to fix some complicated kitchenware. An hour, that is, when broadcasters anticipate creative decision making. So Skip put on Trinity Broadcast Network, which was broadcasting reruns of “The Old Time Gospel Hour.” Falwell could really fill up a screen. Television has a way of creating certain people who are oddly-sized for real life. Tom Cruise and Leo DiCaprio, I hear, are short with big heads. This is somehow perfect for a movie screen. Well, Falwell’s head and jowls were moon-shaped and huge, and when makeup is applied he becomes luminescent, like a celestial body. Also, his shoulders impressively span the width of a television set about 16-30 inches. Any larger and he would just look overstretched and unreal, and any smaller and he might look like Dana Carvey’s Church Lady from SNL.

Falwell does these wrap-ups after OTGH where he pitches his school. Liberty University. He even has a scholarship to offer, but you have to be quick!

“Right now, friends, is the time of decision. You may be saying to yourself: does God want to use me in the world? Well I’m here to tell you—*yes*. Yes he does.”

I guess Skip was feeling unique in the universe. Very likely he had been up all night studying the cosmic mechanics of predestination. This was a favorite of his, as it offered no end of minutiae to be meditated over. You could run your fingers for hours through the grass of that argument and leave feeling as tranquil and wise as a lobotomized monk. The other thing that happens when you stare into this argument hard enough—hold steady, wait for it, cross your eyes if you have to—is that your destiny seems to take shape. Most evangelicals have had this feeling at some point in the development of their faith—that feeling that a decision of huge importance rests squarely on a decision that you have the opportunity to make *right now*, because God thought you were important and expected something of you. There have been moments of appeal like this in many sermons I’ve heard, especially sermons about how lost and damaged

everything and everyone is, moments when the preacher pointed out vaguely into the crowd and his finger landed (There are no coincidences! No random chance!) squarely on you.

God wants you to be in His family, today.

He wants you to tell that neighbor, there is *hope*.

He wants *you* to get a good, Christian education, to be raised up in godliness.

It's a feeling like no other, to feel called in this way. For those that love God, it's like hearing the voice of a lover that you haven't seen in a long time call to you up the stairs of an apartment you share with a douchebag who's always arguing with you about the Rapture.

Skip called, of course, and got the scholarship. Everyone got that scholarship. No matter when or where you called, you got the scholarship. It was a scholarship that literally everyone had tagged to their accounts, equal to roughly 4% off the actual room, board and tuition that Liberty charged at the time.

Either way, my friend was congratulated, enrolled, and inspired. He suggested I join him.

I hesitated. I was still new to religion, and already had made some really stupid decisions, faith-wise, from throwing away my Oasis cds to telling a woman at our church that her son might be demon-possessed, to making *The O'Reilley Factor* a nightly priority.

"How do I know what God wants me to do?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "Just do what you want," he said, "and if God doesn't want you to do it, he'll stop you."

At the time, this seemed like sensible advice. The predestinarian logic went: God moves all of history as He wills. All He asks His people to do is not sin. If a decision involves two sin-neutral options, then God doesn't care what you do. This is how I've always understood Augustine's puzzling proverb: "Love God. Do what you want." In a Calvinist model of the

universe, God will do what God will do. The machine of destiny clangs on and on, rapidly creating the present. My one responsibility was to do something out of a love of God.

In the end, I chose Liberty because it had a football team. Long before I knew or cared about the Culture Wars I knew and cared about college football. I didn't realize until I got to Liberty that football was a matter of utmost importance to the kingdom of God. Falwell wanted Liberty to be to evangelicals what BYU was to Mormons, what Notre Dame was to Catholics: recognizable, competitive. He wanted Christians to be known as winners.

"God wants you to get a Christian education," Falwell would always say, "He wants to raise up a generation of Champions for Christ." From the university motto: *Building Champions for Christ*.

Liberty football introduced me to the strange logic of the culture wars. If you had a football team that could compete on the highest levels, it represented cultural strength. Our school colors were red, white, and blue, a fact which I noticed pretty quickly. BYU and Notre Dame weren't just talented football teams—they were ways of life encoded onto the most popular sport in the largest and most influential country. BYU had their wide-open, loose style of offense, 4 wide receivers, 50+ passes per game, mirroring their global missions strategy, in which they require that every student spend a year abroad, spreading the message. Notre Dame had their Catholic sense of life as a battle-of-attrition, blank gold helmets and jerseys of white and navy, capped off with a run-heavy triple option offense that was as ancient and persistent as the Vatican.

Falwell realized that collegiate athletics could transform religion into a spectator sport. If you could perform on the culture's biggest stages, then you could win. Your religion could take the field, compete against other religions, and defeat them. This applied to non-religious schools

too, all which represented some vague but powerful wing of conquering secularism, the mysterious and all-powerful “Them.”

Right before I arrived on campus they built a new football stadium painted it bright red. It was the first thing you saw if you entered from the front. Then they installed a very sophisticated and expensive type of field turf to attract athletes. Eventually they signed Turner Gill, former quarterback for the almost-champion Nebraska Cornhuskers of the early 1980s. The kingdom of God was arming up, taking their battle to the gridiron.

And yet, the football team kind of sucked. They were average at best, forced as they were to convince talented young athletes to compete for a school with a dry campus and gender-exclusive dorms.

When I arrived, the Lady Flames basketball team was, by far, the most successful of the Liberty sports teams. They had a 6’8” center named Katie Feenstra who had unstoppable post moves. Three seniors surrounded her, two slashing Slovenian forwards and a guard who was a knock-down shooter. The remaining player was a freshman point guard with a bulldog nose who wore a bandage over her right hand all year and seemed to always be diving on the hardwood for loose balls.

They obliterated their conference in my first year, winning their conference championship by 40 points. Then they made Sportscenter after winning their first NCAA tournament game as a major underdog against Penn State.

I took a school-sponsored bus to the Round 2 game, vs. DePaul. The NCAA polls had DePaul ranked in the teens. They were the clear favorites. The Liberty section of the crowd was packed with students and retirees draped in school colors. An electric current seemed to connect us, jolting life through us at every leather-on-nylon swish of a made basket. I felt it in my bones

when Feenstra powered through DePaul's smaller forwards. If she got the ball low enough in the post she'd pivot so hard you could hear her shoes squealing and she'd be right there at the basket. There was this electric current connecting us that, I suppose, is the aim of worship—a sublime and narcotic feeling that made ego recede, that made everyone feel family. We all felt that—I could see it on the unshaven scowl of the newly retired man, who hugged everyone within reach when the buzzer sounded and we came out victors. The school embodied a sense that nobody believed in us, in our importance, in our ability. Christianity was a laughingstock—Jesus Christ himself was a laughingstock, the same Jesus that had saved us from our various sufferings. I had a palpable sense that we were all feeling that we didn't belong, but that we should. The Lady Flames were there to prove that we did.

