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Prayers For the Wild At Heart: Personal Essays

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PRAYERS FOR THE WILD AT HEART:
PERSONAL ESSAYS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate College of
Southwest Missouri State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by
Michael L. Frizell II
March 2001

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PRAYERS FOR THE WILD AT HEART:

PERSONAL ESSAYS

Department of English

Southwest Missouri State University, March 2001

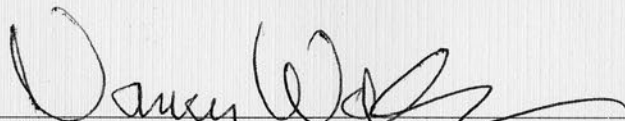
Master of Arts

Michael L. Frizell II

ABSTRACT

It is my contention that writers will violate their own privacy, that is, reveal their innermost thoughts and dreams, when they are comfortable with the manner and context in which their privacy is broken. Thus, the vehicle for "crossing the line" is important. By discovering their "personal voice" through utilization of the narrative personal essay, writers will be able to break the fear of writing in a voice that reveals the essence of their souls. The personal essay is not a work of fiction. In this mode, writers are forced to self-reflect on their subject, accessing a mercurial memory, then transcribing a jumble of half-remembered events, raw feelings, and private thoughts by funneling the information into the form in the context of their present-day situation. The danger, therefore, is that writers may go too far in revealing themselves, thus alienating their readers. It is essential that the writer remember to make the essay relevant and accessible to any reader. This thesis demonstrates how I have managed to adjust to the pitfalls inherent in writing in this mode.

This abstract is approved as to form and content



Chairperson, Advisory Committee
Southwest Missouri State University

PRAYERS FOR THE WILD AT HEART:

PERSONAL ESSAYS

by

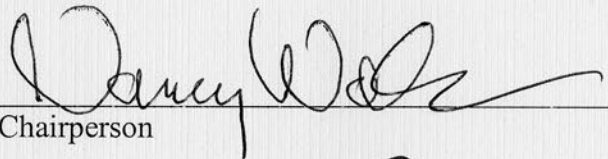
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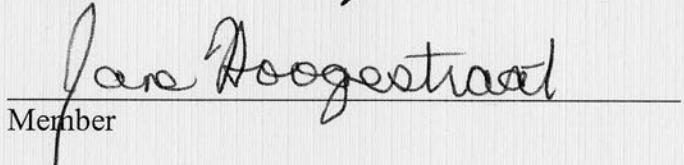
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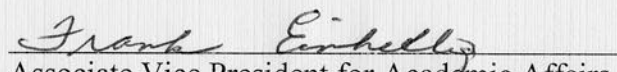
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Member


Member


Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs
and Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I find it difficult to remember all of the people who shaped my life, thus leading to the creation of the personal essays contained herein. That somehow brings me comfort, for I am not sure I'd want those people to read them. However, I find myself compelled to dedicate "Hunting in Silence" to a fellow student of Dr. Nancy Walker's ENG 520 class in Spring 2000 who said, "Gee, I wish I had a dysfunctional parent so I had something to write about!" (Rob Pickering, this one's for you).

Not that I'd call my father dysfunctional. He is who he is and I love him. Thus, as for the other essays, though I fear that I may be leaving many others out, it is to my father that they are dedicated.

Joanne Sieber deserves recognition as well. Her input as a reader has been invaluable to me in determining what "works" and what doesn't. Joanne, an avid reader, finds Hemingway boring but, for some reason, likes these essays. How much more flattery could I stand?

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INTRODUCTION – PART 1

YOU CAN'T MAKE THIS STUFF UP:

FINDING YOUR PERSONAL VOICE THROUGH ESSAY WRITING

William Shakespeare wrote the immortal lines, “All the world’s a stage, the men and women merely players,” referring to the dichotomous way a human being involves him or herself in discourse with other human beings. We have an “actor” and a “private” self inside us that allows us to draw a comfortable line between what information about ourselves we will willingly tell others and what we would prefer to keep private. Where that line is drawn depends on the personality of the individual. This imaginary line prevents us from revealing private matters when relating a personal happenstance in our lives that we have the need or desire to share with others. If we allow ourselves to break this line of privacy, we do so only when the manner in which it is broken still allows us a safe haven. We will only reveal private thoughts if we are comfortable in the manner and context in which they are revealed. Thus, the vehicle for “crossing the line” becomes important.

When I say manner and context, I am referring to several things happening simultaneously. The truth is, we invade our own privacy readily when we feel that we can do so safely, though invading our own privacy when it feels safe could be argued is not an invasion of self. If we keep a journal, private thoughts are recorded and preserved. If we reveal our feelings to another, we lose the ability to take those thoughts back and remake them as private thoughts. When we write down our private thoughts, we do them in our own voice. In other words, we impart a bit of our personality that makes us unique to the vehicle in which we have chosen to reveal our private thoughts and feelings. We

feel no regard for the trappings of formality that weigh down “scholarly” writing when we write in our own journals. Who cares if the comma placement is wrong? When we speak, are we constantly thinking, “I need to pause longer here because if I wrote this sentence out, I would use a semi-colon, and that means I’d have to hold longer than I would for a comma.” We would just write as succinctly and truthfully in our journals as we are able and ignore the conventions that might mire us in the rhetoric. We would write what we feel. Our writing in this form is honest, raw, naked, and purely us. It flows from us readily, taking on a form of its own. “If I can allow myself to write easily in this mode, why can’t I write a term paper as easily?” we may think. The answer will sound simple, though it is complex. Those who have difficulty writing have not yet found their voices, or they are unable to recognize it in their writing. Moreover, if they have not yet learned to recognize their voices in their writing, then that voice cannot be cultivated.

Sadly, those who have not found their voices in their writing do not feel safe writing. Mary B. Nicolini, author and writing instructor at Broad Ripple High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, explains that student writers lose their sense of security, causing them to become impersonal in their writing:

Something happens to student writers after about the fourth or fifth grade. All too frequently, the nine-year-old who enjoyed telling stories becomes uninterested in writing nine years later. It is almost as if the classroom moves from a secure, self-contained unit to a more impersonal, departmental-

ized one; student writers lose their sense of self. Imaginativeness and freshness decline. (58)

The sense of self Nicolini refers to is the private thoughts, feelings, and concerns of the individual. She later explains that many factors contribute to this phenomenon, including teachers who did not approach the task of teaching writing with “humility and sensitivity to the feelings of another person” (58). In addition, she explains, most writers are “on a search for [self]...if he finds himself he will find an audience...when he digs deeply into himself, he will find others who will read with a shock of recognition what he has written” (60). She also attributes the emotional consequences of puberty as having a detrimental effect on the personalization of a student’s ability to feel secure about writing.

So, how can I find my voice in writing if I have, as Nicolini suggests, erected psychological barriers that prevent me from allowing myself to recognize that voice? It is my belief that personal voice can be discovered and cultivated by the act of writing personal essays or creative nonfiction, thus freeing the writer to find the “I” in their writing. The ephemeral “I” is applied to other modes of writing in subtle ways. To illustrate this point, I will use the work of several scholars who attempt to categorize the terms “creative nonfiction” and “personal narrative” (for both modes work well within the parameters I am setting for cultivating the growth of the “I” in writing). In addition, I will demonstrate how I discovered my “writing voice” by comparing a narrative I wrote at age 16 to a narrative I wrote at age 32. By comparing the two pieces, it will be easy to see how my personal voice has shed the psychological restraints (to some degree)

imposed by confusing emotional states or a personal impetus to hide my true feelings from a reader.

The Narrative “I” Impersonates an Author

The personal essay or so called “creative nonfiction” modes of writing are interchangeable in the way they allow writers access to the voices they may have stifled out of the fear of invading their own privacy. These modes demand a particular way of approaching the subject matter. “You can’t make it up,” states Philip Gerard, director of the Professional & Creative Writing Program at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, “You can be as artful as you want in the presentation, draw profound meaning out of your subject, but you are still stuck with real people and real events” (5-6). Therefore, when composing a piece, a writer should write about something that is familiar, the people and events that have shaped his or her life and personality.

However, a problem arises when writing about an event that occurred several years ago and trying to place it into context for the writer’s present day self. Memory sometimes fails us. Memory may be distorted by our own recollection of the event. We color our past to suit us or perhaps disguise the ugly truth about an event that left a black mark on our fragile psyches. We invent creative ways to bridge the gaps in our memory, sometimes embellishing the memory to better suit the text. Thus, the “I” of creative nonfiction or personal narratives may be corrupted a bit. However, the universal truth of the event, the kernel of reality, still lurks within the memory, although the “I” can seem unreliable. Gerard states:

In fiction, the effect of this [unreliability] can be a delicious irony, engineered by the author. His narrator is only a persona, an invented character impersonating the author, and part of our delight in reading the story is recognizing the discrepancy between what the narrator tells and the truth we discover through other clues. But in nonfiction there is no ironic distance: If we don't trust the narrator, then we don't trust the author or the telling. (145)

It is this lack of ironic distance that frightens some writers from using their personal voices. It would leave them too exposed to scrutiny and therefore reveal perhaps a personal bias towards the subject about which they are writing that may not be palatable to all readers. The innermost thought and feelings of the writers might be revealed and thus they will have "violated their own privacy."

The problem arises when accessing our memory to relate a personal event on paper. Memory is liquid and changes to suit individuals as they access that memory in the context of their present-day situation. Nicolini states:

In our increasingly disposable, transient society, the function of memory sometimes is ignored. We are convinced we'll never forget watershed moments; we store our epiphanies in our consciousness. Yet, memory is selective. We do forget, and if we do remember, we rarely reflect. Taking the time to write the stories of our lives, allowing students to

do the same, is a sane, humane activity in which
to engage. (61)

Nicolini does not go far enough in her assessment of the power of writing down memories. When writers sit down to write a personal narrative, some write to self-reflect on their subject, accessing that malleable memory. The writer will then place the memory in a context that is comfortable and immediate, perhaps finding a different “truth” than was originally learned when actually living the moment. If the writer can learn to adapt the core of the memory into an immediate truth of the moment, a type of catharsis is achieved. In addition, the memory will be made palpable to the reader.

A dichotomy develops when we write from a memory. We are attempting to relate an event that actually occurred, not a fiction we have invented. The reader, however, does not have the luxury of possessing all of the life experiences of the writer. The writer, of course, cannot relate every moment of his or her life that led to the event being related, for that would take a lifetime. Therefore, the writer must present to the reader “an image which is brief in description, momentarily fixed in a configuration, of an open and shifting and indeterminate relationship” states Graham Good, author of *Creative Nonfiction: Researching and Crafting Stories of Real Life* (185). This task might seem daunting, but it is made easier by the fact that the writer has the luxury of omniscience. The writer already knows how the story will end. Thus, he or she is able to give the story a temporal framework and is allowed to “frame and shape the story,” states Linda M. Park-Fuller, former professor of Theater at Southwest Missouri State University (3). Park-Fuller utilized this approach when composing a narrative meant for performance, not the written page. Her hindsight allowed her to frame the story in a way

that a day-to-day journal could not. Thus, the reader, or in this case, listener, was able to glimpse a piece of her life as she recalls it.

To achieve this goal, the writer must bring the reader up to speed so that the emotional poignancy might be captured and understood. The writer must find a creative way to make the truth at the core of the piece a universally understood truth, for the reader will not have the author's unique point of view granted by a life's perspective. The writer is then given some artistic license. Within the license, the voice the writer is seeking lurks, waiting to be discovered.

Avoiding Our Voices

We find it easy to write in our own voices when we are comfortable with the vehicle or the manner through which others perceive that voice. Writing is not like some of the other arts. When actors perform, they may be revealing their innermost fears and dreams to an audience, but they are hiding behind a "fourth wall" what is understood by the audience. They are not the characters they portray, no matter how much of their personal beliefs are lent to the characters. In addition, their art is temporal, much like our memories. Their performances exist during a certain length of time, and then are gone forever. Writing is not like that. Writing is an art that can last forever. It can be read by millions at any time, and can be distributed world wide in the blink of an eye thanks to the Internet. The words we put on paper will reveal our thoughts, fears, and dreams long after we are gone. There is a certain comfort, and a likely dread, that accompanies this fact. Once written, my private self is exposed in the writing (that is, if I allow others to

read what I have written) and will remain so forever. Is it any wonder that some people fear the naked exposure of writing with a personal voice?

When I was sixteen or seventeen, I fancied myself a good writer. I was in the gifted program at my school. Daily, I was granted an hour block to do nothing but write essays, short stories, poems, or whatever struck my fancy. My work was mailed to an editor at the *Kansas City Star* to be evaluated. I was not graded, just evaluated. However, I had not yet discovered my voice. I would not discover my voice until almost thirteen years later.

I don't want you to misunderstand me. I am not saying that it is experience, or even practice, that led to my discovery. It could be argued that some people are naturally attuned to their inner voices, which they are able to convey to their readers. I thought I was one of those people. In retrospect, I see that I was not.

For example, in the eleventh grade, I was asked to write a personal narrative. I decided to write about the relationship I had with my father. At the time, we were worlds apart. He was a hunter. A veteran of the Vietnam War, my father was everything that I was not when I was seventeen. He was a man deeply scarred by war, closed off from his feelings and the ability to express those feelings because of the way his psyche was shaped by the mandates of the time in which he was raised. I was a teenager with a stable life, living in a time of relative peace, my every need satisfied by my parents. In addition, I hated to hunt, but wanted desperately to understand my father and get to know him on this level.

My essay, therefore, had a lot of ground I could cover. What I wanted to demonstrate in the essay was how different my father's way of thinking was to mine. To

make this topic palatable to the reader, and to give it a humorous quality, I decided to frame the essay with a recounting of a disastrous rabbit hunting expedition. I shot a rabbit. However, when I found the animal, it was not dead, only mortally wounded. The dilemma I was faced with was bleak. I felt sorry for the rabbit, but worse, I now had to kill the creature in a more personal manner to end its suffering. I was faced with a few choices. I could step on the rabbit, twist its neck, or cut its throat. All of these choices would probably cause blood to be splashed on me, and I didn't think I could handle that. The blood had symbolism. It would mark me if it touched me. My solution was to shoot the rabbit with the shotgun. This poor choice not only hurt my ears, but also caused the rabbit to disintegrate in a mist of red and fur over a smoking crater in the ground.

My father, of course, was not happy about my choice. The essay, therefore, made at least a minor point. My father and I were completely different people, for he would have been able to kill the rabbit without wasting its body. I thought I had achieved my goal and related the deep-seated differences between my father and me by relating an embarrassing moment in the essay. However, the real difference between my father and me was rooted in a family secret that is revealed only between the lines of my eleventh grade essay:

I know my father really wasn't a cruel man, he just had a rough life. I, however, didn't have to face the horrors of Vietnam and the crushing wave of emotions that is tempered and refined by training with men trained in jungle combat and the art of guerilla warfare. I was just a kid from New Jersey

who had been brought up in a stable home, not a trained murderer.

On the surface, it seems I was revealing much, confessing our differences. In fact, the bitter truth remains hidden.

Here is how the essence of that passage changed once I realized I was hiding a truth behind the words, thus stifling my voice:

Like most ten-year-olds, I had spent the day having adventures from the back of my bicycle. I was in a deep sleep when he burst into the room... "Sshh!" he ordered, clapping his hand over my mouth tightly. I could barely make out his features in the blue light provided by my Donald Duck nightlight. He looked about the room for something, then forced me down to the bed... "They'll hear you." Then he said something that sounded as if he were giving orders in militaristic jargon...

My mother then enters the scene, touches him gently on the arm, and leads him back to their bedroom. Then I continue:

...he would never know that he'd been sleepwalking again, fighting an unseen enemy from the safety of his house. We just didn't talk about to anyone, ever [sic]. Even when he got up in the middle of the night and ate everything he could. Some nights, he'd drink all the milk, or eat an

entire box of cookies...then he'd drift back into his bed,
only to accuse my brothers and me of eating everything
later...After a night like that, the envelope of silence around
my father would be a warning, not a request.

The difference is night and day. In the earlier passage, I acknowledge to the reader that Vietnam had had a detrimental effect on my father that caused a rift in our relationship. In the second passage, I drive the emotional core of that effect home for the reader by setting the facts in a moment of universal truth as seen through a child's eyes. Thus, the new passage contains more raw power, more poignancy, and more of an emotional connection for the reader that the first passage is able to convey.

However, just because I was able to violate my and my father's privacy does not mean that I have achieved the task of discovering my voice. My voice in the piece lies in my ability in this instance to relate the event in an interesting way to the reader so that greater understanding is achieved. It is important to remember that the reader is also carrying certain emotional "baggage" into any piece of writing. I know that the piece achieved my goal of connecting to the reader because it caused many of my readers to self-reflect. Seven readers, counting the instructor, read the new essay to fulfill this assignment, written for a college class. Out of the seven readers, five related moments from the piece to their own families. One student, Lisa Stout, wrote:

When my dad was little his grandpa gave him five cents
per gopher head. After my dad shot the first one he threw
up so I can relate to your story on several levels...

Another student, Melanie K. Hoftzyer, wrote that she could “relate to the weird relationship of a silent parent, and I love the voice...Thanks for sharing this.” I find it fascinating that these readers brought personal experiences to the piece and not only empathized with the emotions I was relating, but brought their own sense of poignancy to the piece. Not only was my voice heard and understood, but was internalized and became much more.

Running Off at the Mouth

Once writers have overcome the fear of exposing their soul on paper, they must walk a thin line to keep the work from becoming over-indulgent and thus alienating the reader. The over-indulgence I refer to is when the writer not only violates his or her own privacy, but he or she violates in a way that makes the reader recoil and say, “Too much information! Enough is enough!”

