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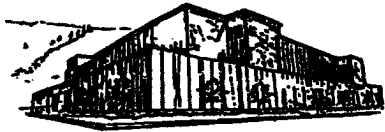
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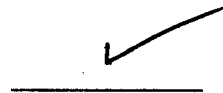
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Meaningless Words: A Collection of Stories

by

Scott Rice


B.A., University of Colorado, 2003

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
The University of Montana
2005

Approved by:



Chairperson



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Strange Meat

Mom pulled her head out of the refrigerator and shoved the grayish chunk of meat wrapped in butcher paper in my face.

“Do you know what this is?”

It smelled like metal and vinegar.

“How would I know what that is?”

She went over to my dad who was sitting in the big chair in front of the fireplace and the television and shoved it in his face.

“Do you know what this is?”

“Well, Martha, how in hell would I know what that is?”

She pulled the meat out of Dad’s face.

“Well, nobody better eat it until I find out where it came from.”

Every evening at five-thirty, give or take ten minutes, Mom and Dad would walk in the back door from work. They would change clothes, Mom into some loose fitting house dress and terrycloth slippers, Dad into old work clothes. Mom would start dinner while Dad went outside to do his evening chores. We ate around seven and settled in for three hours of television and the news at ten. Then it was off to bed, the routine rarely changing.

“I’ll call Neldena. Maybe she dropped it off sometime today.”

Mom reached for the phone and listened for a moment. She held her hand over the mouthpiece and waved at Dad who was pulling on his work-boots by the back door.

“Doris is on the phone again. I knew when they came on the party line it was going to be a pain in my butt.”

She took her hand away.

“Doris, sorry to break in, are you going to be long?”

She frowned at Dad and me but spoke in her phone voice.

“No, no trouble. Thanks.”

She clicked the receiver back in place.

“Shit-fire, that woman goes on and on. She’s got nothing to talk about but those ignorant little urchins she gave birth to like a brood cow for that big lunk-of-a-husband. I don’t know what some people are thinking. They can’t even afford to clothe those nasty little beasts and she keeps right on having them.”

Dad walked out the back door and I pondered the term “shit-fire.” I had heard this term bandied about by my mother since I could remember. It always conjured an image of her bent over with her pants pulled down and a plume of smoke and a flash of fire belching out of her butt in quick little blasts.

She was short and plump with dyed red hair and fair skin. Her eyes were pale blue and milky. She had a short fuse which I believe was caused by years spent being treated like a child by Dad. And we treated her like that, too. She would yell at us and we would nod our heads knowingly at her, shrug our shoulders, and walk away, just like he did.

The east side of the house was unfinished. Someday there would be a new kitchen, a bedroom, a den, and a second bathroom. The addition was started two years before and then the money ran out. A skeletal framework of bare lumber stood where a bathroom was to be and another surrounded the water heater that stood beside the washer and dryer, appliances later to be hidden from view with proper walls and doors. And to

the right of the water heater was the den with a massive fireplace and a sliding glass door that looked out over the back forty. The floor was bare plywood and orange-pink insulation lined the walls looking like industrial cotton candy. Wires poked out of missing power outlets, light fixtures, and switches that would come when the money did. There were no doors on the cabinets and the walls, where the walls had been installed, were bare sheetrock with writing, directions and numbers where measurements had been figured and refigured.

I started reading from my seventh grade social studies book while Mom started dinner. She was making chicken livers with gravy and fried potatoes. She always opened some canned vegetable to add color. The house was beginning to smell like grease and the potatoes made crackling noises on the stove. Mom interrupted her preparation to pick up the phone and check to see if Doris was off the phone yet.

“Shit, shit, shit. Now Fay’s on the line. I swear; I know those women don’t have anything to say to anybody.”

While Mom yelled a lot, Dad didn’t say much unless he was complaining about work or Mom or explaining one of his theories about how the Tri-lateral Commission was really in control of the entire world. He was tall with a barrel chest. He had shaved his head when he was twenty-three because his hairline had already retreated halfway to the back. He wore a huge handlebar mustache and pork chop sideburns. He didn’t get angry that often, but when he did it was something to see. He would snort about like a bucking bull with a strap tied to his nuts. We were all scared to death of him.

Dad’s boss was a guy from Chickasha who had lost his ranch a couple of years earlier. He had taken the job as manager of the feed mill, the first real job of his life. He

was pissed off about it, too. He told Dad that Dad would have to sell his “ranch” because if anybody was going to work for Vinita Hay and Grain and own a “ranch” it was going to be the boss. Dad had told us this over dinner one night and then never mentioned it again. But he started to complain about everything else having to do with work about the same time. The funny part about it was that our “ranch” was a postage stamp swath of two-hundred acres covered in rocks and milkweed and with nasty smelling sulfur water bubbling up from both springs.

Dad came in from doing his chores just as “Happy Days” came on. He pulled off his boots and shuffled off to change his work clothes, stopping in the doorway leading from the kitchen and turning around.

“You seen your brother?”

“No, he told me he and Pete were going in to Vinita to see some girl play softball. That’s all I know about it.”

My brother Shane was a jerk. He was four years my senior and real short for his age. He had sandy blond hair and freckles and he was manipulative and angry. It was worse when he was around his friends. He would put shit in my shoes, animal shit of all kinds. He would make noises in the night to scare me and tell me lies about monsters and murderers. He shot me with BB guns and slingshots and threw unripe walnuts at me. He would hold me down and beat on the middle of my chest until it bruised. At night I would wake up and he would be on top of me moving back and forth and then return to his bed without a word. I stayed out of his way as much as I could. It got easier to do as he got older and spent less time at the house. He had just turned sixteen and had gotten his drivers license so he wasn’t around as much.

