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Something Solid

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Something Solid

by

James A. Niedermeier

A thesis submitted to the Department of English of the State University of New York

College at Brockport, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

March 26, 2006

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by James A. Niedermeier

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Introduction

I wouldn't consider myself a fan of Oprah Winfrey, but I will say that I have watched her show a few times. It's really the only show *to* watch when you have half a bag of Cool Ranch Doritos, an hour to kill, and an MTV generation sense of irony. I'm not proud of it, but there it is. I caught the show when she selected James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, a junkie redemption memoir, to join the prestigious ranks of Tolstoy, Faulkner, Steinbeck, and Dr. Phil in her book club on September 22, 2005. It was very theatrical: his mother was in the studio and she didn't know her son was about to join the Harpo canon. When it was announced, I smiled, and the studio audience clapped like seals, and couch potatoes across America told their spouses that they thought it was nice that that young man's book was selected to ascend from the piles of other memoirs gathering dust in bookstores. It was a "moment," which is something Oprah is fond of saying. Weeks went by and I forgot about it. Many other bags of Cool Ranch Doritos were consumed. There were other "moments."

And then things got interesting.

As we all know now, Frey was outed as a liar by "The Smoking Gun," the internet's version of the weasely kid who always told on you at school. Frey was dragged back on *Oprah* and flogged by the unrelenting host and her ravenous audience. They were confused. Hurt. Embarrassed. Frey squirmed and stuttered his way through his explanation. Oprah trotted out publishers, journalists, writers, and—I think—the entire Chicago Bulls basketball team to spit on Frey, the liar. If Frey

managed to stay away from drugs and alcohol after that, I think he's probably in the clear for the rest of his life.

Frey's repentance on *Oprah*, though, was only part of his Act of Contrition. He also wrote a little essay that was jammed into all the existing copies of *Pieces*. In it, he apologizes, but carefully. One passage in particular struck a chord with me:

There is much debate now about the respective natures of works of memoir, nonfiction, and fiction. That debate will likely continue for some time. I believe, and I understand others strongly disagree, that memoir allows the writer to work from memory instead of strict journalistic or historical standard. It is about impression and feeling, about individual recollection. (*Insert*)

This debate over just how factual nonfiction must be to be called nonfiction is not new. Since Capote's *In Cold Blood*, arguably the first nonfiction novel, critics have sparred about the ethical leeway nonfiction writers should have. Of course, that's just when people started talking about it. People have always made up things and called them true in American letters. What is Columbus but a composite character cobbled together to make the story of Europe's conquest of North America crystalline? What was that cherry tree Washington supposedly chopped down but an inserted symbol meant to solidify a theme? This tendency to add fiction to fact isn't just an American problem, though, and it's certainly not recent. Heck, Shakespeare did it. Henry IV probably didn't speak in perfect iambic pentameter, after all. And even if you can accept a 600-year-old Noah constructing a wooden ship big enough to carry all the

world's animals, the Bible is certainly an example of literature that seeks to blend history and fiction. Look no further than the New Testament, in which Christ converts Jews by telling them short fictional parables. Nobody claims that the events in those parables actually happened, but millions of people around the world claim that they are true, even today.

Wait. Did I just compare addict and liar James Frey to Shakespeare *and* Jesus? Please don't tell anyone.

We are, in fact, living in a time when people clamber for factual things injected with liberal amounts of fantasy or visa-versa. One week before I sat down to write this, five of the top twenty shows on television were so-called reality TV shows featuring scripted moments, eight were fictional cop dramas focusing on cases "ripped from the headlines," and one was the Academy Awards pre-show, a red carpet event displaying actors being themselves—gowns, tuxes, jewels, and all ("Nielsen Media"). It's kind of like how trainers at Sea World show what killer whales are really like in the wild by making them eat from their hands and jump through hoops. And what about movies? Six of the current top thirty are fictionalized recreations of factual events (*Movie Times*). One of these is *Capote*, the critically heralded film based on Gerald Clarke's nonfiction book about Truman Capote's creation of *In Cold Blood*. Phew. Despite the distortion bound to occur when a story is refracted through that many lenses, this film has managed to succeed without major controversy. In fact, actors play real people doing made up things all the time in movies without controversy. Dialogue gets added, people are combined

into composites, and details are truncated for the sheer sake of telling stories directors feel are both more truthful and more economical. And people like these films. Five of the last ten Best Actor and six of the last ten Best Actress Academy Awards went to folks playing real people (“Official Academy Awards”). Apparently, people—even critics—actually enjoy a little lying with their truth.

And so do I.

From the time I was told I was adopted when I was around six, I have been making up stories about myself. I had to. When I was told, I felt like I had—Wile E. Coyote-like—just realized I was standing in midair between two edges of a canyon. If I looked down, I would be finished. My only option was to build a bridge to the side I had come from and then stand on it while I built ahead. As exhausting as that metaphor may be, it really sums up how I felt, how I still feel, about not knowing my origin. Making up a past was not fun for me; it was essential. Therefore, I could not imagine writing any kind of piece about my life and that did not include those inventions. Unlike Frey, I have tried to acknowledge the parts of my piece that are invented within the piece itself, but I did so really out of fear of being called a liar rather than a sense of moral obligation. Those inventions are real to me, those biological parents I made up whom I call Erin and Mario in the first section *are* my biological parents, as much as I can know them. When I write about my mother as a child, my father in the Navy, I’m showing things that I couldn’t possibly have seen, but they exist in my imagination, and that is a real, tangible thing to me.

My wife, who has boxes in which to store other boxes, will concur when I say that our brains crave classification; the categorization of literature is certainly necessary. There needs to be, however, a third category, one beyond nonfiction and fiction; to account for the blending of the two. The alternative to creating this new category is the obliteration of a host of brilliant works by authors who have already created works that are not empirically true, but *feel* true. “There’s a larger, higher, three dimensional truth,” says Lee Gutkind, the founder of *Creative Nonfiction*, “in books where we stretch the truth” (qtd. in Fitzgerald). It is because these works are seeking out this kind of “three dimensional truth” that simply slapping a “fiction” label on anything not entirely journalistic isn’t really fair.

When I was a teenager, the first book to really make an impression on me was Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five*. I’ve read it several times since and taught it a few more, and each time I go through it, I wonder at the word “fiction” Bantam has so thoughtfully branded on the spine of my copy. I realize that the book features an extensive amount of improbability—time travel, universe ending aliens, people zoos—but it’s clearly much more than a trippy sci-fi yarn. From the title page, which advertises Vonnegut as “an American infantry scout [who] witnessed the firebombing of Dresden, Germany” and “survived to tell the tale,” we can see that it is no ordinary novel. In fact, the fantasy doesn’t begin until chapter two; chapter one is autobiographical. It would be an introduction in another book, but Vonnegut makes us read through it before we enter the portal to Billy Pilgrim’s world. During some reading or another, I notice that I scrawled “It’s important that this isn’t an

introduction” in the margin and I still believe that. Introductions can be skipped over, first chapters can’t. Because of this, our reading of the fictional part of Vonnegut’s story is colored by our knowledge that he experienced many of the events—even some of the really bizarre ones—that occur later in the book. We also know that experiencing these events deeply affected Vonnegut, who claims to drink too much and obsessively outline stories about his time in Dresden (5). Vonnegut also makes us privy to authorial decisions he will make later on in the book such as why there won’t be a real climax, why there will be no antagonist, and why he won’t use a linear timeline. All of these decisions, it turns out, aren’t simply made because Vonnegut is trying to create an eccentric story, but because he’s trying to create something that more authentically represents his time in World War II.

Lest we forget that this is a book about him, Vonnegut pops up as a character a couple of times later on, once commenting that Dresden looks like Oz to him because “the only city [he’d] ever seen was Indianapolis, Indiana” (148) and, another time, in a P.O.W. camp latrine on the brink of madness (125). These authorial intrusions make us question just what is real and what is not in *Slaughterhouse-Five*. If the author is real, what about the aliens? What about the time travel? What about the war—isn’t that equally as absurd and fantastic? And then, we’ve stumbled onto Vonnegut’s point. Could he have written a more traditional autobiography to get us there? Maybe. But probably not one that hit at that three-dimensional truth Gutkind was talking about.

Vonnegut isn't the only prominent author to marry fiction and nonfiction. Maxine Hong Kingston has made a career out of walking the tightrope between the two. Her now canonical *Woman Warrior* defies any classification, though she calls it a memoir in its subtitle. In it, she deals with menacing ghosts, experiments with magic, and casts herself in the role of a character from Chinese mythology. Many of Kingston's anecdotes, such as the story about her aunt who drowns herself and her illegitimate child in a well rather than dishonor her family, are extrapolated from small bits of information that Kingston has been given. Her family, like mine, is quite closed mouth when it comes to spilling the details of family secrets. The result of all of this is, as in Vonnegut's work, a more authentic feeling of what it might be like to grow up in a Chinese family in America, to be between a culture steeped in mysticism and one entrenched in the practical.

Many people think Frank McCourt's Pulitzer Prize winning *Angela's Ashes* is so laden with specific recollections of conversations and events that occurred over a half century ago that it must be fictional as well. Indeed, even the most casual critic might find himself wondering just where McCourt hid the tape recorder in Leamy's School or his Uncle Pa Keating's favorite bar—but only for a moment. We quickly buy into McCourt's recollection as truth because it is so three-dimensional. His skill is evident in the crafting of his father, who alternately uses his dead son's coffin as a coaster for a pint of Guinness and comforts young Frank's troubled soul with stories of angels. His father is a drunk and a family man, a patriot and a traitor, a child and toothless old man. In short, he is a human being with more faults than virtues and

shady gray spots in his character. Isn't this the way we all feel about our parents, to a certain extent? I know it's the way I feel about mine.

My mother, as she exists in the world of documented evidence, doesn't much resemble the woman who raised me. On paper, she is a file drawer full of paychecks, tax returns, and social security statements. What do they prove? That she is a hard worker? Is that all she is? Hardly. She is smiling and sturdy in photo after photo I have of her. Was she happy when those pictures were taken? Confident? Sometimes. Where are the documents that show her crying when the furnace broke? Where are the witnesses who can verify how much she swore when I broke the kitchen lamp? How can I prove how cold she can be? In my memories, she is all these things at once, a closed system that no one could possibly understand unless they understood everything at once. It is important that she be known, however, and important that I do my best to express who she is. Should she be forgotten because I didn't keep notes when I was a child? And had I taken notes, wouldn't that have changed the experience, filtered my memories in a different way?