Before my second wife and I divorced, I went through many nights of self-doubt and self-pity, as people are apt to do when faced with such a life-changing event. One night, when she was out with friends, I attempted to work out my fears, that she was engaged in an affair, by writing a play about how I felt. The play began with a monologue from a character I called “The Groom.” The Groom, of course, is a thinly disguised version of me. The second act was a monologue from “The Bride,” who was, of course, my second wife. With her speech, I was attempting to see her side of the situation, and perhaps shed light on my own, perhaps revealing my thoughts to be foolish. I was hoping for an epiphany by writing this play I never intended anyone else to read.

In the play, I go too far in revealing my thoughts and feelings at the time. The gratuitous way I reveal myself is evident in the following passage:

A young man, wearing shorts and a tank top, enters stage right from the hall. He looks tired, and is carrying a bottle of Pepto-Bismol and a tablespoon... he looks dumbly at the audience, then speaks:

GROOM: Do I look like a geek? (pause) No, really, be honest. I've spent a big portion of my life trying to prove that I'm not. But here I am, on a Saturday night at 11 p.m., twenty-four years old, and completely alone except for Arsenio, a *Playboy*, and a good left hand. (laughs) Didn't mean that. Of course, I'm married, you know. Can't you tell? Sure! Maybe it was the haggard look, the wedding ring, or even the sexual comment that gave it away. No, it was probably the Pepto-Bismol. My stomach's been in knots. Oh, by the way...don't go in the restroom for a while...I know the Peanut Butter Captain Crunch and the Spaghettios for lunch have a lot to do with it. But, I feel like I've become a father instead of a husband. My wife, she's young. I like to say I married young, you see, 'cause she's eighteen and I'm twenty-four. I fell in love with her at a time when I didn't want a

lover and really didn't want something serious. I was going through this really weird, womanlike period in my life.

The above passage intrudes into my personal life on several levels. In fact, I only reveal this piece of writing now to prove my point. This piece was never intended for anyone else but me as a therapeutic way for me to talk to someone, even if it is only an imaginary character, about my personal problems. I was trying to achieve catharsis.

I wrote the piece because, as Park-Fuller states, "...the tendency of narrative [is] to provide closure to the experience" (4). Indeed, writing this piece, which continues for almost twenty painful pages, did bring about closure for me. It was the night I decided that I was miserable and that I needed to change my life. If I had written this for an audience, I doubt I would have mentioned some of the things I mention in the monologue because the veil separating fiction from reality was nonexistent in the piece. The passage is too close to home, too raw to be effective as a piece of writing that tells a universal story. Some would argue that writing, especially writing for drama, demands that you force the audience to confront raw emotions to bring about a cathartic response. These critics would say that drama is meant to be confrontational in that way. I would tend to agree, but in the case of this piece of writing, I allowed my voice to overrun the "I" and thus revealed too much to allow the reader to relate to the piece in a comfortable way. Drama uses the confrontational approach to achieve catharsis, not alienation.

Speak; Don't Shout

As Nicolini states,

The personal narrative serves as a bridge, a link between the “soft” and “hard” writing... We are by nature storytellers; therefore, it only makes sense to allow students a chance to first do something at which they are already good... the writer has control over the event; it is familiar, not foreign. (59)

The “bridge” between the “soft and hard writing” Nicolini refers to is the difference between what writers consider “personal” writing as opposed to what they perceive as “academic” writing. Too often, we draw the line between the two modes, where some perceive the “personal” writing as “creative” while the “academic” writing is “scholarly and learned.” Good states,

Unfortunately, the essay usually goes unrecognized either as knowledge (because it is seen as too ‘artistic’) or as art (because it is ‘knowledgeable’ rather than creative)...(15)

His assertion highlights the schism in perception of the two modes of writing. Personal voice has a place in both the narrative mode and the scholarly mode; it is the writer’s job to be brave enough to use one of his or her voices regardless of the mode. To recognize a voice, writers must simply be willing to let go of preconceived notions of the boundaries of writing and internalize the information or story they wish to convey, relate it to personal experiences in a tangible way and synthesize the information. Writers then relate the information with their unique perspective clinging to it. At the same time, a writer

must recognize that there is clearly a difference between personal writing and writing for academia.

Voice is best utilized when there is a balance struck between the synthesis of the information the writer wishes to convey and the way the writer chooses to convey the information. Voice is a careful balance that is created between the raw, hard truth and the reality that memory is fluid and the writer therefore reveals an amalgamated “invented truth” that conveys the result of that synthesis in a universal truth that readers can latch onto and internalize for themselves.

Speak. Don't shout. It's that simple.

INTRODUCTION - PART 2

BREAKING THE FOURTH WALL: THE ESSAYS

As I indicated earlier, a personal essay contains the reflections of a writer's life or innermost thoughts. It may be helpful to think of the personal essay as a theatrical performance. There is an understood "fourth wall" in the traditional theater, an invisible wall that separates the actors and the audience wherein the actors do not acknowledge the outright presence of the audience. In turn, the audience members agree to willingly suspend their disbelief and peer into the personal lives of the characters onstage. When reading a personal essay, the audience agrees to step into the shoes of a reader and see things from the author's perspective, willingly suspending disbelief of the situation presented in the work and allowing the reader to understand the feelings of the author.

In the modern theater, actors readily break the fourth wall and address the audience directly. This device allows the actor to achieve a familiar closeness with the audience that can lead to a greater understanding by the audience of the character's psyche. The personal essay breaks the fourth wall in a subtler manner. Reading allows readers to be transported to the time and place in the piece they are reading, therefore putting themselves in the place of the author. This transference makes the journey the reader takes more personal than the one experienced by the spectator in a darkened theater who may be influenced by the visual presence of the actors on the stage. Readers bring their own personal "baggage" to a piece that can be manipulated by authors. If the piece speaks to a reader and forces to the reader to reflect on a situation similar in his or her life, then the personal essay has broken the fourth wall that separates fact and creative non-fiction.

Chapter 1: Conception and Birth

The first chapter of this thesis, “The Alien”, is centered on the birth of my son. I imagined this piece as a long monologue. Though all of the pieces in this thesis center on the speaker, “The Alien” relies solely on the point of view of the speaker. I utilize headings in the story to break the fourth wall in a direct manner to remind the reader that this is a monologue they are reading and to provide signposts to what the speaker will discuss next and to set the piece apart from the other pieces in the thesis. The speaker seems older in this piece than the others because of the use of signposts.

Chapter 2: Schoolboy Years

For the second chapter, I rely on my readers to bring something personal to the story. “Hunting In Silence” is about a hunting trip between a withdrawn father and his awkward son. Both characters are dealing with personal issues that separate the two in profound ways. Realizing readers may not necessarily have experienced a situation resembling what the two characters in this piece face, I utilized certain devices to force the reader into self-reflection. I consciously inserted mundane sounds, such as the hum of a refrigerator, into the narrative to illustrate the silent gulf between the two main characters. These sounds provide a common ground between the reader and the main character since the sounds are the sounds of everyday life. In addition, the sounds add to the quirkiness of the main character and give the character more credibility as a real person.

This piece is perhaps the most read piece I've chosen for this thesis, for it was "workshopped" in some ways in a writing class for perspective teachers. In addition, the story has been published on the Men's Web website, a website devoted to men's issues, at <http://www.vix.com/menmag/huntsiln.htm>. The feedback I have received usually focuses on what the reader recalled from his or her own childhood and not on the story itself.

Chapter 3: Schoolboy Years

"A Prayer for the Wild at Heart, Kept in Cages," the title of the third chapter, comes from an unusual source. The title is actually from a tattoo worn by actress Angelina Jolie, which is in turn a quote from the Tennessee Williams play, *Stairs to the Roof* (Hale 1). The quote works for the piece because of the teen-angst that is at the main character's motivation. The universal theme that makes this personal story accessible to readers is that of unrequited love during the most awkward years of emotional development. The cinematic feel to the writing works to heighten the suspense of an otherwise quiet love story.

Chapter 4: Adult

The fourth chapter was the most problematic for me to write. To compensate for the problems I was experiencing while crafting the narrative, I decided to fall back on the monologue format I used for "The Alien" when writing "When You Pick a Rose, You Ask Your Hand to Bleed." However, the problems were not with selecting a writing style or making the narrator accessible to a reader. The problems came with simply

selecting an event that would allow me to follow through with my idea of using life stages as a theme for the thesis.

While writing “When You Pick a Rose”, I realized that the choices the narrator makes may not be seen by some readers as especially adult choices, thus forcing me to rewrite the piece three separate times. In the first incarnation, “When You Pick a Rose” was broken into several parts and framed by a completely unrelated event. The frame depicted the main character walking in a university graduation as a faculty member, not a student, and illustrated his innermost fears at being included as an adult in front of his peers. To tie what was essentially two different stories together, I attempted to end the pieces with the narrator’s realization that he had made mistakes he could not repair but that those mistakes made him into the person he was at that moment. The problem was that I was trying to marry two pieces that really didn’t mesh, thus weakening the entire narrative. My advisor suggested I separate the two pieces and see if they stood alone on their own merit. As it happens, I deemed the graduation narrative to be too weak, and therefore discarded it.

What remains is the story of a boy who realizes he is becoming a man and the painful choice he must make to allow his first love to experience her young adulthood.

Chapter 5: Death

Of all the pieces I have chosen to include in this thesis, “A Distant Star” is perhaps my personal favorite and is the least embellished narrative in the collection because the memories from which I drew to write it are still raw and fresh. Though I have experienced death close to my family, it was this particular death that still haunts me

because of the sheer senselessness of the act. I chose to write about death by discussing an abortion from a man's point of view. Though the child was not my child, I still felt some responsibility for the unborn child because I had agreed to help a woman who believed her only out was to abort her fetus. Going in to the situation, I had actually believed I would save the child by proposing marriage. I was young, naïve, and only looked at her choice from a pseudo-religious and moral high ground that I had created for myself. I was blind to her plight. Only in the end do I realize I may have been right, and the choices I made and didn't make that day still bounce painfully in my subconscious.

By writing this piece from a first person perspective, but not omniscient, I am attempting to make my readers reach the catharsis I did in writing the piece, for I achieved no catharsis at the time. The piece changed very little from rough draft to final because, I believe, this is something I've wanted to write for many years but was never sure of how to begin tackling the emotions necessary and still make the narrative accessible to an audience. I focused on small details (her hair, the radio, etc.) and not the here and now of the story to pull the reader into the descriptions and thus force them to think as the main character.

CHAPTER 1: CONCEPTION AND BIRTH

THE ALIEN

I think I can safely say that most men have an innate need to reproduce. I know this is a safe assumption because scientific studies will back up this hypothesis. I also know that I don't need a scientific study to tell me that men spend nine months trying to get out of the womb and the rest of their lives trying to get right back in because I have been to college and remember the dating scene. The funny thing about this innate need to reproduce is that neither science nor the unscientific approach of talking to your peers or even your parents can prepare you for the consequences of your actions. I am not referring to the fact that whatever passes for your all-knowing, religion-based deity saw fit not to include instructions with children when they are born. (I know that children don't come with instructions because I looked for a zip-lock plastic bag containing them when my son was born. I figured if all that stuff was coming out with him, why not a zip-lock?) I am referring to the actual act of seeing something you are responsible for creating emerging kicking and screaming into this world.

My first wife and I didn't exactly decide to have a child. Don't misinterpret me. I didn't say I didn't want a child. It's just that we didn't expect it so soon after we were married. I'll never forget lying in our new bed, a water bed I bought with a student loan check, looking into her eyes, and listening to her tell me that she had "missed" her period. At first, I thought it odd she missed something that made her cranky. This something also caused her hands and feet to bloat and made her crave chocolate to the point of gagging from the taste. Honestly, I sure as hell didn't miss it.

“How did that happen?” I demanded, as if I didn’t know the answer. A funny thing happens to a male in this situation, causing temporary amnesia, which in turn causes him to actually forget what he did that could possibly lead to her missing her period. Yet, looking back on it, I can remember clearly now that several nights were spent begging, if you get my meaning. However, at the time, I fell into the old trap of accusing her of deliberately missing her period as a long-honored male way of avoiding responsibility. After that uncomfortable moment, I told her that, somehow, she had to be wrong. Maybe she was just too worried, causing her period not to come because of stress.

“I can prove it,” she said to me defiantly. She exited the bedroom and came back with a receipt brandished triumphantly over her head, a banner in a war yet to come.

“And that is?” I asked, knowing the answer. She handed me the sales receipt from the waterbed we purchased six weeks earlier. “I started my period that day,” she said casually, “and now I’m over a week late. I’m never late, I’m like clockwork.” How could I have forgotten that she was not exactly in a fantastic mood when we bought the bed? Between the craving for chocolate and the need to snap at me for any minor transgression, I didn’t need to go to the grocery store to purchase sanitary napkins to know that she was being visited by Eve’s curse.

Well, it turns out she was right. Somehow, despite her birth control pills, she was pregnant. The irony of man’s innate need to get back into the womb was lost on me at that moment. See, something that science doesn’t tell you about is that feeling you get when you’ve only been married for two months and you work at a McDonald’s and attend college before you perform in a semi-professional theatrical production at night

and have only ten minutes of free time but somehow you managed to find time for an encounter that produces a pregnancy and your pretty young wife comes to you with tears in her eyes and tells you she missed her period. The question then becomes, of course, what am I supposed to do about it?

My wife and I began to search for an O.B. doctor by polling our married with children friends. However, when calling those doctors that they deemed “the best,” we quickly discovered a problem. Without insurance, the doctor would either not take my wife on as a patient or they demanded the equivalent of our first born by soaking up all of our meager savings. It came to the point where I told my wife, “Well, if we show up at the hospital while you’re in labor, they can’t turn us away. What will they make us do, have it on the steps?” That’s when I learned that my wife was terrified of hospitals, terrified to the point of insanity. She had read articles stating that doctors performed unnecessary Cesarean sections over half the time because they feared the stress caused by a long labor on the mother or the child. “Where else can we go?” I asked incredulously.

It turns out that my wife found, through the wife of a friend of a friend, a midwife in a town about an hour and a half from Branson, Missouri, where we lived. My wife told me that midwives were to be trusted because having a baby was a natural process, so why would we need drugs, hospitals, or doctors? I remember thinking that somehow I should protest, telling her that she would beg me for drugs when her labor pains started. However, all reason was pushed aside when she told me how much the midwife would charge for her services. The midwife would do all prenatal and postnatal visits and the delivery for a mere \$500, about a third of what any doctor was demanding just for the initial visit and down payment. I was immediately sold on the idea.

I'm not sure a person could identify what a midwife actually does. She is like a coach for a team. As coach, she instructs the players, sometimes gives helpful advice or develops a game plan or plan of attack, and that is it. Oh, sure, she will yell at you if necessary, try to get you to keep your head in the game, keep you focused on the here and now, but that's the extent of her duties. The team has to do all the work. Roughly translated, I was going to have to be the one who aided my wife in the delivery of our child. "After all," the midwife said coolly, "you did have a hand in creating it." I didn't bother to tell her that my hand had very little to do with it. I figured she was a professional and knew basic human biology. It was not until I performed my duty and assisted in the delivery of my child that the consequences of my actions became apparent.

Skinned Rabbits

My parents lied to me, and so did my friends who have children.

To be fair, all of society actually misled me, so maybe I shouldn't be so harsh on my family and friends. We are taught that childbirth is a beautiful moment, and that witnessing such an event is a life-changing moment that will have repercussions on how you view the world for the rest of your life. The latter part, at least, is true. It is the first part, that part referring to "beauty," wherein false perceptions are created. I watched fathers on television who were in the delivery room with their wife, or talked to friends who watched their child emerge from the womb. Every one of them told me what a defining moment in their life seeing the miracle of the birth of their child was for them. Obviously, they were not talking about the aesthetics. Nevertheless, I was blind to that

point as I prepared myself for the inevitable task that lay ahead. I allowed myself to be led astray.

My mother and father were thrilled that we had chosen a midwife and that I was going assist my wife during the delivery. "What an incredible experience!" my mother exclaimed. "That's something your father didn't get to experience, but wishes he would have, right, hon?"

My father grunted in acquiescence, which was a lot of talking for him. By agreeing with my mother, this is where he lied to me.

It wouldn't be until after my "life-altering" experience with childbirth that I was told how my father reacted to seeing me for the first time. I was born prematurely, due on March 14 but decided to come out January 24 instead, and I was not a healthy baby just because I was ready to see the world. I weighed two pounds, four ounces at birth and soon dropped to one pound, eight ounces. I was placed in an incubator immediately after birth because doctors feared my lungs were not fully developed.

I could just see my father, face pressed against the glass, his emotions falsely full of the hope and joy that society tells a father he should feel at that moment. And there, squirming around in for what the entire world appeared to be a fish bowl, hoses attached to nose and genitals, both of which were angry red, is me, a yellow-coated, scaly creature kicking spasmodically at my cage. He drifts, wraithlike, down the hall to my mother's hospital room. And there, sweaty, pale, bereft of makeup or the cures of mouthwash lies my mother, anticipating his first words, the words that articulate his feelings about seeing his first-born son and heir for the first time. Her eyes cloud with tears of joy as she asks, "Did you see him?"

My father nods in agreement (I told you he's a man of few words).

Anxious, my mother presses him for more, wanting and needing him to describe his feelings. But he's a man's man, a proud, large, bear of a man who prefers to make things with his own hands and hunt for his food rather than buy it from the local Piggly-Wiggly. He approaches her, and she takes his hand in hers, cradling it as if the hand were her newborn and asks, "What does he look like?"