Falwell was there in the front, smiling and slapping backs with his giant foam #1 finger. I could see the fuzz of the back of his head shaking as he shook people's hands. In person, Falwell had the friendly demeanor of a shaggy dog. He was always offering full-ride scholarships to hard-up students, on a whim, usually servers at the restaurants he frequented. It was when the cameras clicked on that he hardened, put on the breastplate of righteousness, took up the sword of Scripture, all that Ephesians 4 stuff.

I have never, to this day, felt more pride at a sporting event. It was more than a sporting event. Not *represented* more, but *was* more. God took the court in the form of the tallest, most graceful woman I'd seen and led a band of underdogs to victory. And it was *televised*.

"Why Liberty?" an ESPN reporter asked Katie Feenstra at the end of the game.

"God put me here for a purpose," she said.

By the time that Falwell died the spell of evangelicalism had long worn off on me. I had just completed a degree I selected because I once had wistful dreams of learning the ways of

Christ so that I could heal people like he did, love people like he did. Having failed at this, I wasn't sure what was left. Added to that, the idea of the Christian life as a conquest, a pursuit of victory—over sickness or sin or the “rampant forces of secularism,” had worn me down. Every week at convocation a new suit came on stage to warn us about some clever evil that was being devised against us. Politicians, professors, entertainers—everyone was up to some hidden no good. *They* were after our hearts, our minds. *They* were after the soul of America. We needed to guard against them. Then, having guarded ourselves, we would strike out into the world like Spartans. These messages depended so much on fear. I didn't have the energy to be that scared.

They laid out Falwell Sr.'s body in the main greeting hall of the school. A line for the viewing bent halfway through the parking lot, a considerable change from earlier in the day, when it had been around the block. Inside, the casket's gold handles gleamed off light coming from the chandelier. An American flag stood on one side of the room, a Christian flag on the other. He filled out the casket like he filled out a TV screen—completely, utterly, commanding your attention. A Bible had been stuffed under one arm, and the hand of that arm awkwardly levitating, stiff with embalming fluid, just above his heart. His big face looked soft and rubbery, lips slightly inflected toward a smile, looking up at that God he was single-minded in serving, from within the marble heart of his lasting legacy.

I peered down at the corpse of Jerry Falwell, the whole massive weight of it, big enough to set an entire era of Christendom upon. I felt helpless, angry. I stood there in the wake of this man's dreams without dreams of my own to subsist on. Wilting away in a lonely apartment, watching from my one window at cars washing through the rainy street, hoping for God to come and sweep it all away.



## Drugs are My Love Language

The Florida of my adolescence was made up entirely of the places I went when I was high: the Amoco station where my underage friend's cousin sold him beer and blunt wrappers, the Taco Bell where the street racers met in the middle of the night to make wagers before heading out onto the Turnpike, the tropically-branded names of the gated communities where I would crash. The city proper is called Coral Springs, which is more an advertisement than the name of a place. There isn't coral or a spring for a hundred miles in any direction. It's a suburban town leaked out from the kicked-over paint bucket of Miami, the kind of city middle-class people living in the cold, salty Rust Belt mistake for a place their kids would like. We first moved there after the construction company my stepfather John worked for in Southern California folded and Mom convinced him that South Florida, then recently ravaged by Hurricane Andrew, could use plenty of work. My brother Matthew was a blissfully oblivious two-year-old; I was a shy, sullen ten. I brooded inside my headphones on the way down, drowning out the move with a cassette tape of Nirvana's *Nevermind*.

Florida's was a fecund destruction. The hurricane was like God's way of cultivating land already fertile for the growth of buildings. Buildings grew overnight out of buggy marshes, palmy wildernesses. Foreign species of exotic plants and insects kept wandering into the ecosystem and growing to grotesque sizes. The population grew like that too. Every empty tract of land was an appendage that swelled to bursting with new housing.

Our economic trajectory through my pubescent years was this: first, an apartment complex called Sherwood Forest, then a duplex just off a main road, eventually a gated

community named after a body of water in Spain. Call it “diagonal mobility.” The housing bubble sent some straight upward, but bubbles are all about where you’re hanging on. Those at the top of the bubble got a house on the water; those on its sides got a gate and a public pool and free gym access. We had enough money to assure that everyone had their own TV, which Mom, who grew up in a military family of small means, assured me was some kind of distinction.

Nothing was expected of me but that I would go to college somehow. To Mom this was good parenting, to have no expectations. She grew up under the sometimes coherent, always temperamental discipline of a Korean immigrant that her GI father had met just after the Korean War, a woman whose main means of encouragement all seemed to involve blunt objects.

Mom told me more than once, “You could end up a gas station clerk, homeless, a criminal. Gay. It doesn’t matter. I will always love you.”

And it was true. Whether I finished my homework or not, whether I made curfew or not, no matter how high I might have come home occasionally, she would never adjust her expectations of me. Until I could drive I spent a lot of time wandering in the wet heat with my friend Jesse, making up things to do. He was a home-schooled Jehovah’s Witness whose parents had a similar lack of expectations, but more money. We lived in the other half of their duplex, shared a pool. He drove a motorized scooter around as I trailed after him on my early-model Redline. Several houses had cleared out around our gateless neighborhood as people moved up in the world, so we’d break in and throw rocks at the walls, pee in the carpeted corners of empty bedrooms.

Together, we made a game of killing lizards. We’d aim for them as they shimmered across the sidewalk. He always moved a little faster, killed more efficiently. I peddled until my thighs cramped, my head down. Coral Springs crawled with lizards that dashed in-and-out of the

shade, playing the odds, passing the time with a thrill. We found them under felled palm branches and in the crevices of deflated pool toys, the little loungers. We'd find them and stuff them into Jesse's bug zapper, cackling with wonder as sparks sent nervous impulses twitching through their tails. I only stopped when the big bearded goth across the street who sold us refrigerated packs of clove cigarettes bragged to us that he killed frogs by hand, and suggested we join him. I mean, we were cruel, but we had *principles*.

Recreational drugs were great for someone for whom nothing was expected, because it didn't require the long-term commitment of something like cocaine, which I considered the drug of rich misfits and hedge fund managers. I started smoking weed early in high school, around the time I lost interest in completing it, sometime toward the end of my freshman year. We were at Jake's house shooting pool when Jessica pulled a dime bag full of shake out of her camo pants. Jessica wore her hair back tight and had a strong face, and we made out occasionally, if there was nothing else to do. The weed popped savagely when we smoked it and we laughed way more than it was funny. We went to the movies and, during an advertisement for the movie theater that involved a badly simulated roller-coaster, I thought I felt my soul kind of hiccup out of my body for a second. I count this as my first religious experience.