Another thing I admire about McCourt's memoirs, which also include *'Tis* and *Teacher Man*, is their deceptively simple structures. Assuming the role of the Irish storyteller or *shanachie*, McCourt stitches together fragments of mythology, song lyrics, pub jokes, personal tragedies, Irish history, and just about everything else while casually jumping back and forth in time and stepping in and out of the story himself. Instead of a confusing mess, the result of this bit of fancy collage work is actually a coherent narrative, digestible enough to allow McCourt to maintain

residency on any number of national bestseller lists. His structure seems free-flowing and natural, organic. His stories are the kind you would hear from a traveler after a long, exciting, and solitary trip—rambling, everything-at-once stories.

This, I feel, is the only way to truly capture memory on paper. Memories, like dreams, do not have linear storylines; any attempt to give them beginnings, climaxes, transitions, or dénouements always rings a bit false. There are always elements that don't obey Poe's unity of effect in the stories our brains construct out of memories. How many of us, while recounting a memory, have lapsed into a non sequitur that seemed essential to the telling before it passed our lips and hit the air? Only liars, I suspect. Their stories are always smooth and polished. This is one of the reasons I have chosen the rather unconventional route of eschewing traditional narrative structure in favor of short vignettes. My memories are brief images that sometimes contain faulty or nonessential information; they have no story arc, no transitions.

Of course, I have chosen to arrange these vignettes in a very particular way in order to achieve the effect of a story arc. Juxtaposition is a powerful tool, perhaps, as Levi-Strauss said, the only tool of the *bricoleur* (Hatton 76). Hopefully, if I've done an adequate job, my readers will feel character development, themes, and a plot because I've arranged memories and other things in such a way as to emphasize these things. In order to achieve anything that someone would actually want to read, all writers of nonfiction must engage in a bit of artful arrangement.

Tracy Kidder, another author whose work I greatly admire, is skilled in this particular area. *Home Town*, Kidder's book about Northampton, Massachusetts,

would be nothing more than a series of disconnected sketches in the hands of a less skilled author. It follows—among others—a mayor, a police officer, a single mom, and an obsessive compulsive lawyer through their independent lives. Though these folks rarely, if ever, interact with each other, Kidder intercuts their storylines. There is a danger in this, of course; a reader who is constantly asked to change directions might be jarred out of a book. For some reason, though, *Home Town* doesn't feel like it changes directions—it feels like it's constantly moving forward toward some truth greater than the sum of all the individual storylines. And, of course, it is. Instead of simply splicing a bunch of profiles together, Kidder is painting a portrait of Northampton that is as rich and complex as the father McCourt creates in *Angela's Ashes*. He creates a feeling of place that is authentic and three-dimensional, a place that you *understand* when you're through reading. In the same way he sculpts this town in this piece by carefully arranging small bits of information, Kidder also creates a Gothic Revival house in *House*, a Holyoke, MA school in *Among Schoolchildren*, and humanitarian doctor Paul Farmer in *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

Though Kidder rarely attempts to transition from one topic to another in these books, opting instead for line breaks, the sections feel seamless. Even Kidder's research is blended so well that a reader may not be aware that he had done any unless they turn to one of the exhaustive bibliographies in the backs of his books. This effortlessness is extremely difficult to recreate, as I found out. The first time I experimented with the juxtaposition of vignettes was while writing the section of this

piece that focuses on the death of one of my great uncles, a man who was very important to me. My first draft focused entirely on my uncle's wake and funeral, two memories that, even years later, I can step in and out of at will. After writing a rather traditional, chronological narrative, I read it over and I was struck by how truly bad it was on almost every level. Aside from treading in the clichéd waters of the loved one's funeral, the story also lacked any characters that readers might actually feel something for and, well, it also lacked any kind of story. Because I wanted to tell the story, I tinkered with it to both make it more interesting to potential readers and make it more accurately reflect my experience at that funeral. I elaborated. I streamlined. I fiddled with tense. Still, I was unsatisfied. I thought that there could be no way for my readers to understand what I was feeling at that funeral unless they were also party to other things that colored my feelings on that day. So I hacked my chronological narrative apart and interjected other memories into the story. The result is something that I feel is much more nuanced and reflective of the emotion that I was trying to tap into. I hope that it's also more interesting to read.

It's also, I think, a little more culturally relevant. As a high school teacher, I have a unique vantage point from which to view the future of thought in the country. Even in the tiny, rural school I teach in, students expect their information in short bursts. They're impatient with detail and exposition; they would much rather have an image that would sum up everything they need to know. And no wonder. Anything they wish to know is at their fingertips on the internet; websites compete for their attention with increasing flash and ease of use. My students also communicate with

each other with more frequency than previous generations, so much so that they have developed a simplified form of English to use when text messaging, instant messaging, blogging, or online chatting that is the bane of my English department's existence.

Television programming has both influenced and adapted to the trend toward image bursting. Gone are the days of single camera shoots. Even news programs are hyperkinetic, MTV-style shows now. It's nearly impossible for writers who, as David Foster Wallace points out, "tend to lurk and to stare" but are, "terribly self-conscious," to ignore television because it offers them the opportunity to both stare and not be stared at (21). Being born in 1980 with the sensibilities of a writer doomed me to be influenced by the tube and the internet. Though my education has taught me to appreciate the merits of, say, "The Custom House" essay that precedes Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, popular culture makes me far more comfortable with the pungent minimalism of Raymond Carver and the brief, vivid images conjured up by a poet like William Carlos Williams. When I write, it is this style that comes out.

Certainly, there is a danger in obsessing over the image. Many of the writers from my generation are content with, as Wallace terms it, the "numb blank bored" cynicism that comes with munching Doritos, watching *Oprah*, and chatting online; I am not (64). It's fairly easy to provoke readers to smirk in these times of ours; it's far more difficult to make them feel anything. Jamaica Kincaid's lyrical memoir *My Brother* is a shining example of what the image can do. Kincaid strips her story about

her brother's slow death of AIDS down into simple images so powerful that they materialize, as in this description of her brother's dead body:

...his lips were clamped tightly together and they made a shape that did not amount to his mouth as I had known it; and his eyes had been sewn shut, sewn shut, and I have to say it again, sewn shut. And so he looked like an advertisement for the dead, not like the dead at all...

(181)

Though her diction is spare, Kincaid evokes more emotion in this passage with a repetition of a phrase than a thesaurus full of adjectives could. There is a considerable amount of power in "sewn shut."

It's also probably of note that, with that second sentence, Kincaid is commenting on the role of the image in popular culture, how people will accept images of things, "advertisements of death," far more readily than the actual thing, in this case, "death." And why is that? Because the image, even the fictional stuff of advertisements, plays a powerful role in our lives, so much so that we sometimes believe in it more than we believe in reality. In fact, Kingston explores the role of reality in many of her works. She is, after all, the writer of a trilogy of so-called "fictional autobiographies."

Perhaps that would be a good categorization for Frey's book.

So it appears as if I'm back to where I started from, sitting on my couch, wondering about the James Frey controversy. I wonder if it isn't really an example of society protesting against itself. It seems as if the penalty for living in a prosperous

society is tedium and it also seems that our minds can't help but revolt from that tedium. Whether we want them to or not, our brains alter memories, create dreams, make us forget our car keys from time to time. We can either wage futile war against our brains to keep fantasy behind one wall and fiction behind another, or we can let them spill over each other and put up another book rack at Barnes and Noble for books that blend the two. If we do the latter, we will finally have a place to shelve literature that attempts to more authentically represent the human experience.

1. Something Solid

Mom says she doesn't know how much I cost, but that she thinks it was a shade under ten thousand dollars. She doesn't know the exact figure because Dad kept the books; she wasn't allowed to see. *Why does it matter?* she asks and I tell her that I don't know, that it does matter. *Just give me a figure, something solid I can hold onto*, I want to shout. But she won't. I stack up everything she tells me, everything everyone tells me, and make a card house of contradictions and misrememberings, half-truths and exaggerations.

For most of the year, Buffalo is covered in a dusting of snow; people trudge even in the summer months, wake in darkness to crack through layers of frost on car door handles, shovel with one hand while drinking coffee. Children get used to the frozen hair and burning ears that come from going outside after a shower without a hat. They get used to brown puddles of melting snow that line the florescent lit hallways of their schools, the smell of sweat and wool and mud, the layers peeled off as rusty boilers kick on noisily. Not everyplace can be Hawaii.

To a seventeen-year-old boy with the power to undress anyone in his mind, though, a baggy sweater poses no greater obstacle than a string bikini. Mario has lustful thoughts about almost every woman he comes into contact with: the nun who teaches catechism at Blessed Sacrament on Delaware Avenue, the trollish math teacher who talks about the Pythagorean Theorem and trigonometric functions, the

girls' P.E. class playing soccer in the rain, even a diagram in his Health textbook. It's all too much for him to handle. He needs an outlet.

And so he joins the choir.

Mario has never sung a note in the shower or even in church. Never. He doesn't even listen to music. Nevertheless, neither his guidance counselor nor his parents ask him why he's joining. They know. The choir director knows, too. Close proximity to girls is really the only promotional tool high school choir directors have to lure boys. Occasionally, one of them even becomes a good singer, but not often. Mario feels, when he looks in the mirror at his single eyebrow and weak chin, that the only way for him to have any chance of getting a girl is to become this exception. He sits in the front row, his eyes trained on the choir director's white baton. He does not mouth the words, as the other boys do; he sings them loudly and clearly. Proudly. Even the *fa la las* and the *ding dong dings*. He contorts his mouth into the shapes his choir director makes, every *oo* shape, every *ah*. At night, he practices until his throat aches and his blurred eyes can't tell a Kyrie from an Eleison.

By May, every girl in choir is madly in love with Mario. And why shouldn't they be? He sings like Caruso.

So I've made up a past. Sometimes my memories are so vivid that I'm tricked into believing that they're real, that I was there. I'll pick up a playbill, a concert ticket, a movie stub on someone else's desk and invent memories. Some people are like that. A creative writing professor of mine told my class, once, a story

about the death of his father to illustrate how we could capture a memory in words. He told us that he was playing in his yard in a Cleveland suburb when he was six, throwing sticks to his dog, skipping rocks across the road. He turned, the professor said, in time to see his father's blue pickup wrap itself around a telephone pole in front of his house. It sounded—these are his words—*like a rollercoaster, all metal and squealing*. Even from the yard, he felt a gush of air hit him, got glass in his shoes. He saw his father in a reflection on a fender that had flown off the truck, bloody, slumped, breathless. The entire block was dusted in blue flakes of metal and glass. When the professor told us this, I could see it all happening in front of me, as if I had been there.