Mom picked up the phone again and this time the dial tone buzzed across the room.

“Finally.”

She started to dial as Dad entered the room wearing a pair of plaid Bermuda shorts and no shirt.

“What’s on?” he said to me.

I had laid my book aside in order to watch television.

“Happy Days,” I said.

Mom put her hand over the phone and spoke to Dad.

“The radiator on the Pinto is leaking again.”

Dad, sitting in the chair by the water heater with his back to Mom, made a face like, “Here we go again.” I sat by the south wall absently playing with the exposed fiberglass insulation.

“Okay, Martha. I’ll get to it,” he said.

Mom took her hand away from the phone.

“Neldena, I’m sorry but could you hold on a sec?”

She put he hand back over the phone.

“Clay, what in the hell are you doing. You’re going to get that insulation all over you and it’s going to itch like crazy and then you’ll be whining at me. For crying out loud, leave it alone.”

I was always getting in trouble for pulling at the insulation or fingering the wiring that crawled out of the unfinished walls. I would be watching television and fiddling with one or the other or pulling pieces of the plywood floor up and then she would

scream at me. And I always had the urge to say, “If you would finish the damn house I wouldn’t be able to play with the dangerous crap that shouldn’t be sticking out of the wall in the first place.” But I never dared.

She turned back to the phone.

“Neldena, yes, I’m sorry about that. He can’t leave anything alone.”

She nodded silently and glared at me. I turned back to “Happy Days.” Dad never moved.

“Neldena, did you happen to leave some meat in the fridge today?”

She listened.

“So, you didn’t leave anything in the fridge?”

She listened.

“Well, it’s wrapped in some old looking butcher paper and it looks like a heart or something. I think it’s probably beef but I’m not sure.”

She listened.

“Oh it’s cooked but I told them not to eat it till I found out where it came from.”

She listened.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

I wondered if Aunt Neldena was really interested enough to warrant a follow-up about the meat. There wasn’t a lot going on this time of year and I decided it was enough of a mystery that Mom indeed should let her know the outcome.

We ate dinner and watched the rest of “Happy Days.” Mom started cleaning up during the latter portion of “Laverne and Shirley.” Dad remained in the chair by the water heater with his feet propped up on one of the dining room chairs.

“I can’t imagine where that meat could have come from. Dale, will you take that meat out and cut it up and see what you think it is?” she said while she dried the last dishes and put them away.

“Yeah, I’ll do it,” he said without moving.

Laverne had just dipped Rosie Greenbaum’s fancy scarf into a punch bowl at a bridal shower because Rosie had called her a bimbo. Dad wasn’t about to move.

“Shit-fire, do I have to do everything myself. I ask you to do one simple thing for me and you sit there watching television. I am sick and tired of this, all the time the same thing. Nobody listens to a damn thing I say around here and that’s about to change. I won’t have it any longer...”

Dad wagged his head as if beleaguered by it all and got up grunting.

“Well Martha, I’m going to do it. I was just watching the end of the show. Man-oh-man, you don’t have to act like that. Is it going to make a difference if I wait for a commercial?”

He took the package out of the refrigerator and plopped it onto the counter. He un-wrapped it and took a knife out of the kitchen drawer and started to carve thin slices from the chunk of meat. It was tender and fell away with ease under the knife. There was a slight marbling on the outside and the inside had tubes running through grainy meat. It looked as if it might fall apart. It was the same grayish color inside as out and the smell of vinegar and metal drifted through the room.

“Do you think it’s beef?” Mom asked.

“I don’t know, it looks like it’s been cooked an awful long time,” he said as he inspected it closely. “I’m not sure what it is.”

“It looks like lunch meat,” I said.

“It could be,” Mom said cupping her hand around the side of her mouth like Groucho Marx. “But not for my lunch.”

They put the meat back in the refrigerator and we all sat down to watch television. Dad drank a glass of milk while Mom drank Dr. Pepper and smoked cigarettes. I lounged on the floor pulling splinters out of the plywood and dreaming of living in Milwaukee in a house in the suburbs with a mowed yard and curbed streets. After the ten o’clock news they went to bed. I took out my social studies book in order to finish the chapter where the King family moves out of their trailer and into their new home in their new community somewhere in Arizona.

About thirty minutes later Shane walked in the back door and kicked off his boots.

“What’s up shit-eater?”

I didn’t look up from my book. He walked by me on the way to the kitchen.

“I said, ‘What’s up shit-eater.’ Did you think I was talking to the chair?” he said as he kicked me in the thigh.

“Leave me alone, fucker,” I said.

He leaned on the open door of the refrigerator surveying what was inside.

“Are these chicken livers?”

“Yeah, that’s what we had for dinner.”

“I fucking hate chicken livers. What’s this in the paper?”

He pulled out the chunk of meat and pulled away the butcher paper. I never looked up from my book.

“Hey shit-eater, what’s this sliced shit in the paper?”

“I don’t know.”

“I think I’m going to make a sandwich with it.”

“Go ahead; Mom said it could be lunchmeat.”