My friends and I listened to a lot of distorted-guitar music played by people with heroin addictions: Red Hot Chili Peppers, Stone Temple Pilots, Sublime, music that enjoyed itself but seethed with something darker underneath. This was the music of the miserable privileged—without outside forces to rally against, without any concrete suffering or purpose, the bands we loved formed an angsty music of the heart, a music for consumption by kids to listen to as they got high off aerosol cans while their parents were out on a cruise. We spent all our nights listening to this music on people's brand new patios, leaving cigarette burns on the pastel-

colored furniture, beer cans floating in the Jacuzzi. Our theme song was Sublime's "Smoke Two Joints." *I smoke two joints in the morning, smoke two joints at night. I smoke two joints in the afternoon, it makes me feel alright.* Alright. That was the goal. Once we got to alright we could tune out and pass the time in front of various TVs, eating things out of aluminum bags.

In sophomore year at the new charter high school, which they renovated out of an old dead department store and filled with all the kids who were in danger of failing in the public schools. There, everyone seemed to be carrying little sandwich bags full of their parents' medication hidden in brown paper sacks alongside their pizza Lunchables. Vicodin and Xanax became dependable staples—every adult in the city seemed to be recovering from some sort of painful episode. These could be chopped and snorted with a rolled up sheet of paper torn from one's homework and the drug would go "straight to your, like, brain man." My favorite pills were the little blue Adderall that passed our way only rarely. I could take two Adderall and completely remap the boundary of my world. It was like I had temporary access to the spirit of a South Florida real estate agent. Suddenly the tropical dream of Florida made sense, the turquoise quiet, the expensive brightness, the skyscrapers that lined the bleach-white beaches. It was tropical glamour,

Before I turned 16 and Mom decided it was time I learned how to drive, I got a sandwich bag of generic Xanax. I was terrified of driving with Mom—she was a nervous driver, but she was an even more nervous backseat driver. Added to that our family car was a Ford Excursion, a sort of road boat with no mast.

"Slow down *slow down*," she'd say, way before a turn, "No not *yet*" Speeding up. "But there, see over there?" Pointing at a faraway corner, just visible at a squint, "You can never be too careful, there are such bad drivers in Florida!"

The Excursion bubbled around turns like a whale on a wooden raft. I felt like I was driving a tour bus. The pills slowed down the process—receive Mom-comment, adjust technique and speed, receive second interjection, tell Mom to please shut up, make slight adjustment, turn. My nerves were steady as palm fronds in a sea breeze.

“You’re doing such a great job,” Mom said, “but even if you were a horrible driver, it doesn’t matter. Even if we crashed right now and died in the wreckage you’re still my *son*, my *baby*.”

Sedatives notwithstanding, I failed my first driver’s test. The coned parking space setup for the test was not meant to accommodate a road boat driven by a teenager. Though I slid the thing in after a several-point turn, I plowed one cone completely under as I backed and turned out. I heard the otherwise monastically quiet DMV clerk marking through something hard with his pencil.

“Did I,” I started. I could feel the anxiety reawaking, snaking into my fingers. “Did I lose points for the cone?” I asked once it was all over.

“Oh that’s an automatic failure,” he said. Then he adjusted his glasses, gave me a quick, professional smile, and shook my hand.

When I came home I laid down in my bed and shut all the windows. All the brightness and heat outside irritated me, made my gloomy mood feel out-of-place in my own room. I wanted darkness, bleakness, rain. I wasn’t used to failure, the way it felt like something heavy and uncomfortable inside my body. I wasn’t used to failure because I hadn’t attempted much, didn’t have targets to aim at, just some windows to smash in houses that no one lived in.

Mom came in after a few minutes. I was facing the wall, eyes open. I could hear the door brushing the carpet back gently, slowly, the way someone brushes your hair back to see your

eyes. Light trickled in from the hallway. I stayed facing the wall. I heard her small, slow footfalls, then saw her hand emerge from my peripheral vision, as she set a glass of water and something small on the window sill. Then she left the room, still saying nothing. The carpet brushed back, the door latched, the light disappeared. On the sill was a little white football-shaped pill. I took it down with the water, then rolled onto my back and waited for the 20 minutes it would take to start feeling better.

Later in high school the classic rock kids, who wore their hair long and seemingly had only black lights in their rooms, introduced me to hallucinogens. This may have been when I started caring vaguely about art. Not art *as such*, but life as a kind of art. Weed made me feel my soul; hallucinogens let me put it on and look through it. They made the world a giant, breathing metaphor. Palm trees melted into trash cans, condos flowed out into the Atlantic. Roads I drove over felt suddenly impermanent, wavy, colorful, like a water-slide in heaven. The mall arcade seemed suddenly dull. Life became suddenly very complex, so much so that even the accomplishment of basic bodily functions like urinating against the outside wall of a friend's house became full of mystery. Like, how exactly does that happen? How do I *make* that happen? I stood there one night for what could have been hours, but no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't crack the mystery of the body, the wild signaling of the brain, the convoluted machinery of life, man. What strange ghost inside carried the messages where they needed to go?

We would pop a few caps, or tabs, or drops and take my Camaro out to the beach near Ft. Lauderdale. I loved those mammoth buildings for the foreground they gave to the incredible blackness that hung above the Atlantic. The sand we lay on set a clear boundary between the bland, efficient world of condos and the world beyond human grasp. My friends, a random assortment of cargo-shortened bodies by then, would be there hallucinating and cooing nonsense at

the moon. The mushrooms made everything move up there in the dark, stationary sky. Nothing else made them move like that. Heaven was active, God an energy. That's when I started to think of the heavens as a dynamic place, not just stationary dots in the sky but a sort of perpetual movement, a burning. Someone seemed to be out there, behind the black curtain. Someone cultivated the world from behind that curtain, broke the roads and made them wider, smashed through old terra cotta roofs in a clatter of thunder and raised up a skyscraper. On some of those trips I thought I even heard that someone speaking some unknown language that sounded mystic and drunk, the tongue of a fallen angel perhaps. But it was only the random chatter of days bubbling to the surface, broken words that had fused together.

The buildings were growing up everywhere, surging their metallic bodies into heaven or spreading electrically along the borders of bodies of water. I watched them through the car window as we drove along Sawgrass. It felt to me like the buildings had just condensated there. Giant glass buildings ethereal as standing liquid, blue and bright as the sky they melted down from. I couldn't conceive of such things being built by human hands. They were all a part of nature to me, in the sense that their shape and growth was out of anyone's control. They were things to be gawked at and maneuvered around, like sleeping gators lining the street.