I wonder if he even paused before he said, "He looks like a skinned rabbit."

However, there he sat, in front of me, just grunting in agreement that he wished he had seen my birth. Some lies would just cut too deep, I guess, even for him.

Uh, Oh

In preparation for the Blessed Event that would befall our lives, I worked many hours. My day would start at three in the morning. I would stumble out of bed, take a shower, and dress myself in my new McDonald's manager uniform. The uniform was distinguishable from the crew only by the fact that it was blue instead of red and I didn't have to wear those stupid hats. I would arrive at the restaurant at four, and work until one or two in the afternoon. After work, I would drive to college and be in class until about six o'clock. Then, I would fight tourist traffic to get to my job performing in an outdoor drama. After curtain call and signing autographs, I would retire to the dressing room, shower, dress, and drive home. Depending on the tourist traffic, I would make it home by eleven, twelve if traffic was heavy or it was a holiday. This pattern repeated six days a week, saving most of Sunday for homework, grocery shopping, or cleaning the apartment my pregnant wife and I shared.

My wife, however, was not able to work after the first trimester. Something strange was happening inside her, causing her to bleed as if she were having her period despite the pregnancy. The midwife theorized that the bleeding was caused by heavy lifting and being on her feet too much, so she ordered my wife to stay at home, bedridden. My wife was normally an active woman. She also had been a pack-a-day smoker, so you can imagine her joy when the midwife not only confined her to bed, but also took away her cigarettes. Therefore, what else did my wife have to do but theorize about all the despicable things I was doing while out of her sight?

“Why are you so late? See your girlfriend again?” she would snap as she turned the sound on the television up with the remote. Her hair was a fright wig, a haphazard tangled mess that she brushed rarely as her stomach got larger and larger.

“Yeah, that’s why I’m so tired,” I would meekly add, trying to add humor or levity to the moment. In all fairness, it was probably the nicotine withdrawal or the hormones pumping into her system that caused her not to recognize my obviously charming wit. She would either throw the remote at me or burst into tears, depending on her mood, the time of day, or the alignment of the moon and stars.

I finally got a break, literally, in the form of an accident while performing in that outdoor theater I mentioned earlier. A stunt went bad and I broke my wrist in such a savage way that I needed a cast that started at my palm and ended past my elbow. I was able to stay home for two weeks at night, wherein I was almost able to catch up with the sleep I was lacking. The problem was that the accident occurred about a month before my wife’s due date, and I had a stick shift in the Nissan I drove. Fortunately, the break was in my left wrist. That still left me with a problem. How was I going to drive the car

with a cast to my elbow down the winding roads to the midwife when the time came? I went back to the doctor, who cut the cast down so that I could bend the elbow. Consequently, since I wore a coat during my performance and therefore was able to cover the cast, I went back to work at night.

Then, it happened.

I arrived home from performing so tired that I had decided to skip the shower. I'd worked my normal shift at the restaurant at four in the morning, gone to class, performed in the show, and had a beer in the parking lot with another performer before I went home. I fell onto my couch about midnight and turned on the television. Something involving alien spaceships that looked like the bent heads of streetlights flashed across the screen. The picture was hazy, the glow from the screen soft and inviting, and I allowed myself to be enveloped by its warmth.

I don't know how long she stood there, but my wife, dressed in a huge T-shirt and maternity pants, was staring at me quizzically. "My water broke," she mumbled. "About an hour ago."

I said nothing, just lay there, confused by her words. Sure, I was hearing her; it's just that my synapses were not firing properly I guess. She said something about breaking water, but that didn't make any sense. "What's that mean?" I finally asked.

"I'm also having contractions that are about fifteen minutes apart."

"Contractions" was a word that I recognized. That word was included in the jargon the midwife spilled out every time we visited her office, along with words like "labor pains" and "mucous plug," all of which seemed to follow the contractions. I just

couldn't figure out what I was supposed to do about it all at this moment as aliens vaporized a nameless town and the military was helpless to stop them.

"Well, call the midwife, see what she says," I managed to say, losing interest in the aliens. I flipped the channels until I found a neat looking color bar. It was then that I noticed the reds on my picture were more of a green in the spectrum.

I heard the beeps as she telephoned the midwife, who was an hour and a half away. I even heard most of what my wife said as she spoke to the midwife, thanked her, and hung up.

"I'm supposed to just relax. She thinks I have until morning before we'll have to go to her office." Good, at least I'll be able to sleep. Damn the color on this television.

My good arm was asleep when I heard a plaintive "Uh, oh." Startled, I sat up on the couch, shook my hand that had been underneath me, and the words came again.

"Uh, oh."

My wife came into the living room, this time with a wild look in her eyes. I wasn't quite able to speak yet. For some reason my tongue felt thick and my mouth like it had been swabbed with a dry cotton ball. I must have fallen asleep for a minute, I thought. The telephone beeped rapidly as her fingers danced across it. She said something about her contractions accelerating to one minute apart and oh there it is again just a second yes my husband's here ouch. Then I heard it. Although it sounded tinny above the whine of the color bar on the television, it shook me from my sleep as surely as a bullhorn.

"Come to my office now!" The midwife's statement was not a request.

You ever get so afraid that you can literally feel your sinuses drain in a white-hot rush that leaves you smelling air that burns? I felt that as the adrenaline kicked in and I rushed to the telephone. My wife doubled over and I had to pry the receiver from her hand. "We're on our way," I managed to say.

Hurry Up and Wait

The car jerked erratically as I shifted oddly, the cast on my arm a hindrance to smooth driving. Every time the car jumped my wife moaned in pain and surprise. I made the hour and fifteen minute trip in something around fifty minutes, thinking the entire way that my wife was going to deliver the baby right there on the sport seat in the Nissan. I remember wondering if the seat was scotch guarded as we arrived at the midwife's house. She and a helper came out to greet us. I was enraged by their calm. Didn't they recognize the fact that my wife was in pain? They smiled and escorted us inside, where I knew that any minute my wife was going to deliver that child and I could finally get some sleep.

I should have learned a lesson from the visit to the Ozark Empire Fair that my wife and I had made a few months earlier. I was eating ice cream and watching a pregnant cow pace around her cage, a viscous, mucous-like fluid hanging inexplicably from under the cow's tail, past her distended stomach and almost to the hay-littered floor. The cow shook oddly at times, moaned sickly, and paced the cage, unable to get comfortable. My wife stared at the poor creature with morbid fascination. We surveyed this spectacle for almost an hour, wondering when the slimy thing hanging from its rear

end would fall out, but nothing happened. I believe the old adage is that the watched pot never boils to mix a metaphor or two.

Meanwhile, as we waited for our child to be born, my wife transformed from a normally sedate, shy woman into a raving, naked lunatic. After about the first twelve hours of contractions, each a minute apart, I guess clothes annoyed her. She stripped them from her body in a fury, revealing soft, stretched, pink skin and a belly bloated by almost sixty pounds of water and baby. She had gained so much weight that near the end of the second trimester I asked the midwife if she heard more than one heartbeat. That really annoyed my wife. Of course, it probably didn't help that I used a flashlight in a grocery store once to back her up like they do large delivery trucks.

I thought it was funny at the time.

She paced the midwife's birthing room a lot like that cow at the fair, unable to get comfortable. Unlike the cow, she had the gift of speech, and the rhetoric she spouted forth extolled how much she loved me to questioning my mother's marital status when I was born. I would try to cover her up with a sheet so that she was able to preserve her modesty whenever the midwife entered the room. However, when I tried to cover her, she would slap at me and let loose with a stream of words so foul that they hung in the air like smoke from the cigarette she wished she could smoke. The midwife would laugh gently and urge her to try to rest as best as she was able because she wasn't dilated enough to indicate that it was time for the baby to be born.

This pattern went on for almost twenty-four hours. Interesting physiological changes occurred during this period that my parents and friends never warned us about when we asked about their experience with childbirth. My wife's belly button literally

popped out, like that little red plastic button that pops up with the turkey is done. A dark brown line developed from her popped belly button and ran down to her private area, darkening as the day went on to a rich chocolate color. Her breathing deepened and sweat poured from her. She was no longer able to walk without assistance, which she hated. She spent most of her time leaning against a birthing bed that allowed her to still feel as though she were standing even though she was reclined.

The Alien

Have you ever seen that movie starring Sigourney Weaver called *Alien*? In the movie, an unfortunate astronaut stumbles upon a huge, wet, leathery egg. Inside the egg is a creature that resembles a long, pale hand with fingers able to wrap around a person's skull. The creature jumps out, attaches itself to the face of the astronaut, and lays an egg inside the man, unbeknownst to his fellow astronauts. The egg gestates inside the astronaut, sucking his nutrients to benefit its own growth cycle. When the beast reaches maturity, it digs its way out of the astronaut while he's having dinner with his friends and bursts forth in a bloody fountain from his chest.

I remember thinking about that movie as the child inside my wife grew larger and larger. We had to watch what she ate, insuring she had enough iron and less salt so that the baby would be a healthy weight when the gestation period was over. Too much of the wrong thing, or not enough of the right thing, and the embryo would actually take away essential nutrients from my wife to satisfy its growth process. Just like the parasitic creature in that movie, I thought. Therefore, it was with dread that I recognized it was time for my wife to deliver the baby.

Yes, I had seen a little film about the miracle of birth. The woman was serene, mostly covered with a sheet. The doctor in the film reached under the sheet and gently pulled a baby out from under the sheet, like a magician with a hat and rabbit. The baby was moist, but for the most part, looked like any of the million little rug-rats I had seen at Wal-Mart with their mothers. The woman in the film smiled appreciatively as the doctor laid her newborn against her chest, where she cradled it lovingly.

Another lie, this one perpetuated by the Discovery channel.

Before me was not the serene woman from the documentary, but a naked, sweating lunatic that the midwife was ordering to, "Push!" When the midwife gestured for me to come closer, I was afraid to, fearing what I would see. I moved forward, took the midwife's place, and reached up with my right hand to hold my wife's hand. My wife pushed hard, grabbing my naked arm and digging her nails into my flesh. I tried to pull away, but this woman had suddenly developed a super strength. When she stopped pushing and relaxed her grip, I pulled my arm away, nursing the half-moon cuts she left on it. Remembering the cast, I reached up with my left arm, which she gripped as she pushed again, this time finding not soft, yielding flesh but hard plaster. I knew God broke my wrist for a purpose.

What follows was a surreal moment that will never leave me as long as I am alive. The midwife noticed that my wife was pushing wrong. For some reason, my wife was pushing the baby not down and out, just down. She took my place and taught my wife how to push by reaching inside her and, with her fingers, telling her which muscles to use. Suddenly, my wife must have done something right because water shot from her, expelled with such force that the midwife, caught in mid-sentence, choked on it, water

dripping from her hair, face and clothing. And there, where it shouldn't have been under any normal circumstances, was a head, a wrinkled head.

Delighted, the midwife said, "I see the head. Reach down, Rebecca. That's your baby!" My wife did so, touching the face of her child and saying, "Oh, God!"

I could not move. It was real. There was a child in there, not an alien creature or even the calf I had anticipated at the fair. Thankfully, its eyes were tightly closed. If it had been looking around the room, I would have passed out. I numbly took the midwife's place as my wife pushed again, yelling, "Get it out of me!" The midwife responded calmly, "Just push past the shoulders, Rebecca, and that's the last hard part!" and the baby literally slid out and into my arms. A thick, alien chord still connected mother and newborn. "A son," I mumbled. "That's good," I thought. My wife and I had only picked one boy's name, but had about six girl's names.

He was shockingly red, covered with a coat of yellowish slime and crimson blood. His head was not round, but a conical shape, like Dan Ackroyd's "Conehead" character from *Saturday Night Live*. He blinked at me, and I laughed, though I don't know why. I may even have been crying. She reached for him, and I laid my son on my wife's chest.

"Do you want to cut the chord?" the midwife asked as she clamped the chord in two places and handed me surgical scissors. "Cut right here," she indicated between the two clamps.

Before the birth, this "chord-cutting" thing was all I thought a father had to do during the delivery, and I dreaded it. The thought of severing living human tissue repulsed me. Nevertheless, I took the scissors and just automatically cut where the midwife indicated. I figured, what the hell. After watching that, I can do almost

anything. A living creature, weighing six pounds and eight ounces had just come out of my wife in a shower of blood and water. This was nothing.

Then, my wife said, “Uh, oh!” again.

“There’s another one in there! I’m having another contraction!”

The midwife laughed and said, “Oh, no, that’s just the afterbirth. Just push and it will come right out.” The midwife brandished a stainless steel, kidney shaped pan that reminded me of those things I vomited in when I was in the hospital for pneumonia when I was six. My wife pushed and giggled, “Oh! No bones!” and the pan was filled with what the chord had been attached to, a vein-covered, blue sack. “Do you want to see it?” the midwife asked me. “No!” The words came out so quick that I think she almost dropped the pan.

That was it.

What is it That Paul Harvey Says?

It just occurred to me that you might have a low opinion of me after reading this essay. You may think, “What kind of bastard compares his wife to a pregnant cow and his unborn child to a monstrous alien? No wonder he’s divorced!” If this is what you are thinking, you missed the point. I love my son, and if under similar circumstances, would use the services of a midwife again if I ever found my spouse pregnant and she wished to experience childbirth in this manner. I’m just asking you to consider what I had witnessed before judging me too harshly, and how my family, friends, and the media misled me.

Society places certain expectations on the male. In some circumstances, men are expected to be the provider, the guardian, and rock of the household, protecting, comforting, and loving those in our care. However, our society has made the less savory aspects of these myths somehow taboo to talk about in a negative manner. Men are able to father a child into our seventies or even eighties, hence this innate drive to reproduce. People follow the unspoken rules civilized society imposes on them. Men aren't warned about their responsibility in regards to childbirth. No one will warn them that it's not like the movies, not like what your friends tell you, and not as beautiful as your parents extol with tears of joy in their eyes. As a man, I was told only half the story. I was lied to. The wonderful part about the joy of having a child in my life, about that child loving me unconditionally and needing me to be a father as well as a friend was included, but the messy details were omitted.

Now you know the rest of the story.

CHAPTER 2: CHILDHOOD

Hunting In Silence

The rabbit was bleeding in the grass.

The left ear of the rabbit was hanging limply as blood slowly oozed from the wound on its head, caking its face until its fur looked like thick, jagged spikes instead of soft down. The creature's breathing came in harsh gasps sending white puffs of breath into the crisp November mid-morning air. The eye that remained was a clear, shiny brown that reflected terror and sadness as it instinctively crawled through the dry scrub grass, painting a red stripe as it moved away from me. White tufts of the rabbit's hair fell from the sky like snow and I stepped forward and reached for my knife.

* * * * *

My father roused me from sleep with a gruff, "Get up!" He unceremoniously flipped on the light in my room and said, "If you're going with me, you better hurry up." Then he stalked down the hall. "Hell of a way to wake up a sixteen-year-old," I thought. I didn't see him at all until after I had rolled out of bed, dressed, and covered my uncombed hair with a ball cap.

He was sitting at the table in the kitchen, drinking a steaming cup of coffee. He was dressed in heavy hunting fatigues; the green, brown, and black splotches looked odd against the slightly effeminate decorations of the kitchen. Leaning against the cabinets behind him were two shotguns, and I could smell the sharp odor of gun oil as I entered the room. I kept my head down, glancing at his heavy-soled hunting boots, my new white sneakers squeaking on the linoleum as I stopped at the cabinets and pulled a box of Cheerios from the door above the sink.

After selecting a bowl and a spoon from the dish drainer, I turned to the refrigerator to get milk. My father shifted in his chair and the sound of the chair against the kitchen floor seemed deafening, causing me to stop and stare at his back for a moment. Everything seemed fine, so I breathed in deeply and prepared for the sound the refrigerator would make when opened, a heavy “thrumm-umm” as cool air pumped from inside the machine. Bottles clinked on the door as I opened it and scanned the interior for the milk. I reached in for the carton whose mouth was hanging open (someone had forgotten to close it and had probably drunk from the carton, which my mother hated). I expected the weight of at least a half-full carton, and instead was so surprised I almost dropped it when I pulled out an extremely light, empty carton. I glanced over my shoulder at my father, who was now watching me with morbid interest.

“It’s empty,” I said, my words choking out, straining the enforced quiet boundary around my father. I felt as though I had violated the unspoken rule, and I felt sick for mentioning the empty carton there in my hand. I should have just thrown it away and made toast.

He sat for a minute, the steam from his coffee rising gently into the air. There was something distant in his eyes, something sad that held me in place for a moment.

He placed the cup definitively on the table with a “thud” and the moment was lost. “Let’s go,” he said. “I want to be in the woods by sunrise.”

He reached for the guns.

I huddled in the passenger seat of the Jeep listening to the roar of the heater vainly trying to keep up with cold air leaking in from countless zippers that framed clear vinyl windows. The zipper pulls clinked against the cold metal teeth of the zippers, and the

sound of them reminded me of sitting on my backyard porch, listening to the wind chimes. The heater was doing a poor job; I could see my breath as I watched the sun peak out from behind the rolling hills. The black bones of leafless trees stood out from the partially lit purple sky, their branches reaching out and getting thinner until they blended into the tree beside it, a ribcage of intricacies that were lost by the blur of motion.

He drove in silence. The cocoon of quiet that surrounded my father firmly in place, I know, because he had put it there. What, really, was there to be said?