Horse

Dad had a history of small wars with certain livestock. Some of my first memories are of Dad pulling Granddad’s old jersey bull, Nat, by a leather strap looped through a large brass nose ring and yelling at him calling him names, “You son-of-a-bitch, I’ll show you.” This was Dad’s favorite thing to yell when he was struggling with a cantankerous bull or horse. I remember him facing down a Duroc boar that must have stood four feet at the crest of his rounded red back. The old hog would run straight at Dad in the converted milk barn where he was kept and Dad would stand there with a wooden fence post and when the hog got to him Dad would swing the post down and clap him on the head. The hog would go down to his knees, shake his head for a few seconds and then get back up and charge again. I must have been about six years old for that one and it seemed like the two of them went on like that for days.

Over the years he had mini wars with a Horse named Jewel who’d rake her rider off on the low eves of the barn’s first floor, a goat named Sue who would stand on top of my mother’s ‘69 Mercury Marquis like it was the Matter horn, and a couple of more hogs. My high school buddy Brian still loves to tell the story about the time Dad was feeding three of the colts and one of them side-kicked him in the thigh. Brian said Dad dropped the feed bucket, yelled, “You son-of-a-bitch,” and punched the colt with a deft

roundhouse to the jaw. He could have sold these problem animals at the livestock auction in Vinita, there's always a market for something mean; and it brings a certain type of energy to the weekly sale, but he wouldn't sell them. And I'm not sure why Dad had such a hard time getting rid of the monsters. I'd like to think it was because he didn't want anyone else to have to deal with them. Or that he had too much pride and he wouldn't let them go until they were as gentle as that lion with the lambs on the weekly cover of the Baptist church bulletin put out by Mrs. Haney. I believed deep down that it was something grand that I could not understand, but that someday I would. And I imagined myself many times coming with a heavy heart to some mini war of my own.

Dad bought the black filly after I was born. I must have been on the long end of toddler-hood when he brought her up the quarter-mile dirt lane that led from the county road to our farm. Fenced in fields rose about three feet along the sides of the lane because it had become a wash down the gently sloping hillside and the topsoil had exposed the bedrock. Grandmother Jesse had planted snakeroot and iris and natural tall grasses along the sides to keep the fields from washing away, too. But nothing could stop the erosion.

The borrowed trailer creaked along behind Dad's Ford pickup and we could hear the young mare kicking up a fuss. Dad opened the pickup door smiling, "She's a wild but I'll settle her down." The mare, with a lasso hanging loosely from her neck, was rearing up banging her head on the bars that arched over the top of the trailer. Dad climbed up on the side and tried to drop the halter over her head. She was having none of it and so Dad slid down into the trailer beside her, speaking softly things I couldn't

understand. My mother closed her eyes tightly for a couple of seconds before walking back to the house.

The black mare was doing this crow-hop with her front legs, like a little kid throwing a tantrum. She was being careful not to step on Dad but she wasn't too happy about him being in there either. Dad finally got the halter over her head and latched down. He motioned for me to toss him the nylon lead from the back of the pickup. The mare was getting more excited every second. Dad clipped on the nylon lead just as the mare's back leg slipped through the rails of the trailer. She was standing awkwardly on three legs, still putting up a fight and trying desperately to free her back leg. Dad yelled, "Son-of-a-bitch," at no one or nothing in particular. He looped the lead around her head twice, choking her slightly, and pushed her body against the trailer on the side where her leg jutted into the air, pinning her there. He motioned me over to push her leg back through the metal railing. I looked back to see if Mom might still be close enough to intervene but she was already in the house. "Boy, hurry up," was all he said. As I took the mare's leg she flinched and I flinched in startled return. "Easy with her, she's a wild." I wondered how Dad made the decision to apply the term "wild" to an animal. Whenever it was, his decision was confirmed at the moment the mare stood eye-bugged and pinned against a rusted old trailer with one leg akimbo and pointing roughly toward Tulsa. I pushed back on her leg, holding her hoof in one hand and just grabbing just above the fetlock with the other. She kicked out with the leg and sent me tumbling off the trailer's fender. "You son-of-a-bitch," Dad was yelling at the mare now, yanking her head with the lead and her jerking up and slipping her leg back through the bars. There is a look that horses get when they are scared, it's the look of prey when they know they're about

to be eaten, and the black filly had that look then. Her tongue hung out slightly from the side of her mouth and her eyes, these beautiful translucent blue-gray eyes, glass eyes Dad called them, they bugged out in terror until you could barely tell she was a horse. She fought harder then and Dad turned to face her and back her out of the trailer. She misstepped coming out and reared up her back legs boxing forward with her front. Dad struggled on the end of the lead, trying to get her under control. At the crest of her rearing up, she got a little too far back and started falling over. There was a small length of bailing wire jutting out a bout four inches that had been used to attach the slow-moving vehicle orange triangle to the back of the trailer and as the mare came down arching over sideways that nub of leftover wire poked right into her left eye.

Now she was a wild. She got to her feet and bolted shaking her head every few seconds. She would run from the north end of the pasture, stop, hang her head down and shake it as if she had something in her eye she could get rid of. Dad closed the trailer's gate and jumped into the pickup. "You get the gate." I walked over to the pasture's gate as he drove through. He sat in the pickup waiting for me to get the thing closed and I said, "Do you think she'll be alright?" And he said, "She'll lose the eye but she'll live."