By the time we moved into the gated community I was spending more and more time falling asleep on other people's patio furniture. When I did come home I'd go upstairs and talk to Mom. She'd be playing word games on the internet, a game that vaguely recalled her to the successes of earlier life, when she won thousands in cash and prizes on Wheel of Fortune. It had been a long time since then, but she still passed the time with word games. She was the writer of the family, the one that edited all of John's work correspondence. I talked big, like her, though my words were mostly big fat birds that floated into abstraction as soon as I spoke them. She

always knew I was high on nights that I talked very “existential,” why life, why death, etc.

One night I came in high on purple haze, feeling mush-minded, speculative.

“Why do we exist at all?” I said to her.

“To love thy neighbor,” she said, “To make peace with former selves. To improve karma. To treat animals with kindness.” Her spirituality was a hodgepodge of lapsed Methodism and New Age bestsellers.

“So you, like, think we might have been a bird in a past life or something?”

“I have dreams, totally inexplicable dreams.”

“I think God like, talks to us in dreams. But I don’t know about birds.”

“Maybe you were never a bird.”

“Maybe. I can still shit on cars though, right?”

We went back and forth like this for a few minutes, passing the time in our respective highs. She was at that point on a nightly cocktail of opiates and experimental anti-depressants. My daily intake consisted of double my Adderall prescription, followed by whatever strain of expensive weed was in town. Both of us capped the night off with Ativan. It was a way of connecting. It was a way she could still take care of me, a way she could use her expertise to make me, her baby, more comfortable.

“Were you able to get that stuff I asked you for?” She asked me.

I nodded, fished around in my jeans, pulled out a plastic baggie. Inside was a slightly pecked at stem of marijuana, little orange hairs bristling against the sides. I walked over, set it on the computer desk.

She picked it up and examined it. “I’ve just been so blocked lately, you know?”

“Sure.”

“Did you know I read that artists sometimes use it,” she said, regarding me with sudden seriousness of purpose, as if she were defending a thesis. “To access deeper selves, deeper thoughts, memories of past lives?”

“It will definitely make you feel creative,” I said. “That’s some good shit.”

She put the bag down and reached deep into her purse. She came up with a bottle of Ativan grasped by the lid between two fingers. She twisted it open, rattled a pill into her palm. I always loved the squeaking sound of the hard white plastic being pressed down and turned. She put the pill in my palm, closed it, then kissed my hand.

“Good night, son,” she said. “You know I love you right? That no matter what, I’ll always love you?”

“I know, I know,” I said, “I love you too. Good night, Mom.”

## Spinning on a Wheel of Fortune

My mother and John, my stepfather, sold their house in Florida just before the housing bubble collapsed and headed to a middle-upper class neighborhood in Jacksonville, North Carolina, the military town where my mother had once been a cheerleader and John had once been a marine. The neighborhood was filled to the brim with body specialists: podiatrists, dentists, chiropractors, husky husbands and wives with big white smiles and golfer's postures. This was a big move out of the cramped quarter-acre of their South Florida gated community. I had a feeling of inevitability about the move—economic momentum carried them back to a place where they had been poor. Mom bought a German shepherd and named her Pandia, after a Greek goddess. John bought a gas grill and 5 flat screen TVs. My brother and sister got new bikes to ride to their new schools, which were ranked highly by some unnamed group that ranks things.

But what also felt inevitable to me was that they would eventually grow to hate the place. The neighborhood buzzed with tank-sized SUVs that always seemed to be returning a family from a soccer game. Mouse-sized dogs hung out multiple windows. John liked SUVs—he himself had an Escalade, just a few bulletproof panels away from military-grade—but hated the people who typically drove them. He hated people that smiled even though they didn't know you. He grew up near Boston and developed an ethic toward friendly strangers, what I think of as a dafuckouttahere ethic. He never actually said dafuckouttahere—he just kind of wore it, like protective headgear, when overly social people were striking up chit-chat. Dafuckouttahere does not mix well with white collar Southern chit-chat. Wealthy southerners have tremendous orthodontists and like to flaunt their teeth. Stranger or not, they find you, they smile big, they

talk.

At first Mom was nostalgic about moving to her hometown. She was moving right next door to Most Likely to Succeed (MLS), a toad-shaped dentist who had been wearing visors since he captained the high school golf team. When I made my monthly calls from college the whereabouts and howabouts concerning the dentist and his family were made into an enthusiastically impenetrable monologue, with reference sometimes to the adorable interactions of their dogs, always with a reminder that this was a person that she went to high school with, *high school*, and who had fulfilled his birthright as MLS by becoming a doctor.

“A dentist,” I corrected.

“Don’t be so *cynical*,” she told me. She was always telling me not to be cynical. She told me this about the most mundane things, like when I stopped using deodorant.

“It’s unnatural, Mom,” I said.

“You smell,” she said, handing me a canister of Axe body spray. “Don’t be so *cynical*.”

When I visited during holidays I would smoke and drink coffee on the porch, doing my best to revolt against the tyranny of white teeth, and MLS would come out with his 1.5 soccer-playing kids and his dozen visible teeth gleaming like newly poached ivory and I would feel it. They seemed to demand something of you, something boring and difficult.

“Well howdy,” he’d say. “You must be Vicky’s kid!”

“Well, howdy, you’re that stinky aimless boy!” said his teeth, “When do you plan to move back home?”

Mom was protective of all her animals. More than that, she personified the hell out of them. She had 4 rabbits that she knew by history and temperament, as if they were characters in a favorite sitcom. Then there was Blizzard, the Malte-Poo that had almost died thrice because of

what she classified as bravery. Once, while “protecting the house,” he picked a fight with the neighbor’s Weimaraner. “My little bodyguard!” Mom said, as Blizzard yipped while she changed his bandages.

Pandia was the “baby,” though she was the biggest by far. This was not only because she was the youngest, but also because she destroyed so many things accidentally, which Mom took as a sign of intelligence. “She’s thinking, bag—something’s in a bag, something fun possibly? Let’s see what’s in here!”

One day, something went down with Pandia and MLS’s dog. Mom told me this via monologue while I was half-tuned in, my third or fourth straight episode of *Family Guy* on in front of me. Pandia barked too loudly in the vicinity of their dog, a quiet, trembly Yorkie whose disposition suggested long-unexpressed emotional issues.

“Pandia was just playing. You know how she’s really playful? How she plays, sometimes just a little too far?”

“Yep”

“And you know she barks at joggers sometimes but he’s just protective. She’s playful and protective, I mean how can you *hate her*?”

“Dunno.”

“So he tells me that I need to get my dog *under control*. Under control!”

“Yeah, that sounds...”

“Is it my fault that his little rat dog is so nervous? They need to give her a cigarette.”

“People are crazy.”