Our living room is decorated with my father's kills. There is a set of antlers, sometimes two, for every year I have been alive. Six heads of the largest deer my father had taken from the woods were mounted, their living eyes replaced with glass marbles of exquisite detail. Perhaps they would not be as disturbing to guests if the deer were looking straight ahead in their death as opposed to the lifelike gaze they cast into the room with a slightly turned and quizzical look, their heads cocked sidewise as if peering from behind a tree. Barbara stared at the first deer my father had taken and was visibly unnerved.

"It's watching me," she whispered. "Like its eyes follow me." She brushed her blonde hair from her eyes and clutched my arm. I liked that feeling. Her body was warm against mine, the undercurve of her breast gently resting on my arm.

My father hunched over the coffee table and sharpened arrowheads on a wooden-based sharpener, the metal emitting a high pitch screech. They would be razor sharp when he was finished, capable of slicing through leather as easily as they would a five-year-old's inquisitive fingers. Why would he do this right now, after demanding I bring my dates home for him to meet occasionally?

“Did you shoot all of these, Mr. Frizell?” Barbara asked finally.

“Yes.”

“I think deer hunting is so wrong!”

He froze. He hadn't really looked at her before, his disappointment evident when we entered the house earlier. He was hoping that I would bring home a woman who would fill out a bikini in the best places, not someone who would not dare to attempt wearing one in public. Nevertheless, Barbara was nice, had a pretty face, and who was I to be picky, anyway? But now, he looked her straight in the eyes and said, “Oh, really?”

“Yes,” said Barbara, undeterred because she did not recognize that no one talked to my father like this. “Poor helpless deer can't defend themselves from a gun or arrow.”

“You'd prefer I shot people?” Neither of us doubted what he would prefer.

That was the last time Barbara came over.

* * * * *

“Take a shot of your medicine before we go in.”

I must've dozed off. The clinking was quiet, as was the heater. We were parked somewhere deep in the woods, and I couldn't see the road. The purple light was warmed by an orange glow. I reached into my pocket and produced an inhaler. I placed the mouthpiece to my lips and depressed the cylinder as I sucked in deep. Immediately, there was a dull pressure inside my head and a surge of adrenaline caused my veins to throb. I pulled the medication into my lungs, held it, and released.

My father sat for a minute, stared at me, then got out of the Jeep.

I hate my medicine. It stands as a mute symbol of everything I wanted to be and am not. I've had to take it almost every day of my life, and the asthma has entrenched

itself into my psyche as surely as it has in my body. The medicine used to come in a small capsule, pink on one end, clear on the other, the medicine a white powder contained inside it. When I was younger, a green and white phallus that unscrewed to reveal a fan with a built-in cup that held the capsule delivered the medicine. A long metal rod pierced the capsule when the green plastic foreskin was pulled back on the phallus. Then, I placed my mouth onto it and pulled in, causing the fan to buzz as it spun and the powder was blown into my lungs. It always made me cough.

Children would run by the window as I watched them play on the playground from the warmth of my classroom. The teachers would leave me alone, something I doubt they could do now in the era of litigation. Sometimes, I would get to play, but I couldn't run. When I did play, I was picked last, after the fat kid but before the one with the broken arm at least. I dreaded the act of being picked almost as much as I dreaded being placed in a position, whether it was baseball, softball, soccer, or football. I ducked when the ball came my way. I ran too slowly to make a difference to the team.

My father had been a star football player I'm told. Fast, smart, good looking, voted most popular and funniest in high school, my father was the best of the best. Outgoing, worshipped by women, he had it all.

However, something happened before I was born. I never met that version of him.

* * * * *

"No, I just meant maybe you shouldn't push him. He's, well, delicate."

"I don't want him to grow up and be a pussy."

“Nobody grows up to be a...one of those.” My mother hated it when he used foul language. I was six. They didn’t think I heard them, but I did, although I was playing with my beagle, Sampson, in the back yard, a wet tennis ball in my hand. So, I played harder, ran harder. I ran until this feeling started in my chest, a burning, itchy sensation that seemed to spread up my neck. I stopped running.

The beagle gleefully ran over and pulled on my pant leg, wagging and growling. I could hear a sick wheezing every time I breathed in and a groan when I breathed out. It sounded so loud and forceful, but I was not getting enough air. The doctor, a foreign guy with dark skin and an almost indecipherable accent, said I would outgrow the asthma at puberty, around thirteen years old. In the meantime, I would take painful shots in my legs once a week, be subjected to a battery of allergy tests, and have to suck that dry powder into my lungs three times a day. Then he said, sixteen, then twenty-one. Only the medicine got better.

I guess I wasn’t going to be a football player like my dad.

* * * * *

He handed me the shotgun.

My shotgun was a 4-10, though I don’t know what that means. It had two barrels side by side governed by one trigger. My father carried a 20 gauge, and it looked like a cannon compared to my weapon. My gun was cold and slick with oil, the stock a shiny brown block of wood with a pink rubber guard on the end. He carried his gun with careful control, almost as an afterthought. My father was one with the gun, and deftly aware of its strengths and weaknesses. I carried mine haphazardly. He reached for it,

turned the barrel away from him as we walked side by side through the trees. “Walk behind me,” he said in clipped tones.

“How much farther?” I wheezed.

“Through the trees there,” he said, pointing.

We burst through the trees and stood in a clearing. The scrub grass was brown, curled, and kissed with an early morning heavy frost. The sun swathed the area in a deep orange glow.

We were there.

* * * * *

My father took me deer hunting once, when I was six. I damn near fell out of the tree stand. I wasn't like my little brother, who took to hunting, fishing, and organized sports as easily as my father had as a boy. Though he was younger, he soon grew large, his arms and legs and chest filling out better than mine. The silence that enveloped my father did not prevent my brother from getting to know him in ways I could not. The silence between them was not as palpable, just the silence of men who did not need to talk.

When he took a deer, my father would tell us it was one of Santa's reindeer. Although we knew it wasn't, my brothers and I would try to remember which deer he told us it was last year. We didn't catch him until he tried using Rudolph, in which case we knew he was lying because the only red on this deer's nose was the thin trickle of blood that pooled around the drying, distended tongue. My father would tie the deer upside down by its back legs and hang it from a rafter in the shed. Blood would run from the animal's nose as he bled it out. Then, my dad called for his assistants.

The three of us, my brothers and I, would watch as he stripped the skin and fur from the deer in bloody sheets. Armed with bowls full of cool water, we would step forward as he butchered the deer, dropping mounds of flesh into the bowls. When they were full, we would take the bowls to my mother, who cleaned the meat and wrapped it in wax paper to be frozen. I never could watch the part when he would slice the belly of the beast open, allowing its vital organs to spill out onto the concrete floor of the shed where I parked my bicycle. My brothers thought it was cool.

When he was finished, there was something primal about him. He would be splattered in the blood of his kill, a garden hose in his hand, washing the blood out into the dirt road alley behind the shed, strangely quiet. My father's eyes were distant, yet calm and relaxed, not like the frantic distance I sometimes saw in them.

* * * * *

Like most ten-year-olds, I had spent the day having adventures from the back of my bicycle. I was in a deep sleep when he burst into the room. The saloon doors which served as the doors to my room shattered inward as my father entered, that distant, manic look evident in his deep set eyes. "Sshh!" he ordered, clapping his hand over my mouth tightly. I could barely make out his features in the blue light provided by my Donald Duck nightlight. He looked about the room for something, and then pushed me down in the bed. It was quiet in the room, despite the fearful pounding in my chest that caused the blood to roar in my ears like a waterfall. "They'll hear you." Then he said something that sounded as if he were giving orders in militaristic jargon.

A sudden white light stabbed through the slats of the saloon doors hanging haphazardly from the doorframe. My mother, dressed in a white nightgown, drifted into

the room like an angel on the beam of light, her body faintly visible by the backlighting beneath the flimsy material. She touched my father on the arm gently with the tips of her fingers and said, "It's okay, now. Come to bed."

Her touch was like electricity, and he folded, his muscles tensing, then relaxing as his eyes drifted shut. After a while, the light from the kitchen went out, and I was again in darkness.

I reached over and turned on the lamp on my nightstand. In the drawer, I found a flat-head screwdriver. Carefully, trying not to make a sound, I slid from the safety of my bed (which had just been violated) and tested the battered saloon doors. It was almost light before I managed to make them hang straight. That way, he would never know that he'd been sleepwalking again, fighting an unseen enemy from the safety of his house. We just didn't talk about it, to anyone, ever. Even when he got up in the middle of the night and ate everything he could. Some nights, he'd drink all the milk, or eat an entire box of cookies, or potato chips, or a loaf of bread, then he'd drift back into his bed, only to accuse my brothers and me of eating everything later. Other times, he'd stay in his bed, but use my mother as a dead log, upon which he would unshoulder an imaginary rifle and shoot and shoot and shoot.

After a night like that, the envelope of silence around my father would be a warning, not a request.

* * * * *

We walked about 20 yards apart from each other, eyeing the underbrush for signs of movement. The sun had risen, and the golden light sparkled in the frost-covered grass that crunched beneath my sneakers, which were brand new white high-tops that forced

me to walk straight. I had a twisted right foot that was never caught and braced when I was a child, and the shoes helped me to keep it straight when I lost concentration while I walked. My dad stopped walking and motioned to me, then raised his shotgun and fired.

The blast echoed in the valley and, although I knew it was coming, I jumped out of reflex. My father trotted a few feet from his position and bent down, reaching into the grass. He produced a long cottontail rabbit, holding it by the flat back feet high into the air so that I could see it. He clipped it to his belt and we continued the hunt.

I desperately wanted to get one myself. He had taken me hunting for different animals before, and I had never gotten one. Well, there was the squirrel incident, but I think the squirrel was just frightened by the sound of the gun and the ammunition whistling through the branches that it lost its footing and fell from the tree and onto the rock, killing itself. I never found a single piece of buckshot in its scrawny broken body. I'm not sure why I wanted to kill anything, but he wanted to, and it was something we could do together that I didn't have to talk about while we were doing it. It's not that I didn't want to talk to him; I simply never seemed to say anything that evoked a response in my father. My domain was the library and his was an alien world of sports and a past I knew very little about.

* * * * *

He grabbed me by my left arm and spun me around until we were looking each other in the eye and said, "It was really like that. Just goddamn like that."

He only talked about Vietnam when he'd been drinking, and he rarely drank. However, something about the movie we'd just watched on the VCR spoke to him in a language I could never hope to understand. The movie, *Apocalypse Now*, was hypnotic.

A patriotic American man had lost himself in the jungles of Southeast Asia, turning him into a psychopath who fancied himself a god to the godless people. Another American was sent in to stop him before he too succumbed to the psychological presence of the jungle. The men killed without compassion until they had to kill close up, looking into the faces of their victims as they slipped away.

He held my arm tightly, as if trying to get me to understand. I started crying and I wanted to vomit as they hacked the man who fancied himself a god to pieces with a machete. Thick strips of flesh peeled back and revealed pulsing blood beneath and still they hacked at him.

How could I understand that?

He released me when my mother shouted something at him and he seemed to understand that he wasn't there, he was here, in the living room, holding his teen-age son with a vice-like grip. Then, he cried, too.

* * * * *

The rabbit bounded over a slight rise in the field in front of me, its white tail flashing like a target, and then disappeared. When a cottontail is spooked, it will run in a circle from its original location. It was a simple matter of stopping and turning slowly in a circle until a hunter again located the rabbit. I hadn't turned even forty-five degrees when I picked it up, about ten yards from me. I fired. I saw the animal tumble from view over the slight rise.

"It tumbled," I thought. "I hit it."

* * * * *

He met every one of them, and I don't know why I wanted him to meet them.

Well, that's not entirely true. I did know. I wanted his approval. "Hey," he'd say, "bring her out on the boat, I want to see what she looks like in a bikini." My mother would look at him and tell him he was an old man and he needed to shut up, but he'd always ask around May when the weather started turning warm. I don't think any of us ever brought a girlfriend out on the boat with my father. Sometimes, he'd be like my mother said he was in high school, outgoing, carefree, funny, and charming. Other times, he'd say barely a word and tell me to remember to "slow the hell down" when I was driving and never say a word to her, but that usually didn't stop my girlfriends from finding something they liked about him. Why do women always fall for the bad guys?

Women were the area that I seemed to connect with him, even on some small level, even for just a little while. We never spoke about them; there was no need. We were just two guys, hanging out, not talking about how we admired women, but admiring them anyway. It made me feel like a man in his eyes. I was never going to be the football star, never going to be able to join the army, and never going to be much bigger. I wanted a connection with him, something like what my brother had with him, something that men shared with men.

That's why I went hunting with him that day. I wanted to take our relationship to another level.

* * * * *

The rabbit was bleeding in the grass.

I stepped forward and pulled out my knife. The blade was sharp. The stainless steel could surely slice the animal's neck with minimal effort on my part.

However, blood might get on my hands, and I didn't think I could stand to feel warm living blood pumping onto my hands. I remember my father shooting a squirrel from a tree; the thing fell, righted itself, and began running for a hollow tree a few yards away. In one quick, fluid motion, he stepped between the animal and the tree, unsheathed his knife, slit its throat, and sheathed the knife. The squirrel flopped for less than a minute, and then was still. My father scared the shit out of me.

So, I thought about stepping on the poor thing. I approached it, and the rabbit began to bark, "Uk! Uk! Uk!" as it moved away from me. One of its front paws was mangled, and it was literally pulling itself forward with it anyway as blood ran from the socket where one of its eyes had been. If I stepped on it, it would most likely bleed on my white sneakers. I hesitated.

"Finish it already."

My father stepped up behind me.

"What?"

"You just gonna let it suffer like that?" he snapped. "Finish it!"

"I...I don't think I can."

"Goddamn it! Don't be a pussy! FINISH IT!"

Without a word, I raised the shotgun into firing position.

"No, wait!"

I pulled the trigger.

Grass, dirt, blood, and hair exploded outward as the rabbit, two feet from my feet, disintegrated into a red mist. Smoke curled from the small crater I had

created, and fur pinwheeled in the air. My ears were ringing as if I were listening to a thousand crickets.

“Jesus Christ! Give me that gun! Not a freaking deer for Christ’s sake!”

My father pulled the gun out of my hands.

“Sorry dad, I’m sorry I...”

“Step on it! Step! Not shoot! God!”

I stared at the smoking hole filled with what used to be a living thing and felt my eyes burn. I wanted to say something, anything that would make this moment pass, this awkward moment when father realizes his son won’t be like him. I couldn’t find the words. He just stared at me, looking for all the world like a soldier on the battlefield. He was hard, cold, and quiet. He didn’t know what to say either.

We rode home in silence.

CHAPTER 3: CO-ED*A Prayer for the Wild at Heart, Kept in Cages*

I'm in a cage.

I sit at the end of the hall facing the glass exit doors decorated with crayon drawings of dinosaurs, superheroes, and family pets, the sounds of playground mirth inaudibly muffled. Children run by the doors playing tag, their hats pulled down over their ears, mittens tied securely to their heavy jackets, a puff of white erupting from their mouths as they yell and play. I can almost see where the chill of January has kissed their cheeks and nose with a pink glow.

I hope they all catch pneumonia.

I shift uneasily in the blue plastic chair as she speaks. "Can't go out neither?" Lynette says quizzically. I turn to look at her as she pushes her round glasses up the bridge of her nose. She was a pretty girl despite her coke-bottle glasses and stringy brown hair haphazardly framing her pale, moon-like face that has risen over a skinny, gangly frame. She reminds me of "Marcie" from the *Peanuts* comics.

"Huh?" I said, hoping she'd go away.

She sits across from me and stares for a moment. God, she's weird.

"You can't go out?"

I turn away from her. "No." Silence.

"Yeah," she continues. "I got stuffed up yesterday. My dad won't let me go out neither. Wrote a note."

There is an uncomfortable pause as I watch a kid run, then fall hard. Despite myself, I feel a grin cross my face. Lynette decides to ruin the moment by talking again.

“I’m in Mrs. Glazer’s fourth grade and you’re in Mrs. Tice’s. My name’s Lynette Cook. You’re Michael Frizell.”

I don’t look at her, even as a child with a severely runny nose presses his face against the glass doors, smearing them with snot. “Disease bag can’t get me!” he bellows, then disappears.

“Sick!” Lynette exclaims and turns back to me. “You’ve got asthma, huh?”

Where the hell did she get off asking me that? I spin and give her my meanest stare. Unshaken, she keeps making sound come out of the hole in her face.

“I saw you take your medicine. I’ve got medicine, too. See?” She produces an inhaler, one quite different from mine. I recognize hers immediately. It’s the store-bought Primatene Mist. She didn’t even need a prescription for it, and here she was, trying to endear herself to me by comparing diseases. “You’ve got that nasty powder stuff. This shoots mist. Want to see?” Before I can say no, she pushes the plunger on the inhaler, and a cloud is emitted, diffusing quickly as it falls.

“So?” I finally say.

Lynette leans forward on her knees and scrutinizes my face carefully, her brown eyes reflected at odd angles through her glasses. “You don’t like to talk about it, do you?”

“No.”

The child with the runny nose returns to the window, underlining his previous streak as he smears his face against the glass. “Can Mikey come out to play? Or does Mikey got a girlfriend?” He laughs as only an idiot in love with the sound of his own voice can and runs into the crowd of children.

“I, well. I’ve never met anyone who was like me. We should, you know, be friends.” Her voice was soft, almost pleading.

I turned and stared at her for the first time.

Friends.

I had a friend that was a girl?

I’d seen her in the halls, in the lunchroom, and once when I was riding my bike around downtown. She was coming out of the pharmacy with her mother, a large, white paper bag under her arm as they held hands. She was laughing. I remember thinking that she laughed like a chipmunk. She smiled at me once, I think, during an assembly. Girls didn’t usually smile at me; that’s why I remembered her. For the most part, she usually played by herself on the playground, swinging contentedly on the swing set, humming. Girls always had it easy, I thought. They could play by themselves and not get hassled.