And he was right, of course. She lost the eye. She had been a striking horse the first day we saw her in the corral down in Muskogee. She was tall, black, with a white flame down her face and white on three legs. And her eyes, she had the glass eyes of a paint horse, light eyes that you can see right through with wisps of gray and dots of blue. She almost was a paint except the paint horse folks have rules about how much color has to be where. She had a small patch of white on the backside of her belly, almost hidden between her back legs. It wasn't enough to qualify as a paint, though. But Dad didn't

care about the rules and regulations of the American Paint Horse Association. He had been drawn to the mare because of her striking beauty. “That’s a well-made horse.” He would say as he hung over the metal rail of the corral. We made about four trips down there before he finally made a deal, the guy from Muskogee telling Dad she’d be rough to gentle.

She did lose her eye that day; the day Dad brought her home. He never said a word about it and he never tried to saddle her. He let her run around the farm as she pleased. She would walk through the barn as we were tossing bales of hay into the loft and crane her neck around slowly like some prehistoric reptile in order to see everything with her one good eye.

That June Dad and a guy from Sallisaw came driving up the lane in separate pickups. Dad stopped far to the right, off the gravel near one of the two big elm trees that flanked the white farmhouse my grandfather had built during the twenties. The guy from Sallisaw drove passed pulling a shiny new trailer with a closed roof. The side windows were open and a bay quarter horse stallion calmly checked out his new surroundings.

“We getting a new horse?” It wouldn’t have surprised me as Dad never put these things up for discussion. Livestock came and went at his discretion and his discretion alone. I asked my brother, once, if he thought Dad would let me buy a horse of my own. He said, “Only if it was his idea to begin with.” And I knew he was right.

“We getting a new horse?”

Dad stepped out of the truck and some receipts for vaccine flew out with him.

“Get those.” He motioned toward the papers floating in circles in the breeze.

As I gathered up the papers and tossed them back into the dusty clutter of his pickup I asked again.

“Did you buy another horse?”

“He’s a stud out of a Three Bars horse down in Sallisaw. We’re going to breed the black mare.”

“We’re going to breed One-eye.”

Dad nodded disgustedly. He didn’t like the fact that my brother and I called the black mare One-eye. He had an unspoken set of rules for naming livestock. You didn’t name it if it was meant to be eaten. You named dairy cows but not beef cows. You named dogs and horses, but only if they were good dogs and horses. You never named poultry and cats could live in the barn but you weren’t to touch them or else you’d get ringworm. So, we weren’t supposed to have named her because she wasn’t a “good” one, not after she lost her eye.

The mare gave birth the following March. The foal was put together perfectly, he had straight legs, a nice tight saddle like a real quarter horse, a big rump with strong withers and a nicely arching neck that settled on his body as if an artist had put it there. And he was a paint, a real paint. He was white with red sandstone colored spots spread nicely over his body. And he inherited a beautiful set of glass eyes from his one-eyed mother. Unfortunately he also had a huge head that looked totally out of place on his perfectly made body. Even at birth we all went silent when that thing came out. It was long and oval with a muzzle the same size as the top of his head, like a long sausage instead of a regular horse head. Nope, this colt had a blimp-like thing at the end of his neck with two glass eyes seemingly stuck to the sides.

Mom tried to make the best of it, “It’s not that bad is it, Dale? I mean you said everything else was perfect, right?”

“You’ll never see better set of back legs on a horse. He’s got perfect markings for a paint and a tight saddle with powerful withers and a butt to match. He was made to come out fast and turn on a dime. That horse, that horse colt is as perfect as you’ll see from the neck down.”

We only knew the level of Dad’s disappointment by the consistency of his silence. And he was silent. He didn’t say much more about the colt and he let the two of them, the black mare and her deformed foal, have the run of the fenced in chicken coop that had fallen into disuse after Grandmother Jesse died. The yard was about a half acre and Dad had opened the double doors to the old coop so the horses could come and go as they pleased. He fed them and watered them, or we did, but they just hung out there as time went by. He didn’t try to break them; he mostly ignored them.

A couple of years had gone by when I heard Mom telling Dad the black mare was pregnant.

“Dale, you need to go out to the chicken coop and look at that black mare. I think she’s expecting.”

Dad didn’t look up as he slipped on his boots.

“Martha, animals have babies all the time.”

“Aren’t you going to have the vet check her?”

“She’ll be fine. She’s built to give birth.”

“Built to give birth, what a load of crap. I’ll keep an eye on her myself.”

“You thinking of becoming a horse-woman? Starting your own heard with that crazy mare and her deformed progeny?”

Mom grinned and shook her head back and forth as if to say sarcastically that she didn't understand him. The funny thing is that she didn't have a clue what made him see things the way he did.

“I'm going over to help Sam Smith vaccinate a bunch of calves. I won't be around for lunch.”

“You be careful.”

Dad walked out leaving the door open assuming Mom would follow him to the pickup.

“And I just might start my own bunch of horses. You never know.”

Dad leaned out the window of his truck and pecked her on the cheek.

“It's called a herd.”

The pickup began to back up and the wind blew Mom's hair across her face.

“I know that.”

The next foal came in the fall, sometime in September. It wasn't that cold yet, but it's still a bad time for livestock to be born. Still, the little filly popped out looking just like her brother except that she had the most perfect, dainty little head sitting on her perfect little body. We were all relieved as she stood up and looked at us while One-eye licked her clean. Even Dad seemed fairly pleased. He actually cleaned out the chicken coop and added some new hay for bedding. He began to take an interest in the filly.