Things started going downhill. The standard toothy greeting, a sort of Shibboleth in the neighborhood, was lost between Mom and MLS. Mom lamented old friendships, the passage of

time, the changeability of the human heart. She watched and reported on the neighbor's behavior through the window.

"He's always going out alone," she said, "He keeps strange hours. I bet you he's having an affair."

"Why do you care what these people do?" I heard John say in the background.

"They were *friends*, that's why," she said "And now they're not? Just like that?"

MLS had pull in the neighborhood. Mom watched through various windows as he talked with the neighbors in front that had the great riding lawnmower, the one on the opposite side that had the twin Weimaraners. She watched him floating all the way down the cul-de-sac of darkness, wearing his politician's frown, his most approachable sweater vest.

When I visited on holidays I stayed for a couple weeks at a time. By my third or fourth visit they had been there maybe a year and the house was a quiet wreck. Mom had all but moved into the bathroom—her planning calendar was in there, along with her laptop, her slippers, a favorite bathrobe, a week's worth of snacks. Everyone else, John, my brother Matt, and sister Greyson, stayed in front of their respective television sets.

Mom came out to talk a few times a day. The story came out either narcotically slow or amphetaminically fast. When slow her eyes moved as if through gelatin. When fast I could hear her tongue slapping and sticking everywhere in her mouth.

"Does he not remember that we were friends well maybe not friends—friendly, at least that's the neighborly thing!" Her tongue was like flypaper, her words the flies. Despite her apparent energy her eyes were hound-dogged, bloodshot. All I ever saw her eat was cottage cheese and mandarin oranges.

"When was the last time you slept?" She couldn't remember.

Before I left, she always slipped me a handful of cash on the sly, “for the trip.” It was a way we stayed connected, a way, perhaps, to make sure I was never reluctant to return home

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Toward the end of my first grad assistantship at Liberty University, I kept a bottle of Seagram’s Extra Dry with Lime in my desk drawer, obscured by term papers and the *Divine Comedy*. On good nights I had office mates to drink with. Allison usually had a bottle of Sutter Home and Gina had a sleeve of Dixie Cups. Allison would toast to us, the future genius waitresses, and to our “buried ambition and secret / sonnets scribbled on cocktail napkins... eyes / diverted from Ancient Greece to ancient grease.” And we’d pour the drinks, the gin first, then the wine, and talk about the recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article the English Department Chair sent out recently, the profile of the PhD in Victorian Lit who had just been laid off at Kinko’s.

“Just so you know what you’re getting into,” said the email.

I poured myself an extra Dixie Cup of gin. Swirled with the wine, it was the rosiest, warmest color in the flat white room.

In big moments of truth, like when I had too much gin and wine, I could admit to myself that I wasn’t really ambitious. Ambition, it seemed to me, required a certain amount of energy to deal with tedium. Gina could power through tedium, dress it up and make it dance, smirk at it as she graded the last comparison essay of the stack. Allison was like me, dragging, wandering-eyed, shrugging our way along.

The only thing I felt passionately about was that I didn’t want to end up like my parents. I didn’t want to middle-manage a UPS, like Dad, and I didn’t want my claim to fame to be that I won a bunch of money on Wheel of Fortune, like Mom.

If I was alone in the office—as I often was, late into the night, forever catching up—I went to the bottle and the books when I needed a break. I couldn’t smoke on campus—too risky, too public—but I could quietly rebel against the rules of my Baptist college and take quick shots behind locked doors. The more bored I was with the work, the more breaks I took. If I was up late grading papers for English 101, I took so many breaks that I would eventually just spend the night blurrily reading Dante. I had this file of student mistakes that I had collected from my colleagues, accidental innuendos (genitalmen for gentlemen) or hilarious non-sequiturs (“marijuana use can often lead to anxiety, and even death”), or anything unintentionally funny. When we drank together in the office I read these aloud and we would cover our faces and laugh.

“What’s the worst that can happen to us?” Gina said to us once. “We’re doing something we love.” She had a stern, serious face, black hair tied severely back, like a dangerous librarian. In a room full of English majors this gave her an air of immediate authority.

“Well, I guess the worst that can happen is that we die alone and unhappy,” she deadpanned. That’s when we realized all that stuff about love was a joke and we laughed and laughed.

I had big plans to parody *The Inferno*, turning all the circles of hell into basic grammatical “sins” and taking quotes directly from my document of mistakes for dialogue. In the last circle of hell Virgil and Dante would be confronted by Jerry B. Jenkins and Tim LaHaye, who had just completed the *Left Behind* series to rave reviews. I never quite started that project.

One night I was at the office alone and Mom called, her voice shaking from Adderall. It was about 9, and I asked her when she planned to sleep. She told me she didn’t sleep much anymore but—good news!— she had heard about this opportunity on late-night/early-morning TV about making money applying for government grants, and she bought the whole 3-book set

and it even came with an instructional DVD.

“I thought maybe you’d be interested because you said you wanted to be a writer,” she said.

I didn’t really have a counter-argument. That is, I had no other plans after grad school, no particular reason not to buy in.

“And you know with everything that’s happening I thought that maybe we could do it together if you’re interested, why don’t you just...”

“Sure, sure, sure,” I said, “I’ll think about it.”

I hung up the phone and listened to the air conditioning. The office was standard white, the shade you paint a place you’re getting rid of soon. There were no windows. A few small plants sat on the gray shelves of cubicles, in various stages of wilting. I was finishing a bottle of gin, one of those small glass bottles you can hold in one hand.

Guilt usually kicked in around the second or third pull from the bottle, but that night I finished off the whole thing. The thing I liked about gin was that it kind of shimmered in my gut, like one of those long-haired fireworks that sizzle down the sky. I could feel it tingle from my core all the way to my toes, my face. I sat there, slowly burning, listening to the office breathe, as books and papers lie everywhere, shrapnel-like—a battlefield of the mind, the warriors retired for the night in their trenches. I swiveled this way and that on my chair, barefoot (I felt more creative when I wasn’t wearing shoes), briefly entertaining a possible future in which I was loved and respected. I wanted to be Dante, Shakespeare, Dostoevsky. I wanted to be interviewed by NPR in a cardigan with elbow patches.

The gin gave me special believe-in-myself powers that exceeded even a healthy amount of self-confidence. I could reach, if only briefly, the mental state of Cleopatra, just before she

killed herself. *Give me my robe. Put on my crown. I long to be immortal. I'll never drink Seagram's again.*

I sat there, spinning on the black plastic throne of my computer chair, until the feeling wore off and I just felt a little under-water. Suddenly I didn't want to be alone anymore, though I didn't want to see anybody either.