I decided that we would be friends, this weird little girl and I. That way, she didn’t have to play alone and I could be seen with someone and left alone. There was strength in numbers. It had nothing to do with the fact that she was a girl I thought was pretty. Nothing. I stared hard at the *Charlie’s Angels* poster on my wall and tried to go to sleep, but Farrah kept staring back.

We rode bikes together almost every Saturday, played with Barbie and G.I. Joes, and even tried manipulating Star Wars figures together on the landscape of sheets and pillows in my room, but those activities seemed to get stale as we grew older. We began to spend more and more time talking about band trips and books and television shows. I was there for her when her younger sisters would say something that upset her and

listened as she worried about her mother's illness. The lung cancer was catching up with her, and time was running out.

She was barely a teenager when her mother died, and Lynette became even more withdrawn in public because of it. She confessed to me that, full of grief, she had tried to slit her wrists, but her father caught her. Something profound had changed within her with that confession, something I couldn't explain. She was telling me all of her hopes, her dreams, and her nightmares. She trusted me, perhaps more than she trusted anyone. I spoke of my desires, too, knowing that she was the only person that would listen. I was never afraid to speak my mind because I knew, just knew, that she'd understand me. She was my surrogate sister. Or was she something more?

"Mom," I said, desperate. "Just ring it in!"

My mom, a clerk at the only grocery store in town, smiled an evil grin and leaned towards the microphone. "Price check."

I rolled my eyes and tried to grab the box of tampons from her hand. "Mom!" I said. "They're for Lyn. Just give them to me!"

Something in my voice got her attention, and she recoiled for a moment. "Okay, Michael, okay." She rang them up, and I hastily paid her, snatched the paper bag from her hand, and pedaled away on my bike.

I sat on the hardwood floor outside the second floor bathroom at Lynette's house, reading the pamphlet that I found in the garish pink box.

"Now what?" she yelled through the door.

"You got the wrapper off?"

"Duh!"

“Okay, it says to...oh wow.”

“What?”

“Can’t bring myself to say it.” I whispered.

“Why not?”

“Here.” I slipped the pamphlet under the door, the diagram detailing where the tampon was to be inserted folded on top. The diagram was simply drawn and colored pink. There was a long pause.

“No way.” She whispered.

I could just see her, through the crack in the door, her long legs, her pink skin, her rich brown hair tumbling past her shoulders. She was curves and lean muscle, soft, supple, feminine. She allowed the pamphlet to flutter to the floor as she sat on the edge of the toilet, her hands over her eyes, hair spilling through her fingers, and cried.

Frightened, confused, she was crying for her mother.

I was overwhelmed with the urge to kiss her.

That’s when I realized things had changed not only in her, but in me, too.

* * * * *

“Hey, I went and saw *Jedi* again last night.” Billy leaned into my face so close that his black plastic framed glasses almost clicked against mine. He was so close I could smell the sour smell of the milk on his breath. His voice was almost girlish, high and squeaky. Hopefully, when it hit, puberty would be kind to him.

“Again?” Richie said from his end of the bench. “This is how many times for you?”

“Fifteenth. I still can’t believe that Leia was Luke’s sister! God, and he frenched her!”

“What? When?” Richie exclaimed.

“In *Empire*, you know, when he’s recovering from the Wampa attack? Leia plays tonsil hockey with her brother. You’d think that with all his Jedi power, he would’ve sensed that they were brother and sister a bit earlier. The boy is dense.”

“They didn’t french. They just kissed.” Richie said.

“They did too french, idiot. They had to have. I mean, look how long the kiss was. You don’t just smash lips together that long. Tongue is bound to slip in.”

“How would you know, Billy?” Richie asked, a smart-ass look on his face.

“Just shut up and listen to what I’m saying, Simpson.” Billy always called people by their last names, like a coach. I have no idea why. We were all sitting on the bench, suited out in our white trunks and t-shirts as the class played volleyball. No matter how small the shorts were, I always felt like they were too large. My thin legs stabbed out from the bottoms like tinker toys, my knees the bulbous wooden connector between two sticks.

“Okay, Billy,” Richie said. “What are you saying?”

“Well, what is Luke going to do now?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, look, Simpson. Solo bags Leia, but who’s Luke got?”

“Doesn’t matter, he’s a Jedi. He can score lot of...”

“Oh, Lord,” I thought, interrupting him in my mind, “Where is this conversation going?” I watch as the volleyball bounces dangerously close to the bench, but Richie and Billy seem to not notice.

“Oh, yeah?” Billy retorts. “From where?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Chewie is a girl,” Richie answers weekly.

“No, Simpson. He has a family. Showed it on the Holiday Special.”

“Well, that’s not part of the canon. It sucked.” Richie shot back.

Billy was nonplussed. “Well, it still counts. Just because it sucked doesn’t exclude it from consideration. Psalms sucks, but it’s still part of the Bible.”

“I’m just saying that Lucas doesn’t even count it, and no one has ever looked under Chewie’s fur to see what the Wookie is packing. Luke could still score.”

I’d had enough. “Would you two shut up? You know how ridiculous this argument is? My God, I can’t believe we go through this every day!” They stare at me, dumbfounded. Didn’t they realize that I wanted to be something more than I was? Their conversation was just proving that I was never going to get off the bench. “Why aren’t you two playing?”

Billy points to a plaster cast on his arm. “Broke. Still make me suit out, though. And Simpson here had a note from his mom. Again.”

“Allergies,” Richie sniffled.

“What are you so torqued about?” Billy asked me with an almost confrontational tone.

I wanted to tell him that I was tired of being the diseased child who was picked last, the one who had to sit on the sidelines, the one who was laughed at for being a geek.

I wanted to be out on the court, diving for the ball with no fear of a painful seizing up of my lungs. I knew he wouldn't understand. He wasn't ready yet. He was content in his cage while I paced mine like a crazed animal.

"I just don't want to hear about Luke's sex life, okay?" I finally said.

"At least he has a sex life," Richie muttered.

"Look," Billy said angrily to Richie. "I'm just saying that Skywalker is going to be this virgin farm boy the rest of his life, sitting on the sidelines, watching Han Solo make it with his sister. He'd better hope C3PO is a chick, otherwise, he's just going to have to wield his own lightsaber and pervert the galaxy."

Richie protested, but I had stopped listening. Lynette lifted the volleyball high in the air, tossed it, and struck it hard with her right fist. The ball arced perfectly over the net and, unchallenged, smacked between two blondes more interested in the guys behind them than the game. The blondes squealed and went in two different directions. A Cheshire Cat grin worked its way across Lynette's face, a face now much more angular with smooth cheek bones, full lips, a pert nose, and crystal clear blue eyes.

When did she stop wearing glasses?

"Hey, Frizell," Billy said. "How come Lyn's not sitting on the bench, sucking on that inhaler like you?" The coach blew the whistle.

Jerry, a tall and rather large junior, two years older than Lynette and I, strolled over to Lynette and struck up a conversation. She smiled as their eyes met. He said something that made her laugh, and she tossed her hair casually to the side and nodded in an affirmative manner. I heard him say, "Great. I'll call," as he backed away from her, then exited to the men's side of the gym to hit the showers.

“Guess she doesn’t need it,” I muttered.

Lynette was free.

I rode my bike hard that night, pedaling as fast as I could, pushing myself until my legs ached and I could feel the itchy sensation that accompanied an asthma attack begin to creep across my chest and up my neck. I ignored it until my chest felt like a blast furnace and I began to panic, taking in big gulps of air as I wheezed. I skidded to a stop and pulled the inhaler from my pocket. I was probably crying when I closed my eyes, put the inhaler in my mouth, and dispensed the medicine.

* * * * *

“I...I think I want to kiss you.”

The lights from passing cars smeared against the windshield, a rainbow of colors wiping by as we drove in silence. Without a word, I had pulled the car over to the side of the road and turned off the engine.

She was momentarily stunned, but only for a moment, allowing herself a little, nervous laugh. “Stop horsing around! Let’s get back!”

“I’m serious.”

“You’re...why?”

“Why am I serious?”

“No, not that,” she said, a bit shaken. “Why do you want to kiss me?”

“Haven’t you ever thought about it, Lyn? Thought about what it might be like?” I said, leaning towards her.

She didn’t pull away, but she did smile a disarming smile that made me pause.

“Well, I guess so. I don’t know.”

My mind was reeling. What was I thinking? Of course she hadn't considered kissing me. I was her brother. I was the guy she turned to when she needed to talk about the pain of losing her mother, or to complain about how all men treated her like she didn't exist, or the guy that would go to the store and buy her a box of tampons when she was too embarrassed to leave the house. Like a fool, I pressed on.

"Well, I have," I heard myself saying. "We're perfect together." I was having an out of body experience, for that had to be the stupidest thing I'd ever uttered. Under normal circumstances, I would have just shut my mouth, I thought.

She stared at me hard. "Stop fooling around! You know how pissed my dad gets when I'm late. Let's go."

"At least let's try it. If it doesn't feel right, no harm done. We'll drive away and never discuss it again." Shut up. Shut up.

She seemed to consider this for a moment as she tapped her fingernail against her broad, white front teeth, a devilish grin on her face. "You want to kiss me," she giggled.

"Yes, is that so hard to understand? You...you're..." I was at a loss for words, but I knew something asinine was going to come pouring out of my mouth if I didn't stop talking.

"I'm what?"

"You're beautiful," I finally managed to say, choking on the beautiful and silently chastising myself for sounding so desperate. Why can't I just shut up?

"Fine. But no tongue."

I laughed a bit, embarrassed at the thought of touching her tongue. "Look, let's not put a bunch of rules out there, let's just see where it goes, okay?"

“Sounds reasonable,” she laughed and shook my hand as if sealing a deal. I looked deeply into her eyes, ignoring her attempts at humor. I didn’t want her to lighten the mood of the moment. I felt a rush inside me, like an unseen hand was squeezing my heart, forcing the blood out and into my ears with a rush. I leaned in closer. I could smell her perfume, a light, sweet scent of spring flowers, as I felt the heat of her lips closer to mine. Closer.

She giggled, breaking the moment.

“Sorry,” she whispered. “You just look so serious!”

This was serious business. This kiss would determine the rest of our lives. Everything I am and ever wanted to be depended on this one kiss, this strange-looking press of flesh. I resumed my advance.

Our lips met. Hers were soft, yielding, slightly open. I worried about my breath as I tasted hers, slightly minty. For a moment, nothing else mattered, it was as if the world was revolving around us, two people that had suddenly become one. But the moment was fleeting, and I suddenly felt awkward and silly. I pressed my lips tighter to hers, trying to turn my discomfort to passion, but I felt something in her retreat from me as I did. We parted.

I looked into her eyes, hoping to find that magical something that possesses those in love. She blinked for a moment, then turned her eyes down and away, put her hand to her mouth, and stared at the floorboard of the car, saying nothing. I had broken a bond of trust between us. As a consequence, I felt a wall come up between us, built by her. It made me want to scream.

“I think we need to go,” she said.

Nothing was the same after that. Lynette seemed to be busy with the new life that she was forging for herself. She joined the cheerleading squad, played basketball, and even ran in track for a season. We still hung out, but our habit of spilling our souls over a milkshake, sharing our hopes and dreams, was over. I can't tell you how we started sharing in the first place. At night, I would listen to slow songs as a morbid form of self-immolation and attempted to lift weights, thinking that if I could only buff up I could attract her attention. I would usually stop after ten reps, my asthma squeaking in my chest, reminding me that the bars of my cage were still intact. At graduation, we walked together, as we always knew we would, but the moment was poignant. We weren't as close as we were as children.

Lynette asked me to write her when I left Kansas for Missouri to go to college. I jumped at the chance. In some precarious way, we would still be connected, sharing ourselves. Perhaps the letters would rejuvenate our friendship. Before I left, Lynette took photos of her and me with a remote controlled camera, leaning on her blue car, smiling and laughing as the shutter clicked and whirred.

"Just come home and see me. Please." Her voice, even over the phone, was music.

I drove the four hours to Kansas just because she asked me.

"Lynette," I said. "Are you okay?"

Lynette was doubled over behind the bleachers at the football stadium of the junior college she attended, clutching her stomach as another cheerleader, a tall, leggy brunette, held hair back from Lyn's face. "Oh, hon, you're getting it in your hair!" the cheerleader whined.

Lynette looked up, eyes rimmed red, face flush and sweaty. “Mikey!” she exclaimed. Only one person on the planet was allowed to call me that, and it had been years since she had, so I knew. She was drunk. “I’m...” She vomited again, this time on the brunette’s shoes.

“Oh, God, my Tigers!” the brunette said, skipping back daintily. “I told her not to mix before the game. All the jumping around got to her, I suppose. You here to take her home?”

“Yeah, I’ll take her home.”

“Good, this is making me want to join her.” With that, the brunette left, leaving us relatively alone. The crowd was dispersing after the game, but people only gave us a cursory glance as they got into their cars.

“You came, you came,” she said, trying to rise from her crouching position. She wavered, so I stepped close, allowing her to prop herself upon my shoulder. My nose burned from the ripe bite of vodka the second time around and it made my head swim. “I’ve had some Purple Passion.”

“Yes, I can see that. I guess dancing’s out of the question.”

She laughed. “I can’t drive neither. Take me home?”

A light rain began to fall, speckling the windshield with just enough water to make the wipers rub annoyingly against the window as they swiped back and forth. I shut them off and, steering with my left hand, reached across Lynette and rolled down her window with my right when she gasped, “Need air.” A low gurgle started in the back of her throat and she started to dry heave, desperately moving her hands to her face in an attempt to stop what was coming. Not gently, I grabbed her by the back of the head and

pushed her head out the window, her hair held like a leash. I swerved a bit, corrected my steering, and pulled her back in, her face wet from road water and something I didn't care to dwell on much. "Thank you," she half grinned, then began to cry the depressed cry of someone so drunk that they are no longer sure what they are crying about.

"I've made a terrible mistake," she said. "Kiss me."

Almost literally, I had carried her to her bedroom. Her arms were around my neck, her head on my shoulder, her hair cascading like a chocolate fountain down my back, her long, smooth legs draped over my arm, her breath, slow and heavy, on my neck.

I tried not to think about that.

Unceremoniously, I dropped her onto her bed, where she lay for a time, her arms and legs akimbo. I watched her breathing, her chest rising and falling as if in a deep sleep. Her eyes were shut, but fluttered a bit. Suddenly, she sat up.

"Oh, God," she whispered. "Bed spins."

She put one foot on the floor in a vain attempt to stop the spinning, and then slid off the bed and disappeared into the bathroom, where I heard retching. She reappeared moments later, standing in the doorway of her bedroom backlit by the light of the bathroom behind her, wearing nothing but simple white, cotton panties.

I had no control over this feeling that began to creep through me. My hands started to shake, my throat constricted and dried, and this black rage rose up inside me. I wanted to scream. My heart quickened, and I instantly felt nauseous. She moved towards me, and, as softly as she audibly could, said, "Kiss me."

I was shaking now, feeling for some reason vulnerable, exposed, as if I were standing in the snow naked myself. I tried to use reason:

“Lyn, you just puked.”

“So,” she responded. “Fingerful of toothpaste, see?” she breathed out, and I could smell the antiseptic reek of spearmint over stale vodka. She pressed her body against me, and I could feel her firm curves and the supple muscle I had admired so long ago through a precious crack in this very same bathroom door. My resolve was fading.

I tried humor:

“Hey, there’s a time when you said we were brother and sister. This ain’t Arkansas.”

She pressed a long finger against my lips. “Use this mouth for something other than talking,” she purred. And our lips met.

She pressed against me hard, pushing me backwards, forcing her right leg around the back of my legs as my calves pressed against the mattress of her bed. The kiss wasn’t the same as our first. This one contained no emotion, just a simple physical press that was both intoxicating and nauseating at the same time. A raw ferocity. It felt wrong, yet it was so forceful that something deep inside of me felt fear. I could taste her toothpaste as her tongue found its way across mine even as her fingernails dug into the back of my head. She sensed that I was not giving in to the moment, so she pressed herself harder against me, causing my teeth to painfully tear at the back of my upper lip.

I lost balance and fell a bit backwards onto the bed, which caused our lips to part, but not her grip on the back of my head. She fell forward, too, but I managed to get my hands around her arms and push her back, forcibly, as I said, “Don’t!”

Stunned, she locked her eyes onto mine, her right knee resting on the bed, her hair in wet, ropy tangles over her face, her lips freshly parted from her embrace. “Please,

don't. Not like this. Not like this," I whispered, breaking our eye contact and casting my eyes to the floor.

Something seemed to snap inside her, and a look of concern spread across her face, but only for a moment. She replaced the look with anger. "I thought this is what you wanted," she snapped. "What you always wanted."

"It is, but," I started.

"But what? What, Michael? For Christ's sake, I'm giving you what you always wanted. Isn't that enough anymore?"

"Not like this, Lyn. I never wanted it like this." My words weren't reaching her until I said, "You're drunk. You're not rational."

"Screw you I'm drunk," she yelled. "I know what I want. I know you want it, too. What difference does it make?"

I wanted to tell her I had accepted my role and I no longer fought to be something I was not; rather, I enjoyed who I had grown to become and no longer paced like an animal, looking for an out. But I couldn't articulate it. "It makes a difference, it does," I whispered, standing.