After a break in that same term—I think it was Thanksgiving because the professor had gone home to Cleveland to see his family—he told us the story again, to remind us, but I didn't need to be reminded. It was still stuck in my head, with all my memories. He said that he had shared the story with his mother, told her why he used it in class. When he finished, she had stared at him for a long while. Finally she said *Scotty*—this was my professor's name—*Scotty, your father died in the hospital. He had a heart attack during a test.*

Isn't that funny? the professor asked us, his face flushed with embarrassment, *It seemed so—And to think that I've remembered it wrong all these years.* He chuckled nervously and waved the subject away with his hand.

Erin's long brown hair is tinted with just enough red to betray the Irish in her, to suggest a wildness that isn't really there. She locks eyes with Mario while singing Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus." She puts the tip of her finger in her mouth, just barely resting it on the top of her bottom teeth. Mario elbows the tenor next to him in the ribs—*Look at her*. Molly hadn't meant it; she'd gotten a paper cut a period earlier in math class and it smarted. She'd been sucking on it ever since.

Mario stares at her all through class, working his eyes up and down her long body. He thinks of great tangles of glistening naked limbs, of walking his fingers down every inch of her freckled skin.

He approaches her after rehearsal and takes his glasses off—*You wanna, you know, rehearse or something. At my house? Off a Erie?* He smiles his crooked smile and lets his eyelids go slack, trying to suggest mystery. She giggles—*I'm not supposed to date 'til I turn 17*. He leans in closer.

It doesn't have to be a date, he says, *You're my tutor. I'm a crap singer.*

She blushes; her eyes skitter away from his to the carpet.

When I turned twenty-two, I sent a late night email to the New York State Department of Health on a whim to find out the circumstances of my birth. I wish—for the sake of the story—that I had been drinking through a period of depression before I sent it, that instead of emailing, I had tearfully called an emergency hotline worker with a rope in my hand to ask for the same information. If I had, I could slap an Oprah sticker on anything I would write about it and it would sell like Krispy

Kremes. But it didn't happen like that. Instead, I sent an email like this: *Hi! I was adopted and I'd really like to know some more info about my background. You know, for medical reasons and stuff. I'm not really in a hurry or anything, so get back to me anytime you can. Thanks!* When they replied back, I felt the cool exhilaration of someone who has learned a secret. It turned out I was Irish-Italian and I had a non-reactive Cord Wassermann test at birth. I had no idea what that meant, but it sounded significant. I found out eye colors and heights and weights and even that my father liked baseball and movies. *I like baseball and movies!* I thought.

It also said that my mother was a linen room worker who had completed business school and that my father was a college graduate optician and that they'd never married—that was listed as the reason they'd given me up. And then I did get depressed, a little. I called my mom, and told her what I had found out. She was quiet on the phone and then I felt horrible that I hadn't thought about her before the email, that I hadn't even asked how she felt about the whole thing. And then I thought about the stories I'd made up in my head and how they were all lies now and I wished I could just unwrite that email, just take it all back and live in blissful ignorance again.

Eriñ let Mario climb on top of her even though she knew it was a mortal sin. He was handsome and there was the singing, but more than that, he was a success. After high school, he had gone to college to become an optometrist. She had stayed in town and gone to a few business classes and now she worked for a fat, pasty man

who swatted her on the ass with rolled up reports whenever he saw her walking down the hall. But that didn't matter, because she had Mario and they would be together forever and so, it really didn't matter if she was three weeks late. Which she is. She's smiling when she calls him at college, elated. She's picking out colors for its nursery, no, *his* nursery.

How do I know it's mine? he asks and, at once, she understands. She tells him that there hasn't been anyone but him, that if her mother finds out, she will kill her for sure, that he needs to come home, right now and help her figure out what to do. She says these things, but she feels everything slipping, slipping.

When Mario shows up, he sits down next to her. Neither of them say anything. She doesn't even turn her head.

Shit, Mario says finally. *Shit*. He slumps into the couch.

She twirls her hair and pretends that she's never met him, that she's still in choir and he asks her to tutor him and she says *No, absolutely not, not with you, not ever*.

I know this guy, he says after a while, *who can take care of it*.

What does 'take care of it' mean? Erin asks.

You know. Take care of it. Mario pantomimes something that conveys his meaning absolutely without looking like any action either of them had ever seen.

Oh. Mario talks about details, tells her about the guy he knew, about the *Jam* his buddy had been in. Erin stares ahead. He writes phone numbers on a slip of paper and presses it into her palm and then he writes out directions. He puts his hand

on her knee and tells her that they will get it taken care of, that it happens all the time and she shouldn't worry about it. That it's just a Jam.

After a long time, he gets up, kisses her on the forehead, and leaves. When Erin's mother comes home, Erin tells her. They go to church, to Our Lady of Victory. A nun shows her a great glass wall with babies behind it and they all look healthy and lovely and Erin aches. The nun gives her something to sign and so she does, but in her head, she names the baby growing inside of her, she names him James, and begins to love him.

Sometimes, when I'm sleeping, I stare up at the ceiling and imagine ten thousand dollars stacked up on a pallet at a bank and I wonder who decided that I was worth that much. And over lunch I ask Mom again, and I call her on the phone sometimes, at night, to ask. She can't understand why I need to know.

How could they just sell me? I ask. Don't you understand, that I was sold, that I had a price tag and I was sold.

You weren't sold, she says finally. We got you from Catholics and they wouldn't sell a person. The money, the ten thousand odd, was for processing fees. Not for you.

Oh, I say. Processing fees.

And I wonder about the process, I try to remember it.

The woman who would have been my mother waits on the bed in her hospital room, rubbing prayers into rosary beads. There is a bed and a metal tray with a half-eaten chicken breast on it, some broccoli, a jello cup. There is a rocking chair—her winter coat is draped over the arm, her car keys are in the pocket. She will drive herself home when it is all over. The wall is decorated only with a crucifix; the eyes of Christ are open and steely on the cross, not placid or pained. There is anger in them. It is the face of one who would ask Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?, the face in Mark and in Matthew. And why not? Abandoned and left to die by his closest companions, his people, his Father. Why shouldn't he be angry? Should he be indifferent about the end of his life on earth, a life that had few pleasant diversions on its path to death? My mother is angry, too. She, too, has been abandoned in this lonely place by her parents, who are ashamed of her, and her lover, who is afraid of the thing she carries. She thinks, perhaps, that God has left her as well; she reaches out for something to hold onto and finds nothing. .

2. Quiet People

When my aunts and uncles tell stories, my mother is always in the chorus, never a principle. There are stories about Phil, the accident prone, stories about John, the college bound golden boy, and certainly, there are stories about Rosemarie, the princess. In these stories, Mom was there watching John triple in the bottom of the ninth, carried Philly home after he mangled his foot in the spokes of his bicycle, was walking next to Rosemarie when she did something cute. There is only one story about my mother that gives any indication of what she may have been like:

She's eight or ten and healthy as a horse, solid, rosy cheeked and active, mostly immune to Rosemarie's constant coughing. The princess, she's prone to strep and the doctor says *those tonsils need to come out*. But she's afraid, alack-a-day, and *simply won't, just won't* go through surgery alone. Her parents fawn. *No she's too delicate*, they agree, *a flower*. *Kay*, they say, *if only it were Kay*. She could have her tonsils taken out and then work a twelve hour day in a saw mill. *If only it were Kay*.

But, says the doctor, *what if Kay had her tonsils taken out too? Genetics being what they are, hers will probably need to be taken eventually, what if, to spare poor Rosemarie the pain of convalescing alone, her big sister acts as a guide*.

Everyone turns to Mom. *Ok*, she says, her face blanching. And so, they take her healthy tonsils, too.

The reason my grandmother tells this story is not to decry needless surgery, not to praise my mother's martyrdom, but to describe the look of the two sisters,

laying side-by-side in hospital beds, slurping sherbet off wooden spoons, my mother rasping out comforting words to her poor sister.

Precious.

Each summer, Kay's father packs a picnic basket full of sausage and pepper sandwiches and drives his family to all the Catholic shrines in upstate New York. There are many of them, so many that they rarely make it to all of them. But there are two they never miss. The first is Our Lady of Fatima in Lewiston and the second is Our Lady of Victory in Lackawanna, just outside Buffalo. Victory is Kay's favorite because it's attached to an orphanage and you can walk slowly past a great glass wall and see all the unwanted babies in their pink and blue knit caps. Kay presses her nose against the glass and babbles at them and they cry and cry.

Where are their mothers? Kay asks and her father says that *Some mothers just couldn't get out of the Jams they'd made for themselves, God bless them.*

Kay thinks about the babies every so often, up in her room, while her sister Rosemary blathers on about boys in her class, about clothes and boys and make-up. Kay has no interest in these things; she just wants to save the babies. All of them. She wants to gather them up to her and hug them and tell them that they aren't *Jams* at all.

Kay falls in love once, in high school, but it ends quickly and the boy quickly marries another girl. When Kay graduates, she mopes around alone, tags along with Rosemary and her new husband, plays cards with her mother and her friends. She

works on an assembly line, putting screws into Ray-Ban aviator sunglasses twelve hours every day. Her cousin Danny feels sorry for her and asks a guy he drinks with to go out with her.

He's tall, dark haired; a Navy man who, even on those early dates, drinks too much. She wants to hold him to her and fix him. They date for a year and get engaged and then they're engaged for a year and get married. No one is happy about it, not her family, not his, not themselves. When he comes home in the afternoon after his shift in the plant, he goes to the basement to drink or else he doesn't come home in the afternoon and he drinks with Danny at the Dutch Mill. He and Danny talk about their wives and drink and drink.

After being married for a while, she asks for kids and he tries but, after some months, nothing. She remembers the babies behind the glass wall at Our Lady of Victory and tells him about them. They meet with a social worker who gives a little blonde girl. Kay loves her, but her husband is indifferent. He says he wanted a boy. And so he drinks and drinks.

Mom and I are drinking coffee and I ask her questions about Dad, which is okay now. She doesn't tear up or get angry when he's mentioned. Photographs have surfaced, recently, in which his head has not been severed by her scissors.

Did he have any hobbies? I ask.

Drinking. And smoking. He was always smoking, your father.

Was he athletic?

Your father? No, I never saw him move out of his chair. He was tall, though.

And the Navy, what did he do in the Navy?

The Navy? Drink, I suppose.

Why did you marry him? Was there anything good about him at all? This she thinks about before answering. She takes a sip of her coffee.

Bought me flowers a couple of times. He was nice, I guess. At first.

Handsome?

I suppose.

What color were his eyes? At this, she looks up to the ceiling, shakes her head.

They might have been brown, she says. Blue? I can't remember.