I decided to walk to the basketball game on campus, just across the building that held our office. I liked walking in the cold after a few drinks. The cold air made me aware of the warmth of my body. The cold of Lynchburg in autumn is especially nice—a wet cold, everything smelling of the death of organic material. The campus was dark and empty. Big patches of bulldozed ground were dark red, saturated with rain. The end of the world, which always precluded the beginning of a new world. Resurrection and renewal—*unless a kernel of wheat dies, it remains alone, but if it dies—then what? Something happens. Something good.* The school was famously ugly, the dormitories thrown up in a rush as the administrators kept up with the growth of its evangelical student body.

The game was hardly even of local importance: only a few rows of the student section were filled. I liked to sit as close as possible, while still remaining apart, just in case someone smelled the gin on me. It was great to hear the adrenalized non-sense they were spitting at the refs after foul calls, could hear the denim sound of the basketball going in clean, the metal dong of a three pointer that went well-short.

I sat behind a row of students wearing red, our school colors, and writing on the back that read “Jerry's Kids.” This was the name for our brand of FANatics, a class of collegiate sporting event attendee that is the purest and most grotesque distillation of school spirit. At some crucial point they decided to stand and never sit back down. It was a particularly exciting free throw, or

an attitude dunk, or maybe the cheerleaders were tossing free shirts into the spare audience. Either way they never sat down, even after I told them to sit *fucking* down. One of them called me a drunk.

I walked fast through campus, steaming in the wet, dark cold. The whole place felt like a joke God was playing on us. Jerry Falwell, Sr. always said his BHAG (big hairy audacious goal) was to be what BYU was to Mormons, what Notre Dame was to Catholics. Competitive, serious, BIG. The prettiest structure on campus were the Roman-esque facades on the main academic building and on the church. Everything seemed so artificial, like something you could never fully participate in, only gawk at—*the kingdom of God is a mustard seed—the smallest of all the seeds. When it grows, it fills the whole earth.*

What about my dreams? What about my plastic throne? Even a fool is of some use to royalty.

A few weeks later, I was staring at a blinking MS Word cursor, mind and body sluggish, surrounded by paper. I was writing a paper on the *Paradiso*, a book I read without enthusiasm or understanding. I thought about my old roommate, the brilliant philosophy major who convinced me by his enormous capacity to digest highly abstracted books that I must have a learning disability, who told me once that he was terrified of going to heaven because it never ended. I was beginning to become terrified of life because it never seemed to begin.

A surge of nerves traveled through the same pathway that the gin took through me. Only the anxiety was like ice, freezing the pathways from my brain to the rest of my body. I could feel the enamel wearing off my teeth. My tongue clicked drily in my mouth. I thought of Mom.

“I need a favor,” I said.

“Have you thought about the eBay thing?”

“Do you have any—” The cold freeze of nerves clogging my brain almost prevented it from coming out. “Mom, I need something. Just to get through this next few weeks.”

“You mean?” I could hear her quickened breath, her sticky tongue.

“Yeah,” I said, and squeezed my eyes shut to stop from crying. “It’s just—I can’t—”

“I understand,” she said, clear and resolute for once. “I understand completely.”

The thing about Adderall is that it makes you feel like you can accomplish anything, even when you can’t. All of Dante’s paradise seemed to open up to me and the world was all of a part, circles within circle and colors issuing out into the darkness and the void and becoming, somehow, meaning. I made it through the semester like a square peg blasting through a round hole.

But the drop was sudden and the ground came up fast. I lasted another few months before I was crushed by another blinking cursor, by the vast whiteness of the empty mind, and even those sky blue pills couldn’t pull me through.

“Good luck,” said the Department Chair, because she knew I’d need it.

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It was the Summer of 2009 and I was back in Jacksonville. CNN played on the dining room television, instead of the usual ESPN. John would look over absently from time-to-time, waiting for the highlights.

“What about aliens?” John asked me. I was the family Christian, and so I served as a sort of genie of religious trivia.

“I thought we were talking about Jesus,” I said, and pressed the excess cheese from a Hot Pocket. “Are you talking extra-terrestrials here or...?”

“Right,” he said, “I mean, if aliens exist, does that change things for you?” He was

wearing one his many hats. I mean that literally: he had several hats—close to 100 if I had to guess. This had to do with growing up poor, something about not getting desired hats at crucial moments in his adolescence. When he had money, he vowed never to deny himself a hat. This was the closest he got to true religion. The same went for DVDs, though most of his collection had already been boxed up and sold en masse.

“I’d imagine they have their own problems,” I said, “Jesus died for human sins.”

“Not alien sins?”

“Why do I care?”

“Aren’t you supposed to care?”

“About aliens?”

“About all people.”

“Aliens aren’t people.”

I took a bite from my Hot Pocket. Cheese oozed plasma-like through my mouth. Alien blood. Ick, what is that cheese sauce, exactly? And did aliens have blood? Aliens, Hot Pockets, Jesus, the work of salvation. These were idle days.

“You should care about aliens,” he said.

I shook my head, mussed my greasy hair. I had been experimenting with not using shampoo in order to bring out the “natural oils.” John wouldn’t let me wear any of his 100 hats. I reasoned that he didn’t care about the University of Florida Gulf Coast anyway, what did he care? I quizzed him on the mascot.

“Looks like a bird of some kind,” he answered, and then put the hat on and walked away, toward the television, where a split-screen panel was playing to its own uncertainties.

“There is always fluctuation, unpredictability in the marketplace, and we weren’t

prepared, and someone must be held accountable!”

“I don’t mean to alarm, but this looks to be the single greatest economic downturn since 9/11, or the Great Depression, Black Friday, The Great Plague!”

John scoffed and shook his head. He had the skill and patience of an expert on the job, where he deftly coordinated dozens of subcontractors, most of them non-English speaking, to complete 50-floor condominiums ahead of schedule. That particular Summer he was home on leave. He was supposed to be starting another condo, somewhere in Hollywood, Florida, on the Atlantic coast he had been working for years. But on Christmas he tore up his knee, fluke thing—some little fucking kid in a backyard football game he didn’t want to be in anyway—and the company had voided his contract.

Those days, he always seemed to be waiting for someone to call him back.

“No one’s building right now,” he told me, “there’s no money.”

Not ‘nobody had money,’ but: there’s no money. Like the thing didn’t exist anymore, anywhere, and everyone was sitting around waiting like he was for the money to *be*. The economy had found them, and was starting to take back its shit. All there was left to do was to wait for it to start giving again.

I was waiting too, but I couldn’t really tell you what I was waiting for. I clung fiercely to the college basketball and football schedule so that I could tell someone at a moment’s notice what I was waiting for. I was waiting for the Owls vs. the Eagles

Mom was waiting on someone to finally come to their damn senses. No one seemed to understand the special connection between a woman and her dog.

Pandia was on death row awaiting appeal. She had attacked someone’s visiting grandmother over Christmas (“They said *mauled* but come on she’s just a little protective!”) and

the family was pressing charges. Mom wasn't so much worried about the lawsuit as about the dog.