One-eye had never calmed down. You still couldn't get within ten feet of her without her going crazy. But that little filly, and her ugly brother, too, they were as

gentle as could be. My brother and I spent a lot of time with both of them while their mother would stand in the northeast corner of the pen arching her head around back and forth slowly in that weird way in order to keep her eye on us.

Dad began to spend time in the evenings with the filly, too. It seemed the filly made the colt a little easier for Dad to deal with. Still, we were shocked the evening Dad said calmly over a nice roast with carrots, turnips, and yellow onions that he had decided to name her Windsong.

“Windsong?” We said it practically at the same moment, my mom, my brother and me.

“You’re naming that horse after my perfume?”

“I like the name,” he said it as he shoved a chunk of roast in his mouth.

I looked at my brother and smiled, “Can we name the colt, too, Dad?”

“I don’t care.”

My brother tapped his fork on his plate and said, “I’ve been calling him Sandy for a while because that’s what color his spots are.”

So they were all finally named, officially. One-eye, Sandy, and Windsong (who would end up being called Wendy in spite of Dad’s protests.

In early April of the next year I noticed the filly walking funny. She had a little wobble in her gate like she was cold sometimes and like she was dizzy other times. I ran back to the house to catch Dad before he finished breakfast.

“Dad, there’s something wrong with Wendy. She’s walking funny.”

“She must’ve stepped on something out there. Did you boys leave anything in the pen?”

“Nope, there’s nothing in there that shouldn’t be. Maybe she hurt herself on the barbed wire.”

“I’ll take a look after I get done eating.”

My brother and I headed back out the coop to wait for him. When he finally arrived he said, “Yeah, she does seem a little funny. We’ll keep an eye on her.” That was it. We were waiting for the answer from the man who always had them. He was supposed to walk up and tell us exactly what was wrong and all he had to say was, “We’ll keep an eye on her.” And that’s what we did. We watched her as she slowly disintegrated. By the end of the first week she had regular tremors in her left front leg and her ears. By the second week she was having trouble getting up when she was lying down. By the third week she had to be helped to feed and water.

Mom was pressing Dad to call the vet.

“There’s something wrong with her Dale. I’m not pretending to know more about horses than you do, but I know something is terribly wrong with that little horse.”

“She’ll be fine. Give her a little time to get over it, that’s all.”

“She can’t even eat or drink on her own. The boys are dragging her around like a rag doll and you’re telling me she’ll get over it in a few days. She doesn’t have the flu, honey.”

“I’m going into Vinita. Need anything from the grocery store?”

He never looked up at Mom. She wrote out a short list of things she needed from Carters and Dad disappeared down our lane in a cloud of dust.

Another two weeks and the filly couldn’t stand on her own. My brother and I built a sling out of old bed sheets looped through the rafters of the coop and around the

filly's belly so she could stand for a while each day. We would hold buckets of grain and water for her and massage her muscles when the tremors got too bad. Then, Mom put her foot down.

"If you won't call the vet, I will. I can't stand to see that poor thing hanging from the rafters of that old coop like a wet rag."

"I called him this morning," Dad said without looking up from his food.

The vet came and looked the filly over. We stood in the sunshine, Dad, Mom, my brother, the vet, and me; we stood in the sunshine and watched as thunderheads began to build in the west. One-eye was over in the corner of the pen swinging her neck back and forth surveying her crowded pen nervously. Sandy was stretched out near the gate sleeping without any notion how ugly his great head was. And the filly hung in the sling shaking her head to keep the flies away.

"She's a good looking filly. How long ago did this start?"

Dad kicked at the ground with his boot.

"I'd say about three weeks ago. It started as just her walking wobbly, you know?"

"It's been over a month," I said without thinking. Dad looked back at me blankly then turned back to the vet.

"He's probably right."

"That the mare?" the vet asked.

Dad nodded affirmatively.

"Who's the sire?"

Dad looked down and kicked another hole in the dirt. Then he nodded in the direction of Sandy stretched out under the spring sunshine.

“That colt, why he doesn’t look much over two years.”

“That’s about right.”

“Where’d he come from?”

Dad quit kicking the dirt and looked the vet in the eye, “That’s the mare’s first foal. His sire was out of Three Bars.”

Dad was attempting to be the horseman, the breeder that played with the big boys and dreamed of buying out the Borgstrom’s farm in the adjacent section to the south.

“So that’s,” the vet motioned toward Sandy, “the filly’s sire and half sibling, is that what you’re telling me.”

Dad looked out over the west pasture over the milkweed plants and tall grasses, beyond the mulberry trees my grandfather had planted for my grandmother years ago. His eyes scanned up and took in the thunderheads building up.

“Yeah, that’s right.”

The filly was gone the next morning. The doors to the chicken coop were closed and Sandy and One-eye lolled beside each other in the corner of the pen. It’s funny, sometimes when I was a kid I just knew not to ask any questions. In fact, I think my brother and I sort of forgot about the entire episode shortly thereafter. Dad and Mom never said another word about it. Once a couple of years later during dinner my brother said something like, “I was thinking about little filly the other day, didn’t we send her to the vet?”

Dad tore a piece of chicken meat off a thigh and grunted. Mom turned around and gave him the look that we understood as, “Why would you have said that?” And I said something about borrowing Dad’s truck so my friends and I could use it to haul hay that summer and make a little extra cash.