When Don is aboard the U.S.S. Maine, he aches for a woman because all of the guys do. They talk about it all the time. Before they go to sleep some Seabee or another will cry out *Oh Dawn Oh Dawn* while having a tug at himself and all the other guys will laugh and shout at him to *Shut his fucking head* and throw their pillows at him. Don takes turns, too, yelling *Oh Alice* and being one of them, but that's just because he wants them to like him.

No one has ever like Don, not even his own father, who never talks to anyone but sits alone in the kitchen with a tallboy, listening to the baseball game on the radio. His mother talks to him, but not kindly, because he never learned how to mix a Manhattan just the way she likes, extra dry, so dry her lips chap. No one at school

liked him either, but worse than that, no one even seemed to notice him. He escaped the razzing of the other guys in the locker room, but missed the flirty conversation with the girls in the hallway. He was a non-person, a phantom, an invisible man.

But he's popular in the Navy because he can drink, though he gets angry sometimes, not like his dad, who'll smile at the ballgame as long as he's left alone and eventually fall asleep right there at the kitchen table. No, Don is like his mother when he's drunk, mean and terrible. Still, he gets along well with the other guys and when some of them go to work at DuPont after their stint, he starts there, too, working the trick shift from midnight until midmorning. After his shift, he goes to the Dutch Mill to have a few with Danny, a guy on his crew. When Danny introduces him to his cousin, Kay, Don asks her out because it's expected. She has a far away look and she doesn't talk much. He buys her flowers a couple of times. They go out to dinner. He isn't so sure she likes him and he's positive her parents don't, though they lie and put on a good show.

After a couple months, Kay asks him if he wants kids, and so they try to have one, but he's not good at it. He's relieved when she suggests they adopt. The girl they're given doesn't take to him though, she cries when Don holds her and Kay takes her away. So he goes to the Dutch Mill with Danny and gets drunk and when Kay asks him why, he says it's because he wants a boy. But then they get me and he's out of excuses, so he drinks and drinks.

Your mother? People raise their eyebrows when I ask about what she was like. *Kay? Quiet girl. Didn't go out much. Quiet. Now Rosemarie, that's a different story all together...and they're off.* On my father: *Don? Quiet. Drank too much, I think. We don't drink, ourselves. Nice enough, Don. Quiet.* And I wonder about these quiet people, my parents, and I wonder if anyone has ever known them, if they know each other. I look for it in photographs and letters, some little fact that will reveal them to me, so that I can tell their real stories, instead of weaving together shadows.

3. Static Fuzz

These things I do remember, because I was there, of course, but they've been twisted and warped over time. They come in and out like distant radio stations, static fuzz and then music. Sometimes a new song will start before I've realized the last was finished.

Dad leans out of the cab, one boot on the clutch of the pale blue Bronco, the other dug into our lawn, like a root, and I listen to his voice reverberate off the front of our home. He says *Fuck* and that he'll come back for his tools. It sounds like the slap of a caught baseball or the backfire cars make in the hands of new drivers, like the flash of cameras before my sister's prom or silver tinkling nervously against the plates at my wedding. It's the sound of kisses; my mother's kisses on my scraped knees, like his own on my mother's lips.

And that is the end of their marriage.

Every Christmas Eve before the divorce, Dad would break out his accordion and his 15-watt amplifier and play Mel Torme's "Christmas Song" until it was time for me to go to bed. It was the only song he knew. I don't know where he kept the accordion the rest of the year; maybe in the same secret room where my parents kept my presents, the same one I would search tirelessly for in later years in hopes of finding just one dirty magazine. Wherever it was, I never found it. I liked it when

Dad played the accordion; he swayed back and forth with his uneven time in the way that all accordion players must and he smiled nervously each time he missed a chord. My mother and I would sit by the bar in the basement, crunching on burnt chestnuts and watching my sister roller-skate around us. It was nice. Everyone thought so. If I owned a set of watercolors, that's the scene I would paint. Watercolors because that's really my first memory; the only parts that are clear are the ones I've made up over time. In my picture, I would pose Dad with his head arched back, in the midst of a laugh. My sister would be skating on one foot and Mom would be smiling beatifically at all of us. It would be Rockwell-esque. Old ladies would wear it on sweatshirts.

I like to describe this scene at bars to people I barely know. I sip a beer and wave my hands around casually between details. Sometimes I'll make it seem like I'm searching my memory to remember the glint of Dad's highball glass on the bar, but really, I'm just solidifying symbols, trying to bring a cohesiveness to the story. Making themes were there is only dust. Telling the story, because of course, the real story is nice, but nothing worth telling. Just an accordion and a pair of skates and a family with some chestnuts trying to kill off time before they could open up presents.

In the story, Dad is tall and rail thin, a young Jimmy Stewart. He's wearing a white t-shirt because I don't remember what he wore and his hair is coal black and shiny with Vitalis because I remember an old bottle of the stuff being on my mother's dresser for years. He was handsome in the way that old movie stars are handsome because, after all, everyone is handsome in memories; there are no ugly people in

impressionistic paintings because everything's too blurry. He's wearing these funny boots, too—the kind that zip up the sides—because I remember my sister telling me that he wore such a pair at court one of the times she and Mom went to collect back child support. I can't remember if he would have worn jeans or slacks so I leave it out when I tell the story. I can't remember if he sang along with the accordion or even what his speaking voice sounded like, but I make it up; I give him a flat Midwestern accent, though I know that can't be right. I don't know if he'd ever even been west of Buffalo.

Every time I describe the scene, I convince myself that that's the way it was, but I feel the guilty ache of a lie creep into my belly.

My sister is crying and so I cry, too, though I don't know why. Mom had brought us into the master bedroom of our house after screaming at the phone for an hour. The bedroom is nearly empty so I stare at the four dents in the carpet where the bed had been. Most of the furniture is in a trailer across town, where we're living now. I like to sit in the empty rooms with my tape player while my sister packs leftover things in boxes. We're in the bedroom because Mom wanted to tell us something in private, something Dad didn't want us to know.

I run my finger along a brown line on the wall where the dresser used to be. In the background, my tape player is eating Michael Jackson's *Thriller*. It sounds like Alvin and the Chipmunks.

My sister and I cry for a while longer in the empty room, even after Mom goes back to packing boxes in the basement. When she calms down a bit, I ask her what it had all been about.

What does 'adopted' mean? She glares hard at me with her puffy red eyes.

You don't even know! Jesus, you're so stupid. It means Mom and Dad aren't really our parents, dummy. It means we're probably bastards or something. And now Dad's leaving and we'll be abandoned again. Jesus, I can't believe you. She shakes away from me and huffs to another empty room.

I'm tipping back in my chair when the principal, a little gray-haired man who wears wide ties, comes in holding a piece of paper. He makes a signal to Mrs. Kadelecik and she nods. I figure he's after Anthony Catalano because he's always in trouble. He's only in the 2nd grade and he already has a moustache. I smirk. I hate that Anthony Catalano. Serves him right, whatever it is.

Jimmy. Stephanie. Karen. Could you please go with Dr. Pagano? Anthony Catalano turns around and snickers at me. I feel my face burning. What did I do? Was it the penny I threw at the blonde lunch lady? But that was weeks ago! And why are those girls going, if that was it? They were miles away when that penny pinged off the side of the blonde lunch lady's head.

We don't go to the office, though. Instead, we go to some other classroom near the 4th graders' rooms. There are some other kids there I know from the bus stop. Everyone's sitting around in a circle, looking red-faced and guilty. After Dr.

Pagano ushers in a couple more bunches of kids, the lady in the front of the room clears her throat.

You're all here because you're part of a new club we have here in school. It's called the Banana Splits and it's a very special club. Not everybody can be in it. We look around at each other, proud of our good luck. You see, we know what a hard thing divorce can be for kids, so this club is a way to talk about what you're feeling.

Stephanie raises her hand.

My parents aren't divorced. They're separated. They might get back together. The lady in the front of the room smiles at Stephanie, knowingly. *That's always a possibility, she says, You can always hope that something will happen.* A younger kid I don't know shoots up his hand.

What's divorce? he asks. A couple of us rolled our eyes. Where has this kid been? I raise my hand.

Can I go back to class?

Because of late night movies, I figured that it was expected that, when I was old enough, I would track Dad down and shove a knife into him.

I would come home from school to find my mother crying. She would be hunched over the kitchen table with her head in her arms clutching a piece of paper. I would set down my books and go over to console her.

What's the matter, Mom? I would ask, and then my face would wrinkle up in anger. *Is it Father?*

She would nod and wipe her tears away and hand me the paper. It would be a letter written in my father's pointy cursive handwriting. Incensed, I'd tear the letter into shreds, but not the envelope. No, I'd need that to track him down.

I would show up at some post office in a rural southern town clutching the letter and an old picture of Dad. I'd saunter up to the clerk and slam them on his counter. I wouldn't shout; I'd whisper menacingly, annunciating for effect.

Tell me where he is!

The clerk would understand right away and cock his thumb at a backroom, which would be guarded by tall Mexican men with handlebar mustaches and bandoleers. I would hop the counter and, with one artful swipe of my knife, off both of them. I'd kick down the door and there he'd be.

I've been waiting for you, son, he'd say. He'd seem resigned to his fate. We'd fight for hours, dancing the steps of this primeval father-son dance until I'd finally get the best of him. As he died in my arms, I'd forgive him for making my mother cry.

Every month, the same business envelopes with Dad's tortured cursive on the front are in our mailbox, unless he's drinking again. Those months, Mom will call our lawyer and maybe they'll go to court. This month, there is a note wrapped around the check. It isn't addressed to me, but Mom lets me read it anyway. *You should*

know your father, she says. The note says that the check is fifty-seven dollars and eighty-six cents less than usual because he's subtracting all the postage he's paid sending me the checks over the years and the goddamned courts didn't tell him he was responsible to pay postage. He says that, from then on, he'll subtract whatever postage he uses from the checks and if we don't like it, he'll see us in court. *No more*, it says on the bottom of the note.

I sit in my bedroom with a calculator for hours, trying to figure out how he arrived at the figure. Fifty-seven dollars and eighty-six cents. I can't get it. I allow for inflation, for changes in stamp prices, but still, I can't get that number. How had he gotten it? What does it mean?

4. The Cost of Things

Do you know what it costs to live? Mom asks me. I hadn't realized it cost anything. I thought we could just go on living for free, minus the cost of a Snickers bar now and again. I assumed it was a trick question. Parents are always asking trick questions like *Did you do your homework?* and *Where have you been?*; questions to which no reasonable, thinking person can possibly provide an answer. I give it a shot.

Nothing? Mom shakes her head.

For starters, she says, we have to rent the lot the trailer is sitting on. That's two-hundred eighty dollars a month. Three thousand three hundred sixty dollars a year. I'm stunned. Who had ever heard of paying that much for anything?