"They're going to take away my dog," she said on her way through the kitchen, the living room. "Just take my dog away, right away, my dog, my dog."

Earlier in the week she had taken me by the arm into the garage, her face bloated and insomniac gray.

"Do you notice any patterns when you come in here?" she asked, and I could hear her tongue sticking and clicking around the consonants, "Like, for instance, sometimes *right* when I turn on the light I swear—this will sound funny but I swear to you it's true!—it's like *bugs* in the form of *letters*."

I took an earnest look around. Everything was stacked in one pile, heavy things even, chairs and tables and lawnmowers.

"I just see like, a lot more Christmas decoration than seems normal."

She shook her head and made a frustrated noise in her throat.

"So the bugs are playing Wheel of Fortune on the garage wall?" I said.

"In the bath too. I spread the suds on the wall and there it is!"

"Well I hope Pearl Jam isn't involved." This was a dig at the puzzle Mom famously lost in her second day on the show. Eyeing the board, GRUNGE R\_\_ERS PE\_RL J\_M, after spinning a \$1000 turn, she guessed "Z."

"You laugh," she said, and scratched her head audibly with long, uncut nails. "But one of these days you'll see what I see!"

Through the house, everyone's face had a Noir quality. It was like we were all waiting for the other shoe to drop. Greyson came down the stairs as Mom passed, her face full of Humphrey

Bogart-level dread, like she was considering the ruins of society. She was 12 and already taking pills for her nerves.

Mom stopped at the stairs and Greyson went right back up.

“Greyson, you saw it once,” she asked, her face uplifted, plaintive, desperate.

“Remember, yesterday? What we talked about?”

“Yeah,” she said, looking down at her fuzzy white slippers. “I mean, kind of, I guess.”

“And look—have I showed you this?” She rolled up her sleeves and pulled me toward her, while Greyson disappeared up the steps. She showed me her forearms, which were covered in splotchy, blueberry colored marks. The marks were the size of puppies’ teeth, but were scattered in no particular pattern.

“Something’s in the air,” she said. “Spores. I read something online about them.”

“Jeez,” I said, “Did you go to the doctor?”

She scoffed. “I did, and even *he* doesn’t know what’s wrong with me!” She rolled her sleeve back up, a satisfied grin playing strangely on her face, like a shadow in a badly lit room. “Your mother has finally discovered the limits of medical science.”

Something was in the air. There was no money, but something was in the air. A mania, an instability, a brittle quality to every bit of the house’s 2,500 square feet of plaster and particle-board. Outside MLS was always tromp tromp tromping in his loafers, petition-in-hand, spreading the news of dysfunction in 109 Drayton Hall. *If they cain’t keep control a that dog then well...*

They were coming for her dog and there was no money but there was something in the air that you could catch and it would burrow down deeper than any doctor could figure—and all you could do was wait for the phone to ring and hope for good news.

I decided to cut my trip short. She stopped me as I picked up my bags to leave. Took me

by both my hands. Instead of the money I was expecting, I felt only her clammy palms.

“I wish I had something to give you,” she said, her eyes like the eyes of someone you see in an old memory. “I wish I had *something*.”

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Pandia had been put down, by court order. John was overseeing a cement job for Camp Lejeune, the local marine corps base, a “younger man’s job, and incredibly boring.” All of his DVDs were sold, as well as some of the TVs, the pool table, the poker table an end table or two, a few couches. The house was near foreclosure. Disappearing from the inside out. It was sometime around February, 2011—a cold month, Spring still far away.

I had married that January, and was working as an apprentice for a funeral home. The job was a sort of argument I was having with myself, about whether or not I could endure tedium for the sake of love. It put Georgie, my wife, at ease. Now, it wasn’t going well. I was slow and lethargic and uninterested. My manager, an ambitious life-long funeral director with impeccable hair, kept poking his head into the embalming room as my work went late to remind me I was losing my argument.

“Working with death is a way of life,” he kept telling me, “it’s not for everyone.”

Georgie was worried about the way I drank. “It’s not *that* you drink, it’s just—“

We were driving, and I kept my eyes glued, unblinking, to the road.

“You only drink when you’re sad.”

What she didn’t know, since we were newlyweds, was that I was always sad, but only sometimes drank. It was hard to impress this distinction upon her. The argument required a certain amount of creativity to sustain.

“Okay,” I said, “I’m sorry.”

One day Mom called to ask about a name that the bugs were only half spelling out for her. I took the call in the embalming room and sat at the chair at an angle out of the corpse's line-of-sight.

"It's Jessica and I can't make out the rest of the name." Her voice kept slipping and screeching, like bad tires.

"Didn't you know a Jessica? I just need the rest of the name, the last name."

"Mom, everyone I know is named Jessica."

"Listen, stop making jokes, this is *important*. I can't *see it*. I can see Jessica—that's all I can make out. John is playing dumb."

She sounded like she was talking inside a bomb shelter. "Are you in a closet or something?" I asked.

"I'm at my therapist's and he says it's really important for me to get closure so just what is the name, Ryan? I just need a name."

"Closure?"

"I think John is cheating with this—I don't know it looks like *Jessica* at least. But Jessica who? Jessica who?"

An interlude of banging and static replaced her voice for a moment. I imagined her inside of the transmission of our voices, shaking and squirming and fighting to get through.

"You need to get some sleep," I said.

"Ryan don't tell me what *I need*," she said. "Just give me the goddamn name!"

"There is no name!"

"Why are you protecting him?" She started to cry. "Why is everyone protecting him?!"

"Mom, I have to get back to work."

But the line was already quiet and I was alone again with the dead.

Around that time my teeth started breaking. One broke on a piece of freshly baked pumpkin pie that my friend Becky had brought over to the house. I held it in my hand and showed it to her. It was gray around the edges, black inside.

“You should be a dentist,” I said, and put the piece of tooth in my pocket.

The thing about people that smiled all the time was that they made me feel like the world ran smoothly, that one could smile without pain and be in easy love with the world. Yet there I was with a mouth full of decaying teeth, waiting with a corpse for the workday to end.

\*

I visited Mom in the Psych Ward on Mother’s Day, 2011. I bought her flowers at Georgie’s suggestion, although I felt weird about it. Matthew and Greyson suggested we should find a Happy Mother’s Day Discharge! card and all sign it.

The plastic wrap holding the flowers was awkwardly, rudely loud. Everyone else was incredibly quiet, softly tapping at their phones, John stoically regarding the road in his UC-Davis Mustangs hat. Whenever I moved, the flowers would clear their throats and flatulate and all eyes magnetized to me.