Calves

By August the creek bed would lie cracked and baked in the sun. I always wondered where the catfish went when the creek dried up. There was a small spring in one stretch that bubbled sulphur-tainted water up through the algae film that accumulated over the little pool of water that remained. The few catfish that got caught in the pool would hang suspended near the surface with their mouths gaping for air. And many of them survived.

Oklahoma wasn’t a terrible place to live as a youngster. I had the summer all to myself. I would wake up early and start a journey around our farm or one of the neighboring farms. I would waste the day away reading books under the persimmon trees on the top of the hill on the back twenty. I would collect granny rings of dirt around my neck and interesting rocks in my pocket, and I would imagine myself going to exotic places like Alaska or India. Dad sold livestock feed for Vinita Hay & Grain, a small feed mill in the county seat about twenty miles north of Big Cabin. Mom was a secretary for the owner of the Cherokee Truck Terminal, the truck stop near the place where Interstate 44 intersects Highway 69, just south of the world famous Route 66. My sister and brother were older and off doing other things, and so I had the long days of summer all to myself for many years.

The Willis family's farm connected to our land by a narrow strip of property that formed the eastern boundary of our place. They were different than our family. I don't remember Mr. Willis' first name, I always called him Mr. Willis. His wife was named Betty and they had three kids, two boys and a daughter who was born a number of years after the boys. The oldest boy was very tall and skinny and he wore thick glasses and spoke with a speech impediment. No one in our family had a speech impediment. He was in the same grade as his brother, though he was a year older. He left Big Cabin and I don't know where he is now. His younger brother was shorter, more normal looking. He was pretty smart and went off to college in Stillwater. He wanted to be a veterinarian, but they said he didn't get into vet school because his English wasn't good enough. He flipped a tractor on himself while pulling a stump somewhere near the back of the farm. They didn't find him for a couple of days and Faye Borgstrom said when they did find him, "he was one big bruise." Both of the boys always had dirty knees and elbows. My mother would always ask me if I washed my knees and elbows. "You don't want to look like the Willis boys, do you?" The youngest, the girl, was a mousy little thing, skinny as a rail, underfed skinny, with blonde hair and a bird-voice. She seemed fairly bright; I think she went to Tulsa and got married.

The county fair was in August every year. The summer when I was nine years old was the first summer I had a show-steer of my own. The fall before, Dad brought home a purebred Hereford steer for me and I had spent the last eleven months feeding and halter breaking him. I named him Chuck, for chuck roast. The name seemed clever until the day they hauled him away for good. Anyway, Dad had to work the day we were supposed to be hauling Chuck to the fair. So he asked Betty if she would mind hauling

Chuck with her boy's steers. She agreed and I protested. I didn't want to show up at the fair in their beat-up old Dodge truck with Chuck hanging out with their steers in a rusty stock trailer covered in cow manure.

Betty and the three kids arrived late that morning. They came flying up the road to our house in a cloud of dust and with two wild-eyed crossbreed steers bouncing around the back of the trailer. Betty jumped out of the truck with her haystack colored hair flying around her face. She used the front of her tank-top to dab at the sweat on her upper lip. As she did, her massive dingy bra peaked out of the armpits of the shirt. She yelled that we were late, "We're late!" and ordered me to help her get my steer into the trailer with the other two and she grabbed the lead out of my hand and dragged the steer along behind her. I thought the seams of her jeans would give way as her thighs grew large from straining against the will of the frightened steer. I stood there in my cowboy shirt, boots shined up, belt buckle in place, and my hat pulled down over my eyes, dropped into place with proper ritual, starting at the forehead and then letting the back settle down below the crown of my head. I looked at Betty's three kids stuffed in the cab of the pick-up. The oldest boy had dried snot covering one nostril and the little girl's shirt was buttoned wrong. Someone had drawn a stick figure of a girl and boy in the dust that caked the side of the truck.

I road along, cramped between the little girl and the oldest boy. Betty reached across the four of us, locking the passenger door and leaving me reeling under the weight of her body odor. I considered that I should try to have a little conversation but I figured it was their truck and if they didn't want to talk, then I should follow their lead. The pick-up smelled like gas and grease covered in dust and steeped in Betty's odor. There

was a hole rusted into the floorboard so I could watch the gravel road whiz by underneath. When we came to a stop the stock trailer would groan along behind pushing the pick-up forward and dust would pop up through the hole in the floor in small puffs. The oldest boy sneezed and no one spoke a word. Betty had her tanned arms stretched stiffly toward the steering wheel with her hands at two and ten. She held her head cocked slightly forward as if to will the speeding pick-up forward, as if willing us to arrive on time. The middle boy stared out the window like he was bored. I kept catching the girl out of the corner of my eye staring at me and smiling.

The pick-up came to a halt with a jerk in front of the main exhibition hall where the registration tables were set up. Betty jumped out of the truck and commanded the four of us to follow her. We followed orders and trailed behind her into the building, the middle boy first, followed by the oldest boy towing over us all, then me, and finally the little girl.

Betty walked confidently up to the counter. I looked at the big round clock with plain black letters. We were thirteen minutes late. I knew we were finished, rules are rules. We stood in a line behind Betty as she leaned over the three men sitting at the registration desk. They were putting papers away and closing their huge three-ring binders when they looked up to see Betty and Betty was speaking as she arrived at the table. The men shook their head side to side, "Sorry Mrs. Willis, but if we let you..." I took off my hat and kicked at the ground. The oldest boy was picking his nose while the little girl kept trying to catch my eye, giggling like a sick sparrow. The middle boy was looking at the Rodeo Queen that was taking pictures with fair-goers for fifty cents a pop, money for the Baptist Church fund to buy coats for the Indian kids up in Quapaw.