We're getting ripped off, I say. Mom nods.

Do you know how much I make a year? I don't. I wait in giddy anticipation of the number, lightheaded. *Last year, I made just over six thousand dollars.* My eyes widen. Mom's been withholding money from me, I think. She's been pulling in a three-thousand dollar profit and still denies me all of my requests. I think about all the packs of Upper Deck baseball cards I had sacrificed, all the lonely Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles that still sit, unpurchased, on shelves while Mom has been hoarding cash. I feel cheated, betrayed.

Remember, stupid, she says, noticing my glare of indignation, *food costs money, too. And heat. And hot water. The car and the phone. All of that costs*

money. I guess what I'm trying to say is, well, wouldn't you like to start earning something of your own? Some money only you could spend? Maybe buy your old mother a steak now and again? But I'm off already, swimming in Scrooge McDuck-sized piles of doubloons.

The man who stops me at my mailbox isn't dressed up, but he's clean enough to make him stand out from the people who wait there for checks due from angels in city offices.

Excuse me, he says, Do you want a job? I look around to see if anyone is behind me. There isn't. He's a salesman for a new newspaper being printed two towns over and he needs someone to deliver free issues in the park as a promotion. I take the job without asking anyone's permission and begin throwing papers right away.

I haven't really walked around the park much. There are places I go, of course—Doug's, Grandma's—but I don't really know what it looks like as a whole. It's just a place I live; it's not home. The little ranch house on Timberline is home, it was where my whole family had been together, not this place where the remaining bits of us live.

The park is laid out in interconnected circles—like the Olympic rings—and around those circles are all kinds of trailers. In the front of the park, the part that you can see from the road, are newer doublewides with oak-stained porches and ivy-wrapped latticework. But no one lives in these; wires and cables dangled from their

roofs, waiting to be connected. I still deliver papers to them, but they pile up in front of the door. Dormant campers rest on some of the small lots near the doublewides and, occasionally, elderly men in Cadillacs come to check on them, before driving off to wherever they really live. Some trailers, like mine, are tidy enough on the outside, missing the odd square of the vinyl skirting that hides wheels and pipes. Others are Soweto shacks of metal and wood masses covered in blue tarps, fused together with joint compound or tar. TVs blink through spider-webbed windowpanes and kerosene leaks into the ground from rusted tanks. Fat women with hard, cracked hands sit on lounge chairs outside, smoking and pushing hotdogs around little hibachis with forks while innumerable children bang in and out of torn screen doors.

I'll drive through the park years later, after Mom has finally moved away, and note that our trailer had become one of these places. I'll mention it to my wife, that it's too bad the place wasn't kept up better.

So? she'll say, *You hated it there anyway, right?* And I'll nod.

The second Mom's Chevette lurches out of the driveway, I'm at the kitchen sink with a box of matches, burning a stack of things I've saved for just that purpose. I spend hours huddled over that sink when no one was home, burning things. I start by lighting up Kleenex because I liked to watch it consume itself before it hits the ground and vanishes into nothing. I make little fireballs with my sister's Aqua Net, designs with lighter fluid that I light up with matches. I burn things and then clean up after myself, so that no one will know, because how could Mom deal with her a

firebug kid and everything else. But the second the car pulls out of the driveway, I'm at that sink.

Things—trailers, bills, fathers, orphanages— just need burning,. My hands itch when I'm alone. I want to get so hot that the fever finally breaks, and there I'll be, happy and sweating, laughing on the other side.

One winter day, I go to the shed for something and see a kid sucking on a hose that leads to our kerosene tank, siphoning fuel. I threaten to kick his ass, but he cries, sobs apologies. His nose runs and he wipes it with the back of a blue mitten. I know him; his name is John. He get on a different bus to a different school each morning, and from the times I've heard him speak, I'm pretty sure that something is wrong with him.

Why are you doing that?

I'm sorry, he sobs, Dad... He trails off, struggling for words I already know.

What does it taste like, the kerosene? I ask, after waving off his explanation.

He thinks for a moment, sniffing through his last tears.

I don't know. Like gas.

I let him run back to his trailer with his sled and the kerosene after telling him not to come back and I never tell Mom. Then, I go back inside and burn some newspaper in the sink, pretending it's John's dad.

My best friend Doug's trailer is patched together with scraps of plywood and rubber, but still, the wind whistles through it, so it's relatively cool in the summertime. A half dozen bikes in various stages of construction are scattered about the front yard in pools of oil and parts. The lawn—if you could call it a lawn—grows in long, straggly patches like the hair on my Aunt Lottie's head and is mounded up in spots where deceased pets had been buried. There are gravestones for these pets here and there, too, written in the illegible scrawl of Doug's younger sister.

There's a cat tied to the porch with a bit of clothesline, its head lolls to one side and its tongue hangs out of its mouth. Doug's mom found it somewhere and brought it home, hoping to rehabilitate it from whatever was done to it. The cat scares me because I can't predict its moods—it alternately purrs and lunges—and so I have to time my ascent up the stairs, wait for when its head dips to the side farthest away from me. Doug's family is equally unpredictable. There are different rules everyday, different men lounging murkily in the barcalounger in front of the television, different children dropped off by different fathers from different visits, different nametags on different uniforms thrown on the table next to scraps of dinner and bowls of half-eaten Frosted Flakes, schoolbooks, packages of cigarettes, Budweiser cans, Nintendo cartridges, red envelopes from the power company, and on and on. The vicissitudes of poverty. I try not to touch anything in the trailer because it all seems contaminated, bad, reeking of disease. I try not to talk to anyone but Doug, if I can help it, because they'll just make fun of me, of my Reeboks or the book

in my back pocket; my glasses. Even Doug's mom makes fun of me, through her rotting teeth and coffee breath.

The trailer seems empty, but I try a knock on Doug's door anyway.

'S me.

Doug opens the door. He's lying on his bed across the room, but he can still reach over and open the door. And he isn't particularly tall for a sixth grader, either. There is something to be said for living in a place so small that you can operate it from one chair.

Doug's room is big enough for one twin bed, but it holds two bunked together with a strange contraption of duct tape, wood screws, and bungee cords. His walls are covered in stolen road signs and posters of women naked enough to get me in trouble if I tried to hang them up in my room. The other bed in the room belongs to Doug's brother, Chuck, but he's gone. I heard he was touching little girls by the canal, but not from any reliable sources, so I can't be sure. When Doug talked about him, it doesn't sound like he's coming back anytime soon.

What do you want to do? Doug asks, paging through *Sports Illustrated*. The corners of his eyes are already creased; his hands are already callused.

Let's just burn it all down, I think, let's just break that fever. But I say, *I dunno.*

I come home one afternoon with bloody knees to find my mother crying in my closet. Tom pushed me down a hill of asphalt and then punched me in the back of the

head. It stings where he hit me, my neck has gone stiff and my fingers are tingling. I'm crying of course, but I'm always crying now, so I don't notice the wet. I'm looking for Bactine and a Band Aid to stop the bleeding, and I'll need a needle to pick the rocks out of my knees. But then I see her, sitting in my closet, clutching onto my clothes, shattered. And I've never seen her like that, torn apart and weeping, because she's what holds what's left of it together. We're an old taffeta gown, my family, crumbling, crumbling.

The windows in the trailer aren't like the normal windows houses have. For one, all but one of the cranks that open them are broken or lost, so I have to pop out the corner of the screen and open the window with a pair of pliers. "Opened" means that one pane of glass wedges out from the bottom about 30 degrees; the only way to catch a breeze is if it's riding on Oswald's magic bullet. Popping the whole thing out with the emergency latch is an option, but every time I do, mosquitoes make my arms look like topographical maps of the Himalayas. So I crack it open and lay on a bed sheet in my underwear with a bag of frozen peas on my head, waiting for the oscillating fan to hit me. It gets so hot that the carpet smells like it's burning, so hot that my posters slide off the wall, leaving slick snail trails behind.

Still, I get up and grab a box of matches from my nightstand. I light one on my way to the kitchen and let it burn out on my fingertips. Huddled over my sink, I light twenty more; even though I'm already burning up.

At a party, years after I stop burning things, a girl tells me that she's been going to therapy since she was a little girl, to deal with abandonment issues. *I don't know where I would be today without it*, she says. I tell her that I was poor and so I just lit things on fire. Ah, how we laughed at that!

The day I stop wanting to burn the world was haystack dry; the brittle grass snaps and shatters under footsteps. I pick up a clod of dirt and crumble it between my fingers like a Dust Bowl farmer, thinking that the heat, the drought, is too much for anyone to take. I'm the first to see Tom strutting toward the field, carrying a rusty red gas can. He's smiling like a maniac.

Watcha fairies doing? Tom asks.

Lost the ball, Doug says, pointing to the swampy expanse of woods behind the field where I had foul tipped the game away. Tom lights a cigarette and sits down on the grass.

Soon, Doug and I begin tossing around a stray Frisbee, catching passes between our legs, throwing behind our backs, until I misjudge a handle and the Frisbee floats to the ground near Tom. I open my hand so that he'll pass it back, but he doesn't. Instead, he picks it up and stares at it, running his hands over the insignia on top, as if he's never seen a Frisbee before. And then he stands, twirling it around one finger.

C'mon, Doug says, *Give it*. Tom drops the disk to the ground, kicks it over so that it becomes a bowl.

C'mon.

Tom fills it with gas from his can, inhaling fumes. He looks small, reptilian.

Jesus, Tom, what are you doing? This from me, though I know. Tom pulls out a book of matches from his shorts and strikes one, holding it until flames lick his fingertips. And then he drops it. The fire jumps onto a patch of grass Tom stamps with a Converse. He tries to stomp the Frisbee, too, but the plastic is too warm and sticks to his foot. He shakes his leg spastically, sending gas and fire and melted plastic to other places. And then he run, making big circles around the field, laps, trailing fire behind him. The fire seems to stick to the dry grass. He cries, screams out for help, but neither of us knew what to do for him. Finally, Tom shakes his shoe free and the fire with it, and keeps running. I watch him go, wondering where he thinks he can go to escape it.

Mom tells me to sign my first paycheck when I get it, so I do, and then I stick it in my sock drawer. I take it out and hold it up to the light, once and a while, to see the watermark, run my hand over where the newspaperman had written *forty-seven dollars*, longhand. He had handed me the check personally, was waiting in his car for me to come home one day after school. *Sorry kid, nobody bought the paper. Won't need you to deliver anymore.* I nodded and took check, told him that I was sorry, which wasn't true at all. In fact, I would have been surprised if people had subscribed to the paper, because I had been dumping the stacks I was supposed to have delivered

in the bushes outside an abandoned trailer. For all I know, they're still there, a soggy black mountain of old news, facts melting into the ground.