Her eyes began to tear and, confused and embarrassed, crossed her arms over her exposed breasts. I took the bedspread from her bed and wrapped her in it and gently guided her to sit on the mattress. Numbly, she acquiesced and let the tears fall freely down her cheeks. I could feel her body shaking as I held her there for a moment, letting her cry.

"I don't like who I am anymore," she whispered in my ear, her breath hot and moist. "I don't."

I saw her at my ten-year high school reunion. There was that awkward moment when we weren't sure whether we should embrace or not, but Lyn took the initiative and pressed herself against me, her pregnancy even more evident by the distance her distended stomach forced between us. As we parted, I allowed myself the luxury of glancing down at her left hand, which was devoid of a ring. The ring on my left hand seemed to grow a little tighter.

“Are you happy?” she asked.

“Yes.” I said. “Yes, I'm happy.”

CHAPTER 4: ADULT

When You Pick a Rose, You Ask Your Hand to Bleed

I was going to be a high school English teacher.

No, really.

I figured that it would be strange at first since I really didn't have too many nice things to say regarding my high school experiences, but that was my plan nonetheless. I would have summers off and get paid year round, what other job would allow you that perk? That's why I enrolled in the Classroom Observation class my first semester at the School of the Ozarks. The class required students to travel to a high school of their choice to conduct a week long observation of various classes that were not necessarily in their major, but would allow them to observe how a classroom works from the teacher's side of the desk.

My mistake was picking her school.

* * * * *

"Go slow!" I said, clutching my brother Jimmy's arm with my right hand and his friend Jason's arm with my left. "I'm gonna fall!"

"Quit whining," Jimmy quipped.

The wheels on my roller skates squeaked and barked against the floor as they ignored me and sped up through a turn. At eighteen, I still had not learned how to skate without the aid of the sidewalls. (Little children usually passed me, giggling, skating backwards.) My brother and his friend pulled me along, moving faster and ignoring my plea. People scattered out of our way as we raced headlong in a circle, a three-people wide

wall. Jimmy clipped a kid, who spun out of control and smacked into the half wall in front of the video games.

“Okay, which one?” Jimmy yelled over the din of music and the rush of wind in my ears.

“Not sure. Do another pass. Slower!”

They sped up.

Jerks.

A tall blonde slid easily onto the rink in front of us, laughing with her friend, a short, Hispanic girl with dark hair. The blonde’s legs seemed six feet long in her skin tight, black jeans. She wobbled a bit, testing her balance, then suddenly sprinted, her hair flowing behind her, t-shirt tight against her lithe body revealing every curve and muscle as she hit the turn, gliding through the crowd and breaking free of the pack, her feet pumping to the music.

“How ‘bout that one?” I asked Jimmy, pointing at the nimble blonde.

“Good eye,” Jason emphatically agreed.

“I’ll take the Mexican chick,” Jimmy said.

They sped up, pulling me along until we were directly behind the blonde, then slowed a bit. She was swaying side to side like a dancer, her legs slightly apart, the jeans hugging her round hips, her hair, a blonde waterfall of waves and curls, cascading behind her. If we got any closer to her I’d be able to smell her perfume. I felt a nervous pressure around my heart.

She hadn’t noticed us yet. Good.

“Ready?” Jimmy said, and before I could answer, pushed me away.

I slammed into the back of the blonde, not hard, but enough to cause her to lose her balance. She tried to right herself, but found she couldn't with my arms around her waist and her right leg pulling away from her at an odd angle. She toppled backwards and we both hit the floor, my butt and tailbone taking the brunt of the impact as she turned in my arms in a vain attempt to brace herself with her hands. She pressed me to the floor, her breasts against my chest, her legs splayed around my hips, and her mouth dangerously close to mine. She was so warm.

"Oh, God," she exclaimed, panting. "I'm sorry!"

"No, sorry, it's my fault," I said, feigning concern. "Are you hurt?" I made no attempt to get up or remove my hands from her waist.

"No. You?"

Her voice was music.

"Just my pride. Not a good skater is all." Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jimmy take out her dark haired friend across the court with a bit less finesse. He landed on top of her. "You were doing good, too. Sorry about that." I smiled as big a smile as I could muster, momentarily feeling silly as I attempted to show my teeth. Locking eyes with her, I finally managed to say, "I'm Mike."

"Kylie." She smiled and her blue eyes shined. I was nervous for a moment. Had she seen through me?

"Ask her, stupid. Don't just lie there," my inner child chided.

"Maybe you could teach me to skate," I said meekly. "I never learned really."

She said nothing, just stared at me, and I felt that I was beginning to lose my nerve. I could feel the heat of her body and the *thump-ump* of her heart against my chest.

“Or I could buy you a soda and we could talk?”

I just let her talk.

* * * * *

“Wait,” I said as a station wagon pulled up in front of the skating rink and honked for her. “How old are you?”

She pressed close and our lips met briefly. “How old do you think I am?” she said, teasing me with a coy smile and twirling her hair.

“Always guess low. Women like to think they look younger than they really are,” said my inner child.

“Sixteen?” I whispered aloud.

“Keep that thought,” she said, breaking our embrace and turning to leave. “Call me tomorrow.” She pressed a folded piece of paper into the palm of my hand and disappeared into the car.

* * * * *

My hair was so long and feathered that when I pulled a comb through it, the sides looked like the wings of some giant bird as every feathered layer fell into place, the blonde highlights glistening in the sun. I absently put a tic-tac into my mouth as I stared in the visor mirror and flattened my unruly eyebrows. I breathed in deeply, enjoying the first hints of autumn in the air, the sharp tang of fallen leaves making my nose itch.

I was a nervous wreck.

I stared at the hulking brick building, trying to shake the feeling that I was walking into a prison. A Kansas flag and an American flag flanked the main entrance and flapped sharply in the breeze, like a towel popping on a backside in gym class.

Ah, the memories.

I put my head on the steering wheel. What the hell had I been thinking, signing up for this stupid observation? What was I going to get out of it, anyway? Isn't the school going to teach us what we need to know to conduct a class? I absently chewed away a fingernail on my right hand, snapping and peeling until the white part laid back and painfully separated from the skin.

"Hey, baby!" Kylie exclaimed, her voice piercing me as I jumped reflexively. She dove through the open window of the car and kissed me hard as her hair flopped over my face and her legs kicked on the outside.

"Stop! People will see!" I said, untangling myself from her blonde strands.

"So?"

"So, I'm supposed to be the teacher today."

"Mmmm...you always are," she whispered.

"Okay, stop that. I'm serious."

"Fine," she said indignantly and slid back outside. "Guess you'll want to meet Mrs. Wright then."

* * * * *

She pumped my hand quickly and then hugged me unexpectedly, pulling me off my feet. Kylie's mother had a firm grip; her palm wet and cool, not exactly a pleasant combination. "Silly," she cooed. She was a large woman and her hug was like being attacked by two steel-belted watermelons as she pulled me to her chest. Her imitation perfume reeked, burning my nose. My father once told me that if you wanted to know what a woman was going to look like when she's older, check out her mother. "Good

God, I hope this doesn't happen to Kylie. Her back would kill her. Give me a C cup anytime," remarked my inner child.

"We've got several videos I rented from Aardvark on the table and pizza is on its way. There's soda in the 'fridge, so help yourself." She turned to Kylie. "You kids have fun and I'll be home at midnight. Maybe later." With that, Kylie's mother wedged herself into the car and pulled out of the driveway, waving as she sped off.

Kylie and I stood at the curb, and I couldn't seem to stop the grin from spreading across my face.

"Where's your brother?"

"Staying the night at a friend's."

Excellent. "Your father?"

"Overnight shift. A double."

I paused, savoring the moment. "So we're alone."

"Mmmhmm."

Oh, baby. "What do you wanna do?"

* * * * *

"Oh, God!"

I woke up with a start as the sun began to peek in from Kylie's bedroom window. I knew before I peered out of the smudged glass that Kylie's mother was home. The car was in the driveway.

Great. Just great. "We're so screwed," said my inner voice.

It was about 5:30. The numbers on Kylie's bed stand clock glowed bright in the early morning half-light, mocking me. She stirred, carelessly draping the sheet across her

long body but allowing one pink breast to peek out. Her hair was a shambles, haphazardly splayed across her face, her intense blue eyes peering at me sleepily. “What you doing?” she purred.

I was jerking on my jeans and stumbling as I pulled a crumpled t-shirt over my head, static electricity crackling as I did so. My mouth was dry. “Her mother knows we’re still here,” that voice inside me whispered. That is, unless she came in so late that she didn’t check. “Little chance of that,” I argued silently. I barked my knee on the edge of the bed’s frame and yelped, then grabbed my shoes and looked for a place to sit. Kylie’s stuffed animals, large, pink bears, stared at me with expressionless eyes from a wicker chair in the corner.

I sat on a bear’s face and pulled on a shoe.

“It’s almost dawn,” I said in a harsh whisper. “Your mother’s home!” Then, another thought raced through my mind, one much more imperative.

“When does your father get home?”

“Seven. Maybe seven-thirty.”

There is a God.

Kylie’s father, Sam, was a large man, roughly six foot two I guessed, and solid. A Vietnam vet, he had obviously stuck with some kind of workout regimen because his arms were as wide as my leg, despite his incessant drinking. There was a quiet, brooding menace about him that urged me to steer clear of him whenever possible. He scared Kylie, too. I once commented about the odd placement and unusual amount of pictures hanging in the living room until Kylie shot me a panicked look that I couldn’t quite read. Later, while her mother hummed to herself and washed dishes in the kitchen, she showed me the

deep holes in the wall left from her father's fist. "Only when he drinks," she said quietly, and covered the hole with a framed photo of herself at six, her blonde hair in ragged pigtails, her radiant smile a distraction from the hollow, haunted look in her eyes. "Then, he's unreasonable."

Kylie rose, dragging bed sheets behind her like a wedding gown's train in a lazy attempt to cover her nudity. "It's okay," she started to say as I pulled my left shoe on and stood up, colliding with her. I kissed her quickly on the lips and pushed long tendrils of my red hair out of my eyes. "I've gotta go before she realizes I'm still here!" I whispered.

Kylie yawned and watched me quietly. It didn't occur to me that she seemed awfully calm for a school girl, naked, wrapped in a bed sheet, whose mother was two rooms away. For a moment, it was so quiet in the house that I could hear the ticking of the clock in the living room, down the stairs. I slowly opened her bedroom door and peered cautiously into the hallway, fully aware that her mother's door was yawning open to my left, the light from her open window casting a square pool on the floor. If I entered the hall, she would surely see me sneaking by. The silence pressed down on me.

"Come by later, honey," Kylie bellowed.

I jumped and spun on her, clapping my hand over her mouth, her wet lips pressing against my palm as she smiled playfully.

"Sshh! Your mother!" I peered into her blue eyes. She was enjoying this. "I'll come by in a few hours, okay?" She nodded and I released her, tentatively placing my foot into the hall.

Squeak.

The hardwood floor shifted and I backed up so fast that I almost knocked Kylie, who was still trying in vain to keep the sheet around her, over onto the bed.

“Just go for it. Wimp.” my inner-child chided.

Giving Kylie a quick kiss on the cheek, I turned and ran down the hall.

* * * * *

The hallway was alive with flying paper wads, smacking bubble gum, backpacks, people necking against lockers, and students shoving one another. Kylie, oblivious to the adolescent chaos, dragged me by my hand down the center of the hall. “I can’t wait for you to meet my friends!” she cooed. An indifferent shoulder nudged me callously aside. The student, who was about five years younger and a foot taller than the rest of the students, seemed not to notice. Three girls huddled around an open locker plastered with photos from *Seventeen* magazines suddenly stopped gossiping long enough to silently watch us pass. One of them said something to Kylie that I could not hear, prompting Kylie to fly them the bird. “Ignore them,” she said. “C’mon! I’ve gotta get you to Mrs. Wright.”

Mrs. Wright was a tall, thin, pretty woman with mousy brown hair and black eyes. She regarded Kylie with a warm smile and a slight nod. “Morning, Kylie,” she said in a pleasant alto voice. “This must be Mr. Frizell.”

When she said my name, an odd, sharp, sensation hit me just behind the eyes. I flinched physically and said, “Mike is fine.”

“Well, you are, for all intents and purposes, an adult in my class, and adults are addressed by a title.”

“I’m just a student.”

“Not in here.”

* * * * *

She knows, I said to myself, over and over. She knows she knows she knows.

I turned the car’s wheel to the left and crossed the lane of traffic to drift to a stop by the curb in front of Kylie’s house. Her father’s truck was in the driveway. I glanced at my clock radio. 7:42 in the morning. Good, I thought, he’s probably asleep by now. I had only left her house a few hours ago, but during that time, I was desperately trying to come up with a reason why I’d be in town this early since I lived about fifteen miles away. I considered just going home after my harrowing escape from the house, but Kylie had wanted me to come back, and who was I to deny a naked blonde any request?

In the three months that Kylie and I had been seriously seeing each other, I had grown to love her. She was my first real girlfriend. She had shared with me a precious gift, her virginity. We talked little about my leaving for college at the end of next month. Every time the topic was broached, she began to cry. There was this stabbing pain when I thought that I wouldn’t see Kylie every day and know she was okay. I wanted to take her with me, but she still had a few years of school left. Maybe in April next year I’ll be coming home to take her to prom. That would be cool.

I pulled down the visor and peered at myself in the mirror. My hair was a mess, all tangles and knots from the hours of making out on Kylie’s living room couch, her slender hands crumpling my hair, as we pretended to watch one of the numerous videos her mother had rented for us. The make out session had taken us to her mother’s bed, then her own, upstairs.

Upstairs.

On the passenger seat beside me was a box of glazed doughnuts I had purchased as part of my cover story and reason for being nearby so early on a Saturday. I would tell them that I had been on an errand and I brought breakfast, hi, good to see you. That made sense.

I lifted the box and exited the car, trudging up the walk towards the front door.

* * * * *

“What did you say?” My face flushed red and my hands began to shake.

Kylie’s mother smiled and leaned across her kitchen table towards me. “How was my daughter last night?”

Her words didn’t seem to make sense. I came to the door, doughnuts in hand, expecting nothing more than a cheerful, “Good morning!” and a kiss from my girlfriend. Instead, I was greeted to scrambled eggs, biscuits and gravy, juice, and coffee. Kylie was seated at the table as I entered, looking demure, freshly showered, and scantily clad in her short, pink, terry-cloth robe. Curiously, there was a third table setting ready next to her. I thought it was for her father who had decided not to eat and went to bed, but in the back of my mind, I knew. I knew.

Her mother was expecting me. And now this question that had my thoughts racing. Did she mean what I thought she meant?

“Umm, well, everything was fine, just fine,” I stammered. My stomach burned, and I was suddenly not hungry. I laid my fork down next to the steaming pile of yellow eggs on my plate. “The pizza was good, and movies were...”

“I don’t mean that,” her mother said with a slight laugh. “I meant, did Kylie know what she was doing in bed?”

I'm going to throw up I'm going to throw up.

Kylie put her hand over mine, the press of her flesh made me jump and, unintentionally, I jerked away from her. "It's okay," she said soothingly, "I tell my mom everything."

"We talked about it a lot," her mother continued. "She was a little nervous but knew that you both were ready to take that step. She said you were gentle and caring and you don't know how much I appreciate that. I just wanted to know if Kylie understood how you liked things or not."

I dropped my head to the table, feeling the cool wood against my now sweating forehead. It was nice. I shut my eyes and expected to wake up in my bed. Maybe I'm not here, I thought. I had driven all the way home and Kylie will be mad at me for not coming by. That's okay; I'll make it up to her when I wake up.

Kylie placed her hand on the back of my neck, and I could feel the tender bite of her nails on my sensitive skin. Not a dream after all.

"Don't be embarrassed," her mother said. "I'd rather have Kylie tell me everything than have you two running around behind my back. Besides, instead of having her lose her virginity..."

Virginity. Suddenly, the word didn't sound right.

I felt actual pain in my chest when she uttered the word.

Virginity. VIRGINITY.

"...in the back of a Buick like I did, she got to enjoy her first time in a queen sized bed. Wish I had been given that choice."

I lifted my head and looked at Kylie. "Everything?" I squeaked.

She smiled and kissed me full on the lips, her arms about my neck in a full embrace. I was still dumbfounded when our lips parted, connected by a thin line of saliva that seemed to hang there for a moment like a silvery spider's web. "It's okay. Really. She's not mad."

"Where do you think the condoms came from?" her mother said. "You didn't think they were Sam's, did you? He had a vasectomy years ago."

"Does...does he know, too?" My voice sounded like I was going through puberty.

Both of the women laughed. "Oh, honey," her mother said, dumping leftover eggs into the garbage disposal in the sink, the metal fork scraping on the faux porcelain like fingernails on a blackboard. "I don't think he'd like that too awful much. Not at all."

* * * * *

I felt naked.

"Class, this is Mr. Frizell from the School of the Ozarks. He will be observing us today because he is considering becoming a high school teacher." Mrs. Wright turned to me. "An English teacher, isn't it?"

"Yes," I managed to say, though my voice seemed dreamy and far away. I looked at the faces in the room, some smiling, others looking away with indifference. Kylie sat near the back, her eyes dancing with happiness.

My stomach threatened to turn over.

"Well, Mr. Frizell, if you would have a seat here near the front, we will begin class."

Kylie wiggled a bit in her chair, gesturing for me to look in her direction. She blew me a kiss and threw her hair back to give me an inviting look, and then she and the girl

next to her burst into a cacophony of giggles that sounded like someone strangling baby birds. I sat at a desk next to Mrs. Wright's and took out a pen and notebook, pretending not to notice.