The only way we were going to register our steers would be if Betty told a lie. She would have to tell the whopper of the year. But, I knew she wouldn't do that. I knew that parents didn't lie. I lied from time to time and my brother lied all the time. He lied with the same ease as he breathed and with almost the same frequency. I figured my sister probably lied, but I knew, at that time at least, I knew, my parents never did. They were always telling me not to lie, "don't tell lies, you don't want to be like Buddy Von Schrittz, do you?"

Yes, if we were going to get our steers into the show ring that year, Betty would have to tell a lie. And that is exactly what she did. She became the great mother hen, her feathers puffed up and she began to make a steady stream of noises, noises designed to intimidate, noises that were even larger than the body from which they came. And she lied. She lied for her kids and she lied for me. She told them we had arrived a half hour before and that one of the volunteers from the Elks Club had misdirected us and we had gone over to the livestock barns to register and only after we spent some twenty minutes figuring out where we were supposed to be did we haul ourselves over to the main exhibition hall and here we were and, "it just wouldn't be fair to the kids after-all, to punish them because some old coot gave us bad directions and we actually were here on time, just not *hereon* time."

It was a masterful stroke. The men pulled out the binders and the entry forms that been previously put away. Betty turned to us and winked. I was the only one that smiled back. She motioned us three boys to get to the table and fill out the forms. I put my hat back on, forehead first, and stepped up to the table.

Folding Words

Bill was always the favorite. And I never minded it one bit. I loved being Bill's little sister. I never wanted to be good at everything the way Bill did. He was first at everything he tried, always winning some award or getting elected president of something. And he was handsome, blue eyes and thick dark hair parted straight down the middle and feathered perfectly away from his face. Not me, I was no overachiever. It was enough for me to be regular, maybe slightly above average, but generally just a high school sophomore that year, not ugly but not pretty, with an amazingly talented and handsome brother.

I know you won't believe me when I say I didn't mind his being the favorite, but it's true. Bill and I were close. We talked all the time. The year before, when I was a freshman and Bill was a junior, he told me all about high school. He told me who to hang out with, which teachers were cool, even what to wear. He gave me specific and detailed instructions on how to succeed in high school. It was like he had taken notes or something, and passed the information on to me.

That spring, Bill asked Tracy, she was in my class, to go to the prom with him. They had been dating for most of the school year and Bill was really psyched about the big evening. He picked out a tux with a white dinner jacket, a shiny cummerbund, and small black bow tie. Tracy was going to wear a sleek blue dress, robin's egg blue. They both talked about her dress all the time. They kept saying it looked more like a cocktail dress than one of the puffy-sleeved, garlanded monstrosities favored by the other girls at school. They drove down to Tulsa, in fact, in order to find it. They wanted something sophisticated; something that looked like it came from New York or Paris, as they

imagined what New York or Paris had to offer. And they found it at Renberg's in the William's Center downtown. It was backless, a tight-fitting sheath with a slit up one leg. Bill told me how they would go to Tracy's house after school, before her parents came home and she would put the dress on and act like she was a movie star. Bill would lie back on her bed and watch her play-acting. I suppose it looked quite ridiculous with Tracey wearing the grown-up gown and Bill wearing an REO Speedwagon T-shirt, 501's, and white Nikes. After a while he would grab her and kiss her passionately, slowly unzipping the dress, letting it fall from her shoulders, and then they would make-out on her bed until her mother came home.

That's why it didn't make any sense the day I came home from school a few weeks before his graduation and found Bill sitting at the kitchen table wearing white socks, blue boxer shorts, and a plain white undershirt. He was slumped over the perfect white plastic circle of the kitchen table in a smaller circular pool of red that seeped around the salt and pepper shakers and the napkin holder that was shaped like a red apple. The low side of the table was nearest the Formica bar that separated the breakfast nook from the kitchen because that is where the blood dripped down to a smaller pool on the harvest gold linoleum. Dad's 12 gauge was lying on the floor on the other side of Bill's chair and there was a sheet of notebook paper folded perfectly in half on the table, its corner just barely dipping into the puddle of blood. I didn't panic at all; I called Mom at work and then went out to wait on the front porch.

Later, Mom asked me why I called her instead of calling the ambulance. I told her I knew Bill was dead. There is something in moments like that, horrible moments that the mind can barely grasp, when a different sort of knowledge seems to take hold. I

knew he was gone and I never even considered that he could have been helped. And I was right. As I sat out on the porch and waited, the ambulance arrived first, screeching to a stop diagonally across the driveway with one front tire slipping into the grass. I wondered where they had come from for a moment and then waved them directions to the kitchen. Mom arrived next and a short time later Dad's pickup bumped onto the curb. They hauled Bill off on a stretcher performing all sorts of heroics. They all looked very serious, very intent on saving him, but I knew then it was a waste of time.

Dad dragged Mom out of the house after the paramedics. Mom was sobbing and clutching the sheet of notebook paper. They rode to the hospital in the ambulance. It was strange how everyone seemed to arrive all at once and then everyone left the same way. It was like there was three minutes of chaos, noise, and confusion; and then everything went quiet again.

I don't recall how much time passed before Tracy came running up the street panting to catch her breath. She looked terrified.