5. Oranges for Tony

Tony Colucci's face is coated in thick, greasy foundation the color of a nectarine. His cheeks are sunken and caked with rouge. There is something almost pretty about him. Think Ziggy Stardust. Only completely bald, Italian, 84-years-old, and dead.

He is dressed in a suit that isn't his. It's double-breasted and perfectly tailored. Too stylish for Tony, whose one mint-green leisure suit lasted him through decades of weddings and christenings. I wonder who took the measurements for the new suit. Did the mortician measure his arms? His waist? *His inseam?* Did she choose his jewelry: a gold crucifix, a monogrammed tie tack, a wedding ring that had sat on the windowsill above his kitchen sink for years? How did she make his hands look so soft and feminine? Did she soak them and rub lotion into the calluses, manicure them and apply clear nail polish?

The mortician sits on an antique chair in the hallway, next to a table full of brochures and business cards. I grab a couple and stuff them in my pockets so that she will shake my hand and offer her condolences. Her hand is warm and she has a firm grip, but it's hard to stop thinking about what she does with it. She smells like the casket, like raspberry body spray.

I'm six and Uncle Tony comes over to grandma's house to see me. My parents are splitting up because, Mom says, they are tired of pretending, and Gram

has taken us in for a while. Dad went away, which is better, I guess. I like Gram's house all right, it smells like old pinecones and she has strange food that Mom never has like dates, which I like to put in my cereal, and artichokes, which I'm not sure what to do with, though I like the concept.

My cousins come over all the time, too, which is cool, even though Mike is a spazz and can't catch a pop fly to save his life. He flails his arms all around when he tries for one, which makes it even worse. There is dignity, I think, in letting it bonk off your head. He makes me feel like a homerun king, though I know I suck, too. Last time we played, Mike's dad said that I run funny. I laughed and agreed, because it was easier than asking what made it funny. No one else is here today, though; Tony came to see me in particular.

Uncle Tony is wide: three of me standing side by side at least. He has this thick grey hair that sticks out of his ears like cornhusks and wiry black hair that pokes up above his shirt collar all around. Mom says he used to have a full head of curly hair when she was little, but it retreated to his back. When Mom cuts what is left of his hair, she uses the electric clippers to make a line so that he knows where his body ends and his head begins.

Tony is old, but he still gets on the floor to play with me whenever I see him. He sings these five notes when he sits to cover up the noise of his joints. Sometimes, I sing it when I sit down, too. It just comes out; I don't know why. Today, we play War with a double deck of cards for a while and then make giant paper airplanes out of old newspapers. They don't fly very far, but they're fun to make. When Gram

calls us for lunch, we abandon the planes. She has the ingredients for BLT sandwiches on the counter, even though she knows I don't like tomatoes or lettuce and it isn't much of a sandwich with just bacon. Still, I give it a go with just the LT. Tony grabs a handful of tomatoes and we walk out to the porch. He stares off across the yard for a long time, eating those tomatoes, the pale red juice dribbling down his chin.

It'll be fine, he says, after a while, and I believe him.

I kneel next to my mother in front of the casket. She looks up from her folded hands and smiles. In the car on the way over, she warned my sister and me about how he would look. *The mortician's really shitty*, she said, *I don't know what your aunt was thinking. Say he looks good, though, if anyone asks.* As the executor of his will, Mom has been in and out of the funeral home over the last few days to sign papers and work out whatever ceremony is necessary to plant a loved one in the ground forever. She was Tony's favorite niece and, since he was childless and his wife, Lottie, is crumbling slowly, slowly, the duties of sweeping up his last earthly messes went to her. For days, Mom has held the same steely expression she uses when she drives on long trips.

I'm twelve and we visit Tony at his ballpark. It's not really his, but it might as well be. He goes to every game he can, sometimes as many as four a week, usually with his cousin Danny or his friend Santini who used to work on the railroads with

him. I can't tell the difference between them and I doubt they can tell the difference between me and any other kid either. Both of them are thin, craggy old men with bony fingers and twisted mouths. I wonder what they talk about with my Uncle Tony, if they talk about women or cars. They sure don't say much when I'm around besides *hey kid, bag of peanuts* or *hey kid, you're blockin my view*.

Sometimes, when neither can make it Tony offers the other ticket to me, but this time, I sit with Mom in another part of the park and we walk over to see him during the third inning. I stand in the pile of shells next to his seat and he shakes my hand with his salty fingers. He buys me a Coke and I sip it slowly, knowing that when it's gone, I'll have to go sit in my own seat. He asks me about school, my mother about work, talks about the game and the weather. We ask about Aunt Lottie and whichever old man is not with him at the time.

When my Coke is finally gone, we say goodbye and as my mother turns around, he presses five dollars into my hand and winks.

Buy an ice cream, Jimmy. Don't tell your mother.

I tell her as soon as we sit down and feel ashamed.

When Mom stands up, I hurriedly cross myself so I can follow her. I don't want to be alone. An hour earlier, a man from the V.F.W. cornered me in the bathroom. He had a prosthetic leg and he was wearing a navy blue hat cocked to the side of his head. He looked very solemn. Even though the bathroom was completely

empty, he stood at the urinal right next to mine. Clearly, the boundaries of bathroom etiquette don't exist in funeral homes.

You must be very proud of your uncle's service to the country, son, he said.

Zzzip.

I am, I said. Uncle Tony fixed trucks in France during World War II, but he never talked about it. In fact, he never talked about wars or politics at all and he quickly walked away from anyone who did. He was much more likely to discuss proper steak grilling technique or whether or not the current crop of Yankees were bums. The only remnant of war in Tony's life was a commemorative plate that hung on the wall next to his fridge. Lottie bought it from the flea market.

I feel like I knew your uncle, being here, the V.F.W. man said. *You can tell a lot about a man by seeing how much his family loves him. I know he'd be proud of how much everybody's doing for him now.*

Yes, I think so, too, I said, though I didn't. In all probability, Tony would rather have been alive than well regarded. He'd been fighting to stay alive for months and, instead of a welcome release, his death felt like a failure. All the pills he had been taking, all of the tests and operations were for nothing. He died alone in a hospital bed surrounded by tubes and machines and is now slathered in Mary Kay products.

I'm older and pimply and no longer cute fat but fat fat and the awkwardness isn't going away and the girls aren't flocking. He lives in Florida during the winters,

so we make sure to visit him at his house in the fall before he leaves. He has scary furniture with claw feet that remains immaculately white and unworn. Around the furniture on glass tables are more tchotchkes than at Niagara Falls gift shops. He has golden and porcelain Buddhas, small marble figurines of chariot races, glass eggs on little wooden tripods, broken wind-up drummers, ornate antique espresso machines, and cabinets stuffed with china sets, all of which sit untouched and largely un-talked about. His wife is Jewish, so Talmudic scenes and large landscapes of Israel hang here and there on the silky wallpaper. We don't talk about those either because Gram doesn't like to remember that Lottie is a Jew. Tony keeps his things in boxes in the basement or in the dishwasher, places he knows his wife won't go. They aren't things you display, anyway: newspaper clippings and old watches, mostly. And whatever he saves for me out of cereal boxes. I want all of this stuff to add up to who he is, but I know they are just things in his house.

We take Gram and Aunt Rose, his younger sisters, to his house because they're too old to drive themselves at night. They're small and fragile and their papery skin looks like it will tear if you pull at it. I have to help them into the car and carry the three-liter-on-sale bottle of soda and the last squash from the garden they bring as gifts.

There is really nothing to do at his house, so the women play cards and Tony brings me to his den, where we watch Wheel of Fortune. He can't spell very well and likes to guess after every tum, so the game is much more fun than when Mom

watches it at home. The reception is bad and, after fiddling with the rabbit ears, he clicks off the portable and talks.

He tells me stories about the railroad, how his friend lost a hand because he wasn't paying attention. Then he tells me a story about my mother when she was a girl, about the time she had to get her perfectly healthy tonsils taken out because her sister, Rosemarie, was afraid of going through the surgery alone. He also talks about me, how I never fit into the baby clothes everyone gave my mother at the shower and how, when I was a baby, my tongue was so long that people had to push it in my mouth to keep it from hanging out. I sit and listen to him even though I've heard these stories before because I want to learn how men act, what they say when they are with other men.

At the funeral, a fat woman wearing a dress covered in big purple flowers sings Schubert's Ave Maria tunelessly. Like the man with the prosthetic leg, she has never known my uncle. He hadn't been to church in years, even before he'd gotten sick. The day before, at the wake, the same woman gave my mother a questionnaire to fill out so that the priest could prepare for the service. It had spots to list Tony's hobbies, jobs, and a section labeled "interesting anecdotes."

Anecdotes? my mother asked.

Yeah, you know...funny stories, trips you might have taken with him, little habits he had. Anecdotes. Anecdotes. We thought for a while about the questionnaire while the fat woman gorged herself on macaroons from the funeral

home's complimentary cookie tray, trying to come up with the perfect one-liner to sum up Tony's life. Finally, Mom wrote about the time she complimented Tony's shirt at dinner and he took it off and gave it to her. He did things like that.

I'm a man, I think, because I'm signed up to go to college. I'm tired of visiting, but I go one last time to see him, hoping that he'll be more than he is. He is huddled at the card table in the kitchen, playing Rummy with his sisters and his wife. All of them are coughing into paper towels because it's cold season and they're old. Tony's cold will turn into pneumonia and it will kill him during my first semester. He is very thin already; his shoulders look like wire hangers in his shirt and the skin under his chin hangs down to his chest. He is grey and cold and distant.

No one talks during the card game, not even to swear at a bad hand. He trembles with each draft from the doorway and wears a heating pack strapped to his back. I watch them play for a while and then, embarrassed, I wander into the den to watch the news by myself.

The priest is Tanzanian and speaks with a heavy accent, but he is loud and expressive and so, later on, people will talk about how moving the service was, how Tony really would have been proud. The priest has this dramatic way of pronouncing the word *legacy*, slowly, as if it is three words. He repeats it over and over again.

His le-ga-cy is in the hearts of his loved ones.

His le-ga-cy is as a good husband to his wife, Lottie.

The priest never talks about the anecdotes we wrote down. Instead, he talks about Tony's love of gardening. He says that Tony loved to spend time pruning his orange trees in his backyard. This is true; we had written it in the "hobbies" section on the questionnaire. Tony hadn't gardened in years, though, not since he stopped going to Florida. The priest didn't know that, though, so I let him continue his metaphor.