"Just concentrate on the lesson. Take notes. Then get the hell out of here," said my inner-voice. "You know they're watching you. They know about you."

I watched Kylie out of the corner of my eye. Frustrated that I would not look her way, she had begun doodling on her note pad and carefully chewing a stick of gum so no one would notice. Her hair was swept back, revealing her long neck, her pert ears, and sensible diamond stud earrings. She wore a pink sweater that was fuzzy and hugged her body and tapered to her stomach to end just above her waistline, allowing her belly button to peak out. Her jean mini skirt fit nicely about her hips, hitting her about mid thigh. Her legs were bare, slender and muscular. She shifted slightly, itching her left leg with her right shoe.

Her shoe was a sneaker, a pink sneaker, adorned with little pink bows.

The sound of a diagram unrolling from a metal casement attached to the wall caused me to jump. Mrs. Wright unceremoniously unfurled a picture of a frog on its back, the flesh pulled back to reveal its internal organs.

"We're going to dissect starting tomorrow."

* * * * *

"I wish you could stay here with me," Kylie said softly. Diamond tears spilled down her cheeks, cutting a white line into her makeup. She held me tight against her, so tight that I could feel the squarish shape of the plastic fastener for her front hook bra against my breastbone. I made no attempt to pry her off.

We stood by the waters of a muddy reservoir, the sun settling into a crimson bed of clouds as the first hints of the change fall brings kissed the breeze that played through our hair, bringing us the sharp, musky scent of newly fallen oak leaves. The only sounds evident were the dry rustling of leaves and the soft sniffing from Kylie.

“It’s not forever,” I whispered.

* * * * *

“Oh, man, it’s dead.”

Kylie’s face turned paper white as she stared down at a frog in a jar. The frog was lying haphazardly on a damp fluff of cotton, unmoving. Her lab partner, a large blonde boy with freckles shook the glass hard enough to make the frog’s corpse whack against the sides of the jar. “I think I’m going to be sick,” she muttered.

I watched mutely from the front of the class. Day two of my week observation in Kylie’s school had been uneventful thus far, though the uneasy feeling I experienced the first day had not subsided. I could barely sit still in the chair.

“You shouldn’t be here,” my inner voice whispered, and then fell silent.

Mrs. Wright gave her students instruction to lay the dead frog onto a cutting board and to pin it down. The girls squealed, on cue, whining to the boys in their group to touch it for them. As jars were opened, the sterile, sour reek of formaldehyde permeated the classroom. The smell was not helping my stomach. I watched Kylie as she stared down at the dead animal with morbid fascination, her eyes half shut in a wince of disgust. Her freckled lab partner picked up the board and threatened to “put it on her” and she backed away from the table, squealing shrilly. Mrs. Wright scolded them, but I couldn’t hear for all the noise in the room as students busied themselves with dissection.

How childlike Kylie seemed.

“Mr. Frizell?” a mousy girl squeaked meekly. “Are we doing this right?” I moved to her table and watched as the mousy girl pierced the skin of the frog with a scalpel at the anus and moved upward, splitting it. “Go slower so you don’t damage the internal organs,” I suggested, not really knowing what I was doing, but offering anyway.

“Honey?” Kylie called out too loudly, causing everyone to pause for a moment. I thought I was going to die.

What the hell was I doing here?

* * * * *

It was almost two in the morning by the time I arrived at Kylie’s house from college, spurred by her plaintive cry for help over the phone.

“Come home,” she cried. “Please. Please.”

It had been six weeks since I had seen Kylie. I could always feel her presence with me in everything I did, but her influence was lessening as I explored my new life at college. During the first few months of the fall semester, I went home almost every weekend to see her and feel her warm touch. But her hold on me was tenuous as I began to fall into the routine of being independent. I was slipping away. She was still in school, still growing. She needed to be enjoying her youth, experiencing her school years with her friends, not sitting home on the weekend waiting for her college boyfriend to come home. She started calling me almost every night, sometimes in tears, sometimes valiantly hiding the fact that her heart was breaking. However, there was something in her voice tonight that told me that this call was not a call fraught with frustrations borne of absence. This was a call of desperation, a call for help.

“I need you.”

I left my car door ajar and ran up the walk, taking only a moment to glance at her father’s dented Ford truck rusting silently in the driveway. I didn’t bother to knock and flung the front door open.

“Upstairs.”

I jumped when I heard her father’s deep voice cut the darkness of the front room. “She’s upstairs,” he slurred.

He was sitting in his fabric easy chair, his hair tousled, his clothes appearing as if he’d slept in them. The sour smell of stale alcohol permeated the room. I hesitated only a moment longer, peering at his black shape, his large, heavy hands gripping the armrests of his chair, then turned and bolted up the stairs to Kylie’s room.

Her door shut, I rapped on it gently. “Kylie?” I whispered almost inaudibly. “It’s me.”

“Come in.”

I opened the door slowly to find Kylie sitting on her bed, her back towards the door. She was rocking gently back and forth, arms across her chest, her head down, obscuring her face with her hair. I circled around in front of her and brushed back long golden strands so I could see her eyes. They were black with tear-smearred mascara.

“Baby, what’s wrong?” I hugged her. She made no attempt to reciprocate. “Did something happen?” As I put my arms around her, I realized that she was shirtless yet still in a pair of faded Levi’s. I pulled back and put my hands on her shoulders. “Talk to me. I was scared to death. Tell me what’s wrong.”

She dry heaved instead of sobbing because she seemed to have no tears left. “Only when he drinks,” she muttered wetly, and uncrossed her arms.

Angry red fingerprints, already turning purple, were pressed into her breasts, some so clear that I could make out the bloody half-moon cuts of fingernail tips. There was a hint of blood on her right hand, and her shirt was torn and hanging about her waist.

I wasn't thinking as I took the stairs three at a time and rushed him in the front room.

“Son of a bitch!”

My voice didn't seem like my own. It was distant, loud.

He was out of the chair faster than I thought possible, taking less than a step to meet me as I charged forward, fists ready. His pan-sized palm caught me on the left side of my face and spun me sideways, causing my head to impact with the floor. Before I was able to turn and face him, he clutched the front of my shirt, the fabric pulling tight across my back as he lifted me from the floor like a rag doll, then tossed me across the room, my legs sliding on the hardwood floor without purchase. I wasn't sure if he hit me again or not. I was still disoriented from the first blow.

“Stop it stop it!” It was Kylie. She had thrown herself between her father and I, her arms cradling my head tenderly.

Sam hesitated for a moment, shocked by his daughter's sudden ferocity. He reached up and touched the long, bloody furrows on his cheek from Kylie's fingernails and, for a moment, he was gone, his eyes empty. He raised his hand as if to strike her, only to hesitate as she flinched and buried her face in my chest. Her hair obscured my vision, but I could feel the displacement of air as he strode past us and out the front door.

Kylie didn't move until he started his truck and pulled out of the driveway and the sound of his engine faded.

"Kylie, I..." she stopped me from saying more with a kiss.

"Don't tell anyone," she whispered. "Please."

Neither of us spoke again that night.

* * * * *

"What were you thinking, anyway?"

I was stunned for a moment. How dare she ask me that!

"Play stupid," said my inner child.

"I don't know what you mean."

Mrs. Wright had finally called me into her office on the last day of my observation. Her office was Spartan but still managed to look cluttered because books were piled in corners and papers were splayed on her desk in a fan shape, as if she'd tossed the pile there in her haste between classes. She sat down behind her desk and didn't offer a chair to me.

"Come now, Michael, we both know why I wanted to talk to you."

"About Kylie."

She smiled weakly. "You're in college now. She has a few years ahead of her. Don't you think it's time to move on?"

"That's not for you to say," I said, gathering my wits. I knew this was coming. I could sense Mrs. Wright's consternation regarding Kylie and this college guy she had visiting her class. Kylie had always admired Mrs. Wright, even regarded her as a role model.

“You’re right, that’s not my business,” Mrs. Wright conceded. “But Kylie is a student I’ve looked after for some time. She’s not a strong student, though I must admit that she’s been on track this semester. I’m told by her mother that you are the cause of that.”

“I just encourage her to do her homework and get good grades. She’s capable, just a little unsure of herself. She needs to build confidence.”

“Oh, and you’re the one to do that for her?” There was a pause. “Sorry, that was unfair. I think you can see that I am concerned for Kylie. And her well being. She’s a good kid. But that’s just it. She’s a kid.”

“You haven’t seen her after dark,” my inner child screamed. “That’s no kid.”

“Mrs. Wright,” I began aloud.

“Call me Sharon.”

She threw me off guard. “What?”

“My name is Sharon. We’re both adults here.”

There was a long moment of silence between us as the weight of her words pressed down on me. She smiled slightly and leaned back in her chair a bit. When she spoke again, her words were simple, direct, and cutting.

“Aren’t we?” she asked.

* * * * *

I stopped taking Kylie’s calls, instructing my roommate to tell her I was out. Her frequent letters were longer and more frantic, pages of teen angst and longing for closeness neither of us were experiencing. Months had passed since my confrontation with her father. I kept the incident to myself, though I desperately wanted to tell her mother.

Something in her mother's demeanor when she came home that morning to find Kylie and me huddled on the floor told me that she already knew. It was a family secret that festered under the surface, poisoning them all.

To my knowledge, he never touched her again.

Eventually, her letters stopped coming. But I had left things unfinished. How do you tell the woman (correction: girl) you love that you had outgrown her?

I was an adult here, master of my world. I recreated myself. I was not the skinny asthmatic last picked on the whiffle-ball team. I was the witty theater major, taking risks, daring people to not like me. Women were beginning to take notice. Women unlike any I had ever met. When I came home, I was that quiet kid again. I listened to hours of discussion about what school was like and oh how Kylie couldn't wait to leave it for college. At first, I felt the pull of being that young again, and wished that I could do it all over. I would do things differently. I would be like I am now, and the pain of my schoolboy years would pass like a bad dream. I was living precariously through Kylie. It took me months to realize that, while I was living in the past, Kylie was missing her present. She would resent me for it later on, I reasoned. It was time for an ending so that both of us could have a beginning.

It was after two months of total silence and an entire semester since the classroom observation that I arrived at Kylie's house late on a Sunday afternoon. She was sitting in her backyard, dressed in a simple floral print dress that showcased her slender legs. She was sipping a coke and reading a romance paperback. Gone was the child I had met at the skating rink almost a year ago. I wanted her more than ever at that moment. She looked up and our eyes locked. She was at first startled, then overjoyed, but she suppressed the

urge to rush forward and embrace me. She sat back in the metal patio chair and eyed me cautiously.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello.”

I sat down across the table from her and stared hard at her. “You look beautiful,” I said. “Really.”

She ignored me. “Where have you been? I’ve been calling and calling. You don’t answer my letters, either.”

“I know, and I’m sorry,” I heard myself saying. I stood up and crossed to her, kneeling in front of her and putting my hand on her bare knee, savoring her warm skin.

“It’s been crazy at school, you have no idea.”

She said nothing as we stared at each other for several quiet minutes.

“Is there someone else?” she whispered.

“No, no. There’s no one else.” I wasn’t sure I could do what I had to do because what I had just said was not planned, just a spontaneous response. There was no one else. “You know I love you.” I leaned into her and kissed her on the lips. She responded with a flurry of passion, and I could feel my resolve beginning to crumble as her resistance faded, but she abruptly pushed me away.

“You expect me to...” she began. I sensed my opening and the direction I had to take.

“Maybe we should go upstairs,” I heard myself saying. “Forget about all this.” My words cut her as surely as if I had swung a double-edged knife. I fought the tears I felt

welling up behind my eyes and said, "You know, forget all this. Be just like we were." I leaned into her and kissed her neck.

She jumped like I had bitten her and, with tears staining her cheeks, pushed me away. "No!" she said shrilly. "That never solved anything. Never."

After a pause, I realized that was my cue to deliver the line, "Well, fine. I can't believe you're being so immature about all this."

I let her stand there and fight tears as she dug her fingernails into her palms. "Maybe," she said through clenched teeth, "you should go."

She was free now, I said to myself as I drove out of town. She can enjoy being a teenager, instead of regretting that she'd missed all those years while waiting for me.

My inner child was strangely silent on the matter.

It wasn't until I was halfway to the college before fear filled my heart and I screamed long and loud, drowning out the radio as I drove down the interstate.

* * * * *

I didn't go home from college the summer of my freshman year, opting instead to do summer stock with a theater company. We would do four shows in repertory. I would be too busy to think about Kylie.

The heat of the summer began to fade, and the cool breezes that suggest change set upon the campus as I walked to the campus post office. I fished the key for my box from my pocket, expecting to find a letter from Columbia House asking for money for the Bruce Springsteen greatest hits compilation I had ordered months earlier, or maybe even a magazine, inside. Instead, I was delighted to find a letter waiting. I removed the envelope and examined it. No return address was evident, and I didn't recognize the obviously

feminine handwriting on the delivery address, but I recognized the postmark. It was from Kylie's hometown.

I tore the envelope open before I was out the door, and was reading the letter as I walked down the crumbling cement steps, wandering towards the performing arts building as I did so.

It was from Kylie's mother. It read:

Michael,

Kylie doesn't know I'm writing to you, and I would like to keep it that way. She had a hard time at first, adjusting to life without you. So did I. Maybe someday, I will call you my son-in-law, and maybe not. I know that you love her, despite the way you treated her, and it took me a long time to realize why you did what you did. I realize you did what you thought you had to for her. She is young. She will heal. And so, too, will you. You were her first love, and I appreciate the fact that you treated her kindly. I hope this letter finds you in your new life as a young adult and that you think fondly of your time with her. I know that, despite her pain, she will someday think fondly of you.

Leaves swirled about, surfing air currents downward to rest on the well-manicured lawns of the campus. I folded the letter carefully, placed it back in the envelope, and then folded it in half, intending to place it in my pocket. It was my only connection with my

former life. I have only a few pictures in a memory book in my mother's junk closet at home, nothing more.

I decided they were enough.

I slowly tore the letter into small, white fragments and allowed the pieces to join the leaves in their dancing.

CHAPTER 5: DEATH

A Distant Star

Do you know what it means when they say that a star is one thousand light years away? It means that the star could blow up and we wouldn't know it for a thousand years because it takes that long for the light to reach the Earth. When we look up at the sky, there are so many stars that it's close to impossible to tell if we're looking at the same, individual star that we noticed yesterday.

Who could know such a thing? It seems almost beneath our notice.

Rachel doesn't think this way, especially not now.

I look at her next to me in the car. She's calm, almost too calm. She smiles slightly as she notices me staring at her for an inordinate amount of time as I drive down the road. Her long, thin hands brush a haphazard tangle of red curls from her face, her demure smile dancing in her brown eyes. She's oblivious to this inexplicable anger building inside me. For a moment, a silent movie flashes in my mind and I actually see my right hand slapping that playful smile from her face with a swift crack. I push the thought aside as she reaches over and her hand, warm and soft, touches mine.

Her touch is electric.

"Just in case I forget later, I want to thank you for doing this." Her voice is like a chime blowing in a breeze and it's easy for me to forget the bitch she is. Or maybe I'm overreacting.

I smile weakly. "I wanted to help," I finally manage to say. "Really."

She smiles, larger this time, and squeezes my hand lightly. Silence resumes as she stares out the window. The miles roll by slowly, the quiet making the trip seem

longer. I look at the speedometer to make sure that I'm going the speed limit. I can't seem to shake the feeling that I'm traveling through air as thick as mud. Or perhaps it's just wishful thinking and I'm having some kind of out of body experience, watching two children approach their doom.

The stars have their own patterns of gravitational drift, constantly changing with shifts of their rotation around distant stars as the Earth changes position to create seasons. Our Earth and the individual star we've spied in the heavens are not necessarily synchronous. The stars move, changing their configuration and thus our perception of them. The change is subtle.

Rachel shifts slightly in her seat and snaps on the radio. I notice her long arm, the fullness of her breasts, the slope of her shoulders even through the frilly blouse, so feminine, so graceful. Her every move seems to capture my attention and, even though I hate her, I know what I have to do. And I do hate her. But I can't shake the feeling that someone must love her so that she can see things can be good in her life without resorting to drastic measures.

First she asked me if I would loan her money. Since I was receiving a scholarship at the School of the Ozarks to major in Theater, I had a lot of extra money thanks to a private donor who believed I could, someday, become a famous actor. I was nineteen, had no bills, a car that was paid off (an orange and white 1978 Dodge Aspen, not a chick magnet, but hell, it ran), and college was paid for because of the unique work-study that the school offered. Therefore, every dime in scholarship money was pure gravy, spending money that could be used anywhere. The money was intended to dissuade me

from taking a job outside the realm of the college campus. I doubt that my patron intended that I use the money for what Rachel needed.

When I said no, she cried, her eyes welling up with huge tears that spilled down her cheeks unbidden, her fear overcoming all need for decorum. "I didn't know where else to go," she sobbed.

The truth is I barely knew Rachel. For my work-study, I was placed on the Theater Company building sets, acting in shows, and working as part of the technical crew for assemblies in the school's auditorium. Rachel was also in the company. I would be lying if I said that I never noticed her. She's a flamboyant redhead who, if she applied herself more to her craft as an actor and concentrated less on partying and socializing, could be a great artist. I had no doubt that she could become an actor. She just had to do some growing up. Of course, at nineteen, both she and I dispelled thoughts of growing up and getting a "responsible" job as not for us because we'd both be famous, whether it was in New York or Los Angeles, someday. We talked about our dreams once after a particularly rigorous Movement for the Stage class. We critiqued each other's technique, telling ourselves that all the work we put in now would pay off in the end.