The waiting room was square and windowless, and brought me immediately to mind of my old grad student office, except that the walls were a slight tint of grey that suggested accumulated neglect. I say there were no windows, but there was a small service window where you signed in. No outside windows though, only a window into another windowless room, an architectural metaphor straight out of Kafka. Out of this service window fluttered all sorts of sadness coming from inside, little warbling moans or high-pitched chirping appeals for pity that served a strange kind of ambience for us in the waiting room. Matt and Grey played on their

phones, while John flipped quickly through a *Psychology Today*, taking in the happy-then-sad interchange of images. This was as regular a moment as an oil change to them by now, a fact that made me feel even stranger by contrast. I sat there trying to hold steady, keep the flowers quiet in my lap.

They let me see her while she awaited her discharge appointment. The buzz of the door was comically caustic, like the announcement of a wrong answer. I was led through a corridor that reminded me of the hallways of my school, blank white, temporary, curling at the edges, but with a slightly darker tint, like the first turn of bad teeth. She had cut her hair short and was wearing pajama pants and a white shirt. Two old TVs poked out of the corners like surveillance cameras. They were playing the news. Things were finally turning around, showing signs of recovery.

“Hello, son,” she said to me, from across a wobbly table. Her eyes were ashy and vague, bombed out from anti-psychotic medication.

“Hi Mom,” I replied. “I got you flowers.”

The plastic crinkled like wood on fire as I scooted it gently toward her. A young, gray-haired woman lifted her eyes and pointed her copy of *The Secret* at me.

“I can’t remember...,” she said, and her eyes floated above the table, near sleep. “last time someone’s bought me... flowers.” She turned them with her hands.

She indicated the TV with a slow nod of her chin. “Looks like things are turning around.”

“Sure,” I said, looking at the table.

She talked about her roommate, who screamed when addressed, even when medicated.

“There should be...levels, you know? Like in a prison.” Her face panned back and forth, scanning. “I mean, I’m crazy but...”

Above us, the broadcaster was busy re-framing the Dream. “The Dow is up, unprecedented recovery, the American spirit!”

The gray-haired girl, quiet, peaked at the TV from out of her paperback. Down the hall someone started barking the beginning of a song.

“But goddamn.”

“Yeah,” I said finally, “You’re a special kind of crazy.”

Her eyes glowed dimly. A chuckle leaked out of her smile. “You laugh,” she said, “but crazy has a lot of... *levels*.”

I agreed.

When she was finally discharged John pushed her out in a wheelchair. Just before the elevator shaft she stopped us. The flowers were in her lap, slapping her face as she turned her head back-and-forth to look for something.

“Wallet,” she drawled at John. She took it and fished around through a jumble of papers until she found two one dollar bills.

“Here,” she said, and handed it to me, “All I got.”

I took the money and thanked her. I looked at the bills a while, faced them, uncreased them. When I returned home I pulled them from my wallet and showed Georgie.

“I can’t spend this, can I?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“I have an idea,” she said. She went to the guest room of our apartment, which was filled with wedding gifts and the unsorted junk of our old lives. When she came back she had a small, square picture frame. She slid them in, clipped the back on, and put it on my desk.

“For inspiration,” she said.

\*

When Georgie and I visited that summer, Mom was still wearing long sleeves, despite the weather. She was spending most of her time on the couch—Blizzard the Malte-Poo on her lap. This was a good sign; she wasn't holed up in the bathroom anymore, reading the world's messages off the bathtub wall. John was ready to start a new job—the money had reappeared, and he finally had real buildings to build. Matthew drove Mom to the community college, where she was taking creative writing classes and he was finishing his AA.

“Hey remember when Mom was being attacked by alien spores?” Greyson joked. Her hair shined black against the summer sun coming through the windows. She started laughing, and Georgie cringed, which made her laugh more. “Too soon?”

We spent our few days there wandering around the house with not much to do. We ended up watching a lot of television. Georgie liked to watch HGTV, so she could dream specific dreams about our future house. I liked the unspecific dreaming of ESPN, the undemanding vicariousness of spectator sports. More than a game, sporting events developed into stories, and stories had no specific end, just a last scene and a series of questions—a productive kind of waiting, a way to use dreaming to pass the time.

I had recently quit my apprenticeship and got a job working as a janitor for Liberty U. After a few months I'd be able to finish by degree, a side note I was careful to foreground when people asked me where I worked. Lying there staring up one of the few remaining TVs, Georgie said I'd be a university teacher someday, or a magazine writer, that we'd live in a mid-century modern home with a slate-grey living room and a sectional sofa—not leather, which we would be sensible about and buy used. I shrugged, kicked the can down the road a little farther.

“I just want to do something I like,” I said vaguely.

I used to just want to be on TV. Not as a job—I just wanted to do something that was

worthy of appearing on television. TV was full of people that made it in some way. Kevin Arnold taught me what it meant to be a middle-schooler. Zach Morris taught me what it meant to be a high-schooler.

Perhaps this is why we always made such a big deal about Mom being on Wheel of Fortune.

“Hey Mom,” Greyson said to her later that day. It was 2 PM and Mom had just woken up. Her pajamas were the same off-white as Blizzard, who badly needed grooming.

“You wanna listen to some music?”

Mom gave a hazy look. “Music?”

“Yeah, I know these great grunge razzers called Pearl Jam!”

Mom laughed and shook her head. “Oh fuck you!” she said, cheerfully.

Georgie asked if they still had the video. Mom said yes, but it was on VHS.

“But we have this little TV that has VHS in the garage if you can find it.”

I worked my way through all the old junk in the garage to find it. The TV was sitting on an old unused dog kennel filled with Christmas decorations.

I brought it inside, called upstairs, and waited for everyone to sit down.

“Hasn’t everyone seen this a million times?” Matt said

“Georgie hasn’t!” I announced, and turned to her. “This is a big moment, Georgie. Your official initiation into the family.”

The set was one of those small 16’ sets, built around a VHS tape deck. It looked like it had been kept solely for this moment. It was heavily faded and covered in dust.

“Jeez,” I said, “this thing is filthy!” I blew hard on the top of the set. Dust exploded into the air.

Mom darted up quickly, the fastest I'd seen her move all day. She was covering her eyes. As she passed I heard her mutter "I can't, I can't, I can't."

It wasn't until that moment that I remembered about the spores. How just months before they'd been digging into her skin, infecting her blood. Suddenly the air was filled with the stuff. It was falling on all of us.

I looked around at my family through a curtain of gray dust, which had dispersed across the room. Everyone sat there scattered on the leather sectional, quietly looking at their shoes. Their eyes seemed like eyes that had seen it all. The dust was falling now along the bill of John's bright hat, on Greyson's black eyelashes, in the hood of Matthew's sweater.

Georgie asked what was wrong, but I had no idea how to answer.