Making things grow will be his legacy, the priest says. When he finishes, I stand in line with the other pallbearers and walk down the aisle to collect the coffin. One of the pallbearers works for the church; we could only find five men in the family willing to do it. We were all given small black ribbons to wear on our lapels. The hired man's ribbon is frayed from use.

We heft the box up onto our shoulders. It feels good and purposeful to lift something, to be busy. As I carry his coffin out of the church, I think about that word, *legacy*, and Tony's oranges, rotting on the ground in another state.

6. Paying for Passage

The first time I get a tuition bill in college, I throw up in the bathroom sink. Then I call the Bursar.

This is a mistake, right? I ask. Four thousand five hundred forty-eight dollars? I've got loans, don't I? Scholarships?

Of course, she says, but they don't cover this. I rub my head, which is what I do when I'm nervous, pulling out little follicles of hair. They don't grow back.

Upstate New York is lousy with country club colleges like the one I chose in Elmira; admissions officers troll high schools in rural areas for wide-eyed overachievers with troubled pasts shepherded around by guidance counselors who wouldn't know the difference between Cornell and Pensacola State if it was drawn up for them in a helpful bulleted chart. The admissions officers put on school-colored striped ties and take the kids on tours of their finely manicured grounds, point out all the ivy and the fancy monogrammed topiary and nudge them into decisions with half-scholarships for early commitments. *This is the way to go, they say, your past can't get you here.* So you run and then you throw up in the sink after your first semester, trying to figure out how many jobs you'll need to pay Charon for passage.

I feel a queasy as I walk into the record store in my brown Payless oxfords and my new white polyester dress shirt. I meet a manager at the front and she takes me back into a tiny room furnished only with a TV on a cart. The manager, a small

woman wearing a black business suit dotted with clingy white pills, hands me a couple tax forms and a short multiple-choice test which she tells me to take after I've watched the tapes stacked by the TV. There is one about theft, about how shoplifting affected the cost of the products in the store and even (gulp) employee's paychecks. There's one about customer service, too, about the company's policy of the customer being right even when they're wrong. There is even a video about dress code and personal hygiene. I'm rapt. I feel like I'm learning some kind of complicated secret handshake. I make notes on a piece of paper towel so that I won't forget anything.

The very worst calls that come over the loudspeaker in the department store, I have learned, are coded. You can't call out that a child has been abducted or that an elderly woman is having a seizure in the snack food aisle next to the Pop Tarts. Instead, you page Mr. Picasso or Mrs. Strongbow. There is a whole system of codes that even the lowliest flunky in the dingiest department store must commit to memory. Most of these codes are filed into the deepest recesses of the human brain, by the information you got from your Earth Science teacher. Not so for Code Brown—Mr. Brown—the code for an overflowing toilet.

One particular Tuesday when the call comes in, I'm the only stockboy on. I put my head down and grab the mop from the storeroom. Department stores scrimp on supplies, so the mop is just the chintzy kind with the little sponge head anybody can buy for three dollars. There aren't any gloves especially put aside for cleaning,

either. We're just supposed to take them off the shelf in Housewares and then make a tally on a clipboard. When I get there, though, there aren't any gloves left.

The bathroom is next to the alcove restaurant in the front of the store. I put a "Do Not Enter" sign in front of it and open the door. Water rushes out, so I quickly shut the door behind me.

There's an inch of water but the smell, the smell, is far deeper. I look around for the plunger and find one with a broken handle, which means I'll be wrist deep in whatever awaits me. Maybe it's just kids playing with toilet paper, I think, maybe it's just white pulp and water. I look up at the closed door of the stall. People always close the stall door when they overflow the toilet, as if they can hide what they've done, how they've left their mess to someone else.

Then, like a dead man, a pair of underwear floats past me from underneath the stall.

I don't stop to reason why someone might have discarded his underwear; I know that, whatever the reason, it has to be awful. And I know that I will clean up whatever foul, reeking shit that is spattered on the walls of that stall with my bare hands because I'm getting paid to do it. It's what life costs.

Charlie, the guy who manages the butcher shop I work at, looks like a New England sailor, like Ahab sans patch and peg. He wears mesh gauntlets at work because he once cut his hand on the band saw he uses to separate pork ribs. I was there. His blood mixed with the pig's blood in a brownish pool under the cutting

table. It smelled like metal and burning bone. Without pausing, he grabbed a rag from the counter and wrapped it around his hand. *Tell Paul I went on break*, he said and walked out the back door. Fifteen minutes later, he returned, his hand stitched up with red thread like a baseball. No one talked to him for the rest of the day.

Of all the guys in the shop, though, I like Charlie best. He knows my mother and gave me the job because he thinks I'm desperately in need of male guidance. Every so often he claps me on the shoulder and asks how I'm doing in school.

What classes are ye taking now, matey, he says, approximately.

Um, Eastern Philosophy. And Irish Poetry. And African Lit. Oh, and there's this one class on Holistic Learning I'm pretty into right now. Charlie scrunches up his face up and walks away, shaking his head. I've seen similar expressions at wakes.

If you're stealthy enough, you can hide for hours in the bookstore. There's a trick that I've picked up from some of the older guys: pick up a few esoteric titles and then go to the map section and lie down. No one ever buys. People buy maps at gas stations, not gigantic chains with adjoining latte shops.

Even with my disappearing acts, I still have to work at least six hours out of an eight hour shift. I would lurch down the aisles like a zombie, my mouth sandperry from the recycled air, shielding my nametag from any customer I pass. They can find *Chicken Soup for the Golfer's Soul* themselves. Once every shift, I'll go to the bathroom and sit on the toilet for a half hour, reading and rereading the week's circular while drinking a soda.

The Japanese students in the ESL program I work for speak little English and wrap most things they eat in little seaweed tissue papers. The women have tiny feet, bruised and covered in knobby bunions, though they still squeeze them into stilettos everyday. They're forward and flirty, but only with Americans. A few would make intricate origami with thousands of folds and leave them in my mailbox. The men wear rock t-shirts with butchered English lyrics on them, wear wrap-around sunglasses, carry phones the size of matchbooks. When they aren't in class, all of them—the boys and the girls—sing Elton John songs in the lounge while one of them plays piano. *And I think it's gonna be a rong rong time...I'm a locket man...*

I'm supposed to teach them colloquial expressions, so we sit in a circle on the floor of my room and I say *Kiss my ass, motherfucker* and they say it back. And I teach them when to use *testicles* and when to use *balls* and when it's okay to call somebody an asshole or a piece of shit. When they blush, I knew they've got it.

One night, I come home staggeringly drunk from a bar. I stand outside my room, stabbing at the door with my key, trying to find the lock. Takashi, the oldest of the students, is sitting in the hallway, fiddling with a paper crane. He laughs at me. *Asshole?* he asks.

Yeah, I say. Good.

The literary heritage of the city of Elmira, NY is not as significant as its chamber of commerce would have visitors believe. Basically, it relies on the fact that

a couple dead writers passed through and left some garbage behind. Nevertheless, someone needs to work as a tour guide around those stacks of garbage, and who better than a destitute English major to do it?

I'm on the job a week before I realize that the stuff in the manual I've memorized will not be sufficient to earn any kind of tip. The only people who seem entertained by the rote material are old ladies just happy to be outside. So I lie. *In that box, I say, is Mark Twain's writing hand, preserved in formaldehyde. It was stolen by grave robbers in the 20's. They blanch and turn to their compatriots. Can we see it, they ask. No, I say. Too dangerous.* I point to the fluorescents on the ceiling; *It would shrivel up in the light.* They nod and grope the box as we pass. *Now here is Harriet Beecher Stowe's wooden leg. Few people knew about it because, as we all know, she was incredibly vain. You'll never see a photograph of it.*

And the tips come rolling in.

As an RA, they told us in training, the only thing you have to do is make sure people know you have a walkie talkie. Once they know you're connected to authority, they'll fall in line. So I knock on a hockey player's door when I hear his girlfriend crying. *Dean, I say, let me in.* When he doesn't answer, *I'm going to call someone on my walkie talkie.*

Fuck you, he says. Dean's been drunk since I met him a month ago. My third night on duty, he shit in a furnace grate. *C'mon, Dean,* I say. I depress the button on my walkie talkie so that he knows I mean business, then I go in my room and sit on

my bed., Minutes later, his girlfriend knocks on my door. Her mascara is running and she has a cut on her forehead.

Can I use your phone? she asks. *Dean threw his against the wall.* I nod.

When she's done with her phone call, I turn her toward me.

You know, I can help you, I say, *I learned about all of this. In training.*

Fuck you, she says, and heads back to Dean's room.

My roommate is a full-payer from Massachusetts who smells of liniment and has a ring of acne around his muzzle. His name is Brandon and his parents and his parents' parents and, in all likelihood, his parents' parents' parents, went to finer institutions and had sighed with relief when C-student Brandon told them that at least he wasn't going to a state school. Brandon gets up at two in the afternoon, showers, and lounges around in his bathrobe for the rest of the day. He listens to post-Peter Cetera Chicago, drinks Earl Grey tea, and puts inspirational quotations from pop songs all around the room. I read them when I come home from work.

We've got to hold onto what we've got, one said. *It doesn't make a difference if we make it or not.* I stare at that quote several times a day, trying to decide if Bon Jovi is right.

From what I can tell, Brandon does not attend any classes. I go to all of them, even the tutorial sessions for my English 101 class, which everyone cuts. I love sitting in those cold gothic buildings listening to turtlenecked feminists quote Cixous and fat, bearded, tweedy English profs rant about Freud and Ben Johnson. I join

every club I could. If college came in a liquid form, I would have injected it into my veins. It seems like a way out, a way to finally feel solid, and I don't want anyone to take it from me.

But that's not why I throw up in the sink. That happens after I hear Brandon call home and, between sips of tea, casually ask his parents for a thousand dollars so that he can buy some new clothes. I throw up because I realize that if I manage to cobble together some kind of life out of air, the odds are pretty good that my children will be acne riddled pop-song quoting shits who sip tea on my dime instead of going to class.

7. Arrival *

There are schools like the one that hires me out of college all over New York State, all over the country, really, if you drive far enough past suburban strip malls and quaint historical villages. You will find them near once prominent factories that now stand empty, reminders of a time when the town was not great, perhaps, but sturdy. Proud and independent. These schools will be at the ends of empty Main Streets dotted with failing bars and outdated dress shops with yellowed windows. They will be near American Legions decorated with hand lettered marquees that list the names of the dozen or so recently graduated sons and daughters stationed in some desert fighting wars they would have failed quizzes on a year prior. These schools are packed with children before they open. Even in winter, students will huddle in the foyer waiting for the morning bell to send them to their lockers a full hour before class. They list around from class to class as if on a breeze during the day, and then station themselves in hallways and gyms and classrooms until nightfall when their parents pick them up. It's not that they are eager to learn, God knows; it's just that there is no place else for them to be. There are so many of these small town schools that they seem hardly worth mentioning, cliché almost. The difficulty is that even people living clichéd lives must go on living them, even when they are too boring to be of note to most outsiders.