As I sit here in the car with her beside me, I realize she must've been sizing me up to see if I'd be receptive to helping her. I wasn't a total stranger to her, but there was no emotional connection between us. I have to say, staring at her now, I am alternately attracted to and repulsed by her. How can someone so physically attractive do something like this? Of course, that last statement seems shallow, also a bit incongruous. I was experiencing some radical form of emotional disconnect which caused me to think drastic

thoughts, drastic thoughts anyway, but I was close to taking real, lasting action. What I would do would change her life. It would change mine, too.

In a mathematically miniscule way, stars affect each other, creating new patterns in the sky as they shift and move with the ebb and tide of gravity. Yet, an individual star could represent something to a person that cherishes its presence. Perhaps the star is the first one a person noticed when looking up at the sky after their first kiss, or their first declaration of love. Then, this star would bring more than an obscure mathematical probability, for it would have a purpose. Comfort is derived from knowing that it is there.

I have this problem when it comes to women, especially ones I find attractive. I get tongue tied, my palms sweat, and I start to stutter. I can't ask the woman a direct question because I'm afraid of how she will respond to me. I often thought this was silly. What would she do that made me so afraid? It's not like she was going to recoil in horror from me. Yet, something stopped me from approaching a woman, something palpable, a holdover from high school perhaps. Girls barely noticed me in high school and when they did, they were usually teasing me. I preferred books to dates and kept primarily to myself. I had few friends, but the friends I did have were just like me and we could take each other or leave each other. I preferred to live like that because every time I looked in the mirror, I could see that skinny loner staring back at me. I remember a time when women actually hoped that, as I approached them at the few school dances I did attend, I wasn't coming for them. I could see a sort of panic in their eyes. I'm not saying that I didn't date entirely, but it was rare when a woman acknowledged me in high school.

When Rachel approached me, begging me for help, what was I to say? I still harbored the romantic notion that even I could find love. A woman I considered attractive needed my help, and I had a lot of pent-up passion inside searching for an outlet, ready to explode. College was going to be a time of change. I was going to remake myself and I swore that women would find me attractive. Rachel's timing couldn't be better to feed off my lack of self-esteem coupled with the desire to become someone else. But what she was asking pushed my tenuous role to the limits of its definition.

* * * * *

I hate her. As I stare at her, watching her blithely flip through stations on the radio, I alternately notice the sensuality of her body and sense the coldness of her heart, a dichotomy I hadn't prepared myself to experience. I had placed women upon a pedestal for so long that I hadn't considered they were flawed. I was the one who had flaws, but I was working on them. She had asked me for help a week ago, and I guess I had deluded myself into thinking that she wouldn't go through with her plan. Maybe the test was false, and she'd find that out before we left, I thought. Or maybe she just couldn't go through with it. But as the miles scrolled serenely by outside the car's windows, bringing us closer to our destination, I realized that there was no turning back for Rachel. Her mind was made up. In her mind, it was already done.

It was already done.

To me, however, we still had about fifteen miles until we reached Springfield. That meant we had about twenty-five minutes until we reached our destination on Cherry Street. Cherry Street, I thought, how ironic that this journey would end on Cherry Street.

The cherry was a symbol of purity, of an unspoiled natural condition, virginal. What the hell had possessed them to build a clinic on Cherry Street? I had twenty-five minutes to change her mind.

“It was an accident,” she said when she first approached me, looking for money. “I don’t even know him, well, not very well, anyway.”

I remember thinking, “How the hell could you not know him after that?” but I kept silent. I wasn’t exactly an expert in this area.

“Does he know?” I stupidly asked.

“No. No he doesn’t. Does that matter?”

“Why don’t you tell him? I mean, won’t he help?”

She lit up a cigarette, a thin Virginia Slims menthol, and pulled in a nervous drag.

“It was a one night thing. It was stupid. It wasn’t supposed to happen.”

“But it did.”

“No shit,” she said, blowing out smoke. “Look, if you’re not going to help me, well, I...I’ll...” tears began to fall, leaving white streaks in the pink blush on her cheeks. She was sexy and vulnerable at the same time. And when she looked at me, I felt my resolve fade.

“I won’t give you money,” I finally said, placing my hand on her arm.

“Oh,” she said. “Look, I can pay you back.”

“It’s not that. I just, well, I just don’t believe in it and I can’t give you money because of how I feel about it.” My excuse sounded lame, even to me, but I meant it.

Rachel sensed my unwillingness to compromise my beliefs and, with that realization, her body seemed to crumple in upon itself, like a marionette whose strings had been cut. She pulled in another drag from her cigarette and fought back her tears.

"I have no place to go. My father would kill me, my mother is sick, and well, I don't want this guy to know. I don't. He's not someone I really want to spend my life with, you know?"

"Why come to me?"

She stopped suddenly, as if that question hadn't occurred to her. She locked her eyes on mine and, as I stood transfixed, she stood up and kissed me gently on the cheek, her body dangerously close to mine, so close I could feel the heat of her as she whispered, "Because you're not like most guys. I thought you'd understand."

Damn, she was good.

I knew Rachel didn't have a car, for she had always made that clear to anyone who was willing to give her a ride into town. I think everyone in the theater company had given her a ride to Wal-Mart at least once. That's when it occurred to me. I could, if nothing else, at least give her a ride. She'd be trapped in a car with me and that might give me the opportunity to talk her out of it.

"How will you get there?" I heard myself saying before I had completely thought it out.

"I hadn't gotten that far," she said quietly, lighting another cigarette.

"I'll drive you," I said.

That was almost two weeks ago, plenty of time for me to devise a way to talk her out of her plan. Every day since then, I had wracked my brain, trying to figure out a way

to change her mind. "You should consider it a gift," I imagined I would tell her. "Some women pray all their lives for just such a gift." God, that sounds clichéd. "God never gives you anything you can't handle." I wasn't religious, so I was afraid that would sound forced. I just couldn't seem to find the words. That's when it hit me. I should stay simple, direct, and to the point. I had to find a way that took the pressure off her situation. I was looking for the words that would show her that someone else would help her lift the burden, that she wasn't alone. I was just looking in the wrong place, for I had long ago come to the conclusion that there is a God. He just doesn't meddle any more in the affairs of men, and apparently women. He gives us the tools to make our own way, and it's up to us to figure out how those tools worked. My solution, then, was simple.

I would ask her to marry me.

I would ask her to marry me even though I hated her. Certainly she was pretty enough for me to be physically interested in her. With the life-change that was coming, I figured we could work out the rest and find a way to love each other. Feelings of love would come, given time. Surely others married for lesser reasons. It felt right. She would not be alone, not with me by her side, and therefore would have no reason to kill the unborn child within her. I would shoulder the emotional and financial burdens with her. She could tell everyone the child was mine and never have to admit that she got drunk in a bar and engaged in sex with a total stranger.

She also wouldn't have to live the rest of her life knowing that she had killed an innocent child. I don't care if it's legal. I don't care about the politics that surround her rights as a woman to do with her body as she will. I felt that she now had a responsibility to another person, and I'd be damned if I was going to sit by and let her shirk that

responsibility. That inner need for me to be needed by a woman was suddenly satisfied. Rachel needed me, in more ways than she was aware, and I was going to show her just how much she needed me.

The rolling Ozark hills that were passing by the car's windows gave way to scattered suburbs as we neared the city. I now had less than ten minutes. Ten minutes to save a life. Ten minutes to change two lives, forever.

I'll pull over, I thought. I'll pull over near a bridge that spans the James River so that there's a beautiful backdrop. I'll take her by the hands, kiss her full on the mouth, and propose marriage to her. I'll tell her that I've always loved her and that I would be honored to have her as my wife, and that I would raise the child as my own. No one would have to know. It could be our secret. I would tell her how beautiful she was and that I would devote my life to her.

I felt my throat constrict as I tried to will my hands to turn the car onto the shoulder. But we passed over the bridge, and I couldn't do it. I felt as if my arms were encased in cement.

"Take the Sunshine exit," she said.

"Yes. Okay." My voice sounded alien to me.

"You all right?" she asked. "You sound tired."

"No. Fine, I'm fine," I choked. "Are you okay?"

"I will be."

The exit came up faster than I expected. Five minutes now.

I would look for a park, someplace quiet and away from the rush of cars on the highway.

But there was none. I was waiting for an epiphany as I stopped at a red light, and then turned right onto Glenstone Avenue. Time ticked by quickly. We passed a bank, a motel, a few gas stations, but none of those places would do. A set of golden McDonald's arches loomed before us and a red light stopped us again.

"This is Cherry," she said. "I think you go right."

I hesitated long enough, and several cars took advantage of the right of way, blocking me from turning. I must've looked at her sharply, because, startled, she faced me and said, "What's wrong?"

"Rachel, I...I..." and the light turned green. Cars were lined up behind us and we had to move.

"What is it?"

"Nothing...it's...nothing."

We turned onto Cherry. "It's less than a block," she said. "Wait! There it is on the left."

I turned into the lot and read the stenciled letters on the glass frontage of the building. WOMEN'S CLINIC, it read in bold letters. The building looked like every other obscure doctor's office I'd ever seen. For some reason, I was disappointed. I thought the building would look oppressive somehow, like some kind of stone fortress guarded by truncheon-carrying policemen in riot gear dispelling a crowd of Pro-Lifers armed with sandwich boards and picket signs. The lot was about half-full of cars. A squirrel casually worked its way across the lot and into a nearby tree. I killed the engine, and the sudden quiet hurt my ears.

Rachel was staring at me and a strange, quizzical look crossed her face. To me, it appeared as if she were in pain, but just for a moment. "Well," she said, her hand on the door latch.

"Rachel," I began, not looking at her. "You going to be okay?"

"I think so," she said quietly.

There was a long, awkward pause. A car pulled up beside us and a woman, her eyes obscured by dark sunglasses, stepped from the car and crossed the lot, her heels clicking as she reached the door and, without looking about, was swallowed by the building. In silence, Rachel and I watched her go.

"If you want to, you can come in with me, make sure I'm okay."

I nodded. Why the hell had I suddenly lost the ability to speak? I had so much to say.

But I was out of time.

What if that individual star we spied in the sky, the one that brought us such comfort just knowing it was there, never was?

Rachel opened the car door, and the car buzzed, letting me know that my keys were still in the ignition. She closed the door and straightened her shirt, then walked the way the sunglassed woman had walked. If she paused at the door, I'll never know because I didn't watch her go. When I was able to move, I saw the glass door drift shut. She was gone.

I don't know how long I sat in the car, my head on the steering wheel. The car heated up as the sun reached its mid-morning position overhead, and sweat began to collect on my temples and around the nosepieces on my glasses. I thought about starting

the car, letting the air-conditioner run, but decided against it. How long would she be in there? And why couldn't I ask her The Question?

Of course, maybe it wasn't too late. I could go in. I could go into the building and perhaps I would find the courage I needed to put a stop to this, once and for all.

I got out of the car, pocketed my keys as I closed the door, and approached the door. The squirrel from earlier, blissfully ignoring me, crouched on a branch, gnawing an acorn. A car pulled into the lot, and the sound of its engine made me turn. I realized that the lot was full now. A man and a woman got out of the car and, hand in hand, approached the building. I couldn't watch them any more, I decided, because they made me too mad.

I went inside.

Every chair was occupied, and I had to stand in line just to move towards the reception desk. A sign above the desk read, PLEASE SIGN IN AND HAVE A SEAT. I wanted the nurse behind the desk to be mean to me so that I could pass judgment upon her, but she smiled and asked, "Could I help you, sir?"

She was probably about twenty-four, with a perky nose and straight blonde hair. Her voice was warm, the tone of her words even and caring, and I hated her, too. I looked around the waiting area, but didn't see Rachel.

"I'm looking for someone," I said.

"Yes, sir, could you tell me who that is?"

I told her and she glanced at a clipboard. "She's in with the doctor now. She won't be long. If you'd like to have a seat?"

I was late. Too late. I stood there, my mouth open, but no words came out. I felt as if this nurse were judging me now. There was something about that last statement. Her tone seemed uneven now, mocking. Did she think I was the reason Rachel was here? I suddenly felt ashamed and I wasn't sure why. I turned and brushed past the couple I had seen in the lot. They approached the desk and signed in on the clipboard. "Fill out this paperwork and the doctor will be with you shortly," the nurse said.

Another nurse appeared from behind a white door armed with a notepad. She called out a name and a woman, whose body was exhibiting the early signs of pregnancy, stood up and walked slowly towards the nurse. She wouldn't be pregnant long, I thought wryly and took her chair. The woman disappeared with the nurse behind the white door.

I tried not to look around at the other women in the room, but I imagined their eyes were upon me. "What a bastard," I imagined them saying. "He did this to her. And now look where she is." I scoured the table in front of me for a magazine so that I could focus on something else, anything. There was an eclectic collection of two-year-old *U.S. News and World Reports*, *Redbooks*, *Cosmopolitans*, and even *Field and Streams*. I selected a *Cosmo* and began to absently flip through the advertisements for feminine hygiene products and perfume samples.

As time passed, I realized that it was quiet in the building except for the occasional, "Sign in please, and fill out this paperwork," and the occasional name called. No one was conversing. I casually looked about the room. The jovial attitude I perceived in the nurse at the reception desk was actually a rote attempt at a greeting I realized as a sense of perspective began to set into my way of thinking. Almost every

woman had a partner with her, some support. I had allowed Rachel to enter the clinic alone. How lonely she must've felt.

That's when I noticed someone I knew.

My acting coach's oldest daughter was sitting about a dozen chairs away from me. I barely recognized her because I had only seen her with her makeup on. She was wearing a gray sweatshirt and pants, white tube socks, high-top Nikes, and had her hair pulled back with a blue bandana. I imagine she knew I was there and recognized me, for she was scribbling fiercely as she filled out the necessary paperwork, her head down and her eyes transfixed to the page. It was obvious to me that she was trying hard not to be noticed or look in my direction. I can't say that I was shocked to see her there because everyone knew that she was a wild child at heart, but immediately I dismissed that thought as being judgmental. For all I knew, she could be here to obtain birth control pills or for a standard gynecological examination. I glanced away from her when I noticed her head begin to turn in my direction. ABORTIONS PERFORMED FIRST TUESDAY OF THE MONTH, a sign read on the wall beside me. When I looked back, she was staring right at me.

We locked eyes for a minute and she smiled faintly, nodding her head slightly in acknowledgement of her recognition of me. I forced myself to smile, returned her nod, and then casually looked the other way.

Our eyes did not meet again. When they called her name, I caught her out of the corner of my eye as she disappeared behind the white door.

I don't know how long I sat there, not looking at anyone, staring at my feet. A nurse, the nurse who called out the names, appeared in front of me.

“Are you Michael?” she asked.

“Yes, yes I am.” I hadn’t used my voice in so long that it cracked.

“She’s all finished. I’ve talked to her about the drugs she’ll have to take to stabilize her hormones and warned her that she still may lactate. If she shows any signs of dizziness or nausea, or if she bleeds excessively, bring her to the clinic immediately.” The nurse handed me two fist-sized boxes. “These are her pills. She shouldn’t take them on an empty stomach, so you might want to stop and get her something to eat before you head home. Okay? Here is a copy of her paperwork, some guidelines and warning signs, and the doctor’s card.” The nurse handed me a sheaf of papers. “Do you have any questions?”

“Ummm, no.”

“She’ll be a bit sore for several days, and engaging in intercourse is not advisable for a few weeks.” I couldn’t even protest before she said, “Here she comes now.”

Rachel emerged from behind the white door, obviously sore, accompanied by a tall, spindly nurse. She walked slowly and carefully towards me. I rose and took her arm with my free hand and steadied her.

“You okay, hon?” the spindly nurse asked her.

Rachel smiled weakly. “Yes, I’m okay.”

“Okay, now you call us if you don’t feel right, got that?” With that, the spindly nurse turned and disappeared behind the white door.

It wasn’t until I had led Rachel to the car and placed her in the passenger seat that it occurred to me I hated her for doing what she’d done, but more, I hated myself for allowing it. I felt that at this time in my life, I had failed her, failed God, failed myself,

and failed that innocent life. Gone was a child who could dream of the stars as I did, wondering if the light that reached Earth had been snuffed a thousand years before and we just didn't know it.

I fancied myself as the only one who would notice if a star suddenly ceased to be in the night sky. A star that had once burned bright and meant something to perhaps a pair of young lovers parked near the lake and using the star's light for illumination as they embraced, or a widow who through tears gazed at the night sky above the graveside and noticed this oddly bright star above her, was gone. A star had suddenly ceased to be, its potential snuffed out, wasted. I was the only one who knew its potential, but I couldn't tell anyone what it meant to me and could've meant to others. It was just one star among so many, an individual speck of light that meant nothing to anyone save me, but was now gone.

I drove to the corner and stopped at the McDonald's we had passed on the way to the clinic. I helped her inside, sat her down, and took her request for a meal. When I ordered, I was sure to include a glass of water, no ice, so that she could take her medicine.

As I sat down, I realized that I hadn't thought about what Rachel must be feeling. The emotional turmoil coupled with the physical trauma, not to mention the moral dilemma she must've been wrestling with was most likely tearing her up. I had spent the day dwelling on my own misplaced guilt moral ineptitudes. How selfish I had been. What a bastard, I thought. I was too self-absorbed, too judgmental to be of any use to her.

She reached into her box of food and produced a plastic bag containing a toy car. She unwrapped the car and, without missing a beat, used her chicken nuggets box as a pseudo-ramp. She rolled the toy between her hands, enjoying herself, oblivious to the world around her. She looked at me and grinned.

“I love Happy Meals,” she said.

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