They offer to start me at thirty-six thousand dollars a year, six times more than my mother made the year after the divorce, twelve and a half times more than a year

of support from my old man, three and a half times more than I was worth when I came into the world and I said yes. I feel, staring down at my first paycheck, that I'm finally holding onto something.

Karen and I get engaged in April and move in with my mother after graduation. Mom has moved out of the trailer and into a house in the city with a view of a housing project. Progress is progress, though. We manage to stay there for the short side of a week in the twin beds Mom, the good Catholic she is, thoughtfully sets up for us. Then, we rent an apartment we can't afford, buy some garage sale furniture, and live lean for the summer. Some nights, we sit out on the rickety balcony and listen to the quiet and I can't remember anything.

Zac holds his index finger to the side of his nose and blows snot all over his desk. It comes out in a bright green fan. He laughs when it dribbles off the desk onto the carpet and then he starts rocking, theatrically mad. I'm not supposed to be watching, which is why it scares me so much. Zac is a negative attention junkie, and so he usually makes sure he has a crowd, like the time when he peeled a six-inch piece of road rash off his forearm in the front of the room, while my first period English class gaped. Or the time he ate pieces of a test on *The Lord of the Flies*. Or when he slapped himself in the face hard enough to leave a handprint after I yelled at him for talking. Other people's eyeballs are Zac's drug of choice and there is an unlimited supply in high school. Pot and coke and acid and everything else he pours

into his body are just substitutes. But now he's doing it alone. I think of my father drinking by the fireplace late into the night, long after he thought I'd gone to bed.

I've had Zac in my class for the past two years and I can't stand the sight of him. Everything about him repulses me, from his fashionably punk black fingernails to the little railroad tracks on his knobby black teeth. We communicate by grunts and menacing squints like gorillas jockeying for territory.

I'm tired of feeling pity for him, tired of the weepy conferences where he tells me about his predictably shitty home life, tired of hours of meetings with various administrators, teachers, and parents concerning him, tired of the hundreds of forms I've filled out regarding everything from his attention deficit to the dynamic between him and his best friend—a creepy goth boy with Asperger's who writes essays about killing infants behind Bliss Foodmart. I'm tired of the sick feeling I get before his class, tired of the constant attention he draws out of me during the day, and tired of waking up in the middle of the night to jot down little strategies that might help the next day go a little more smoothly. Most of all, though, I'm tired of being reminded of who I am.

Karen and I want to leave our cramped apartment across from the wine packaging plant because, mainly, it is our first place and we feel as if we aren't making any progress in our adulthood. We've begun to notice little faults. The white walls stain when rubbed in the slightest way. There's no medicine cabinet in the bathroom. There are too many stairs. The smell of fermentation draws flies in the

summertime that drone at night and die in black clumps along our windowsills. In truth, the place is fine. More than fine, actually. In the morning sometimes, before I go to work, I eat cereal by the window and watch deer run through the brush behind the complex. We want to shed the place, though, because it seems like we should have more space. When we see an ad for the bottom floor of a house on Main Street, we decide to pack up the furniture we've gathered since leaving college and move in. It's slightly more expensive, but we good have jobs. The new place had more rooms, semi-gloss paint, and no flies. It was perfect. And it feels more, well, solid.

You should really quit. Really. This from Karen, my wife now. We're lying on our bed in our apartment, and I've just told her my latest work story. This one wasn't about Zac, but an honors student named Helen whom I caught cheating. Helen is one of the brightest students in any of my classes, certainly one of the most motivated. She had begged me to let her choose a book well beyond her means for a report and she ended up turning in part of someone's doctoral dissertation on Nabokov, to which she had attached a cover with a clip art rainbow. It didn't take much effort to find her source—it was the first thing that came up when I typed the title into Google. I was pained by the fact that she had cheated—on a fairly easy assignment, no less—but pained further by the phone call I received from her mother after school demanding that I give Helen a passing grade on the assignment.

But she didn't do any work on it, I said.

She did the cover, didn't she? she asked. *That was part of the assignment.*

I talked to my principal about the phone call.

Did you specifically tell them that you would give them a zero if they cheated on this particular assignment? he asked. No, I hadn't. *Then her mother has a point, Jim.* And so I gave Helen the opportunity to complete the assignment again. She cheated that time, too, though a little more craftily. I gave her a 65 and didn't talk about it with anyone again. When she was nominated by the principal to join the National Honor Society later that year, I didn't object.

Karen has asked me to quit thousands of times and each time, I think about it, but there is the money, that constant stream of money that trickles in. After all, it costs a lot to live.

One afternoon, after an especially long day of work once, I can't pull into the driveway of our new apartment because a RentWay van is blocking it. As I wait, I watched two men in blue overalls negotiate a mattress down the stairs that lead from the apartment above ours. I shake my head.

Fucking bed's repossessed, I mutter. Unbelievable.

When Penny moved into the studio above our apartment the spring before, she carried her things in plastic sacks from the Family Dollar, the run-down department store in the seedier part of town at which she worked. While we were relatively happy on our move-in day, Penny seemed morose and haggard, deep worry creases lined her forehead and she moved swiftly, sneaking into the house as if trying to evade its owners, as if someone would catch her tell her she didn't belong. She had

borrowed a friend's car for the move, but when the heavy things were in, her friend left. It seemed pitiful to me to be moving into a new place alone, with no one to even grab the other end of an end table or offer advice on where to place a lamp. She didn't seem to have a bed or anything else that actually required a lifting partner, though, so I didn't offer to help. I watched from the window and wondered what type of full grown adult didn't own a car. It turned out that my estimation wasn't far off.

A few weeks after Penny moved in, her husband followed. He was a short, pudgy black man who laughed loudly and easily. He and Penny seemed to get on well, so I didn't think anything of his postponed move in date. They sat on the porch together and drank beer while my wife and I sat inside and listened to the television while catching up on paperwork.

Penny and her husband fought loudly and it seemed that the most hurtful things they said were for everyone to hear. It reminded me of my parents' loud cutting arguments in our tiny ranch house, but with all the hardwood squeaks and bumps of a rough professional basketball game. My wife and I would listen to them in our kitchen, the room that was directly below them and curse them lightly for not being able to handle their problems out of the earshot of others, as we had learned to do:

Because of the fights, I admit that when the cop knocked on my door, I knew what it was about.

Have you seen a short black guy around here? Wears baseball caps? The cop asked. I nodded.

Upstairs?

Yeah, well, he's not supposed to come around here anymore. So if you see him, you call us, okay? I nodded again and looked around the cop. Penny was standing in the shadows, holding a wadded tissue to one eye.

Can we use your porch to draw up some papers? the cop asked. I nodded again. My anger was making the words stick in my throat. The cop waved at me and I could tell my part in the business was over. I closed and locked the door.

Who was that? Karen asked.

Cop, I said. I pointed upstairs, our sign for Penny. She shook her head.

How dare they bring that around here, you know? We work hard to be able to afford this place and what good is it if we have to live under that. And I agreed.

I arrive at school late because, among other things, it's winter and I just don't want to get up. It's too cold and besides that, it's raining and there's nothing worse than winter rain splashing on you when you're tired. I notice the crossing guard huddled with a group of kids on the far side of the street, but when I slow down to let them cross, she waves me through. The crossing guard is apt to do strange things, though. There's still a dent in my hood from when she smacked it with her stop sign.

When I pull in, my department chair, Stacy, comes over to my car.

We're on lockout, she says. *Bomb threat on the bathroom wall in the middle school. Someone's going to burn the place down.*

Ridiculous. Where should I go? She points to Jim, our athletic director. So I ask him,

I dunno, but we're putting kids on buses. Driving 'em someplace. Hey, D'Arduini, you can't go into school; we're on lock down! This last bit he shouts at a middle schooler walking toward the door. The kid turns around and gets back into his mom's car. They drive off.

I yell at a couple other kids nearby who are making moves toward their own cars.

Can't drive home guys; get on the bus. They shrug and wait with the mob of kids already on the sidewalk. Everybody's wet and shivering.

What's going on? they ask

Don't know. But we're going somewhere.

Church rectory, like last time? Not the football field again, right? Too cold.

I don't know. It's our third lockout in a calendar year, but the first this school year. While we're talking, two cops holding shields run past us into the school with the superintendent. Nobody says what we're supposed to do. I hear from a kid that they're going to the bus garage and I catch a ride from somebody going over.

When we get there, parents' cars are already parked all over the lawn. There's no Admin at the door, only teachers standing around, waiting. Waves of kids, an ocean, are standing in the garage. They all have their cell phones out, calling home. They're laughing. I hear them saying *Columbine*, and *9/11*, buzz words that mean chaos. I hear them asking to be picked up, but they're smiling, unafraid. I walk

through them, telling people to hang up their phones, that they're only making it worse. I look for the fights because there are always fights when this many kids are crowded together tightly in one room, especially when they aren't any chairs.

Do you have any food? one kid asks me. *They wouldn't let us through breakfast line.*

How long, Mr. N?

Do you know what the note said?

I keep shrugging and telling kids to hang up their phones. I look for the kids who can't handle chaos, the ones who flip out at pep rallies. They're in the corner, playing with one of the garage doors, trying to get it up. They're halfway when I get there and tell them to put it down. I joke with them. They're laughing.

Soon, they all start to trickle out. Parents are at the doors, asking for their kids. They're smiling, too, laughing. What else should they do? They ask if they can take the neighbor kid home, too, and get mad when they can't. Someone asks an Admin if his kid can go to the cheerleading tournament tonight if he signs her out. *Yes, she can go.*

An eighth grader gets arrested for the threats after two more evacuations. She's from a trailer park, her parents have just gotten divorced. *It's a cliché*, my colleagues say at the lunch table, *Kid never had a chance.* And I agree.

There is no escaping memory. You cannot outrun it or block it out. It will wait until you are sitting comfortably in your favorite chair and then force itself upon

you. It will force you to play different parts in the worst scenes of your life, force you to watch others spring traps you have sprung before. You will babble the names of people you've long forgotten in your sleep, you will write a check to the power company for fifty-seven dollars and eighty-six cents and wonder why the number is familiar to you. Memories will come in and out, like distant radio stations. You will reach out to them, try to grab them, hold them down. But they are not solid things.

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