"What happened?"

She looked at me as if she expected me to be able to tell her.

"I don't know."

"Is Bill okay?"

Her voice trailed off. I think she still thought I could put this in order for her, but she was terribly, terribly wrong. I looked down the street first one way, then the other. I tried to put it into words and failed. I sat there silently groping for language that would describe the events of the day in the late spring of 1980. The spell was broken by Tracy's screech.

“Rachel?”

I stared at the ground.

“Bill’s dead.”

It was nice and simple and to the point. It needed no other explanation, which was a good thing because I was quite incapable of that at the time. Tracy walked with me to her house a few blocks away. We talked as we walked and I described what had happened using as few details as possible. Then we kind of stammered the rest of the way to her house, repeating the question that would haunt us for the next ten years: Why?

For the next couple of months Tracy and I spent a lot of time together. We talked endlessly about Bill. We told each other stories about him; we comforted each other. She said they would drive out to the lake and park and talk about leaving together, going away to college and then moving someplace far away and getting married and having kids and a house and two cars and all the rest. And I told her how Bill would write notes to me and hide them in silly places for me to find sometimes months after he hid them. Tracy and I cried together most of the time and often fell asleep on one another’s bedroom floor, waking up to find ourselves thirsty and confused with puffy eyes.

Often I would stare in the mirror, thinking how much I looked like a female version of my brother, the same blue eyes, the same thick dark hair. Even the shape of my eyes and face recalled Bill’s in a softened, more rounded way. At times I knew that seeing me was painful for Mom. She would see me early in the morning in the dim light of the hallway, and she would flinch, jerking to attention before realizing it was only me.

These days, I have to look at pictures of Bill in order to remember him clearly. That’s what I did while I was home for Thanksgiving this year; it’s what I do every year.

Mom, in her tireless grief, had made a scrapbook memorial for him just after it happened. It was filled with photographs, pictures of Bill waterskiing on Grand Lake, playing little league baseball, and lined up with the student council wearing his navy blazer and khaki slacks. There were postcards from his summer trip to Florida in 8th grade and little notes he had left us over the years. And on the last page: Bill's graduation announcement with his name written in fancy letters. For the last ten years I have taken the scrapbook out during the holidays so I could get his image back into my mind. I sit on the bed in my old room and look at the scrapbook and then look in the mirror, trying to remember how we looked alike and trying to imagine what Bill would look like now.

And always the question that was hanging over our heads: why? The entire town was at a loss to explain what happened. I knew people speculated. They said it was Dad, that he was beating Bill. They said Bill was on drugs. They said I was on drugs. They said Mom was an alcoholic and Tracy was a slut. But none of it was true.

For the last few years I had imagined asking Mom about the scrap of paper. The scrap of paper that was on the table the day I walked in and found Bill. The scrap of paper with its tip barely dipped into the round pool of blood. Mom and Dad had never acknowledged it. I told myself when I was younger that they would have told me if it contained something important.

But, over the years, I had started to reconsider. I wished I had asked long ago what was, if anything important, on that scrap of paper. But then it seemed too late, as if I missed my chance and asking would be useless and needlessly cruel, like opening a box that contained a special pair of shoes that don't fit anymore. Why do it? What's to be gained?

So this last Thanksgiving I was thinking of the note, again, when Mom walked into the kitchen carrying a dusty cornucopia with plastic fruits and vegetables glued inside. She set the decoration on the table and wiped her nose with the back of her hand as the dust floated in the air.

“I don’t know if we should even have Thanksgiving this year. There’s too much trouble in the world.”

“Mother, please don’t start. You’re going to screw up the day for all of us.”

“That’s nice, Rachel. It’s good to let go of things that trouble you. Wish I could.”

I rolled my eyes dramatically.

“Where’d you find that old thing?”

She lifted the cornucopia a couple of inches off the table, tilting it one way, then the other as if to inspect it. She placed it back on the table and dusted her hands off on her jeans.

“I found it in the closet of the extra bedroom.”

This was code for Bill’s old room: the extra bedroom. It was much more pleasant than saying the bedroom where our dead son once slept or the space where our son lived such a miserable life that he felt compelled to shoot himself at the kitchen table. No, it was, and had been for some time, the extra bedroom.

“You aren’t really planning on putting that on the table, are you?”

“Why not? It’s scratched up and dusty and I like it.”

“Well, it’s your table, but everyone will think you’re nuts.”

In fact, Mom wasn't nuts, but something else. She was finished. It's like she had done all she set out to do in life and was marking time until her body realized her mind was done. She spent her days wandering around the house working on different projects like painting the front yard fence or making origami cranes and horses and hanging them from the ceiling of the kitchen. And Dad would say how nice things looked, but that was about it. I don't think he knew what to do so he just continued moving through each day. They both did.

"Mom, do you think about Bill often?"

She jerked her head back, just slightly, at my words. Then she recovered herself.

"What makes you ask that?"

"I don't know, maybe it's the holidays or that it'll have been 10 years next spring. I don't know. Do you?"

She looked down at the kitchen table as if suddenly remembering where we were.

"I think of him all the time. Every day, I suppose."

"I don't think of him every day anymore. I feel guilty sometimes because I don't."

"You shouldn't feel guilty; it's been a long time and you were young."

I went for something to drink.

"Mom, do you remember the note from that day?"

I said it with my head in the fridge. When I came out, I found she had gone quite rigid, stone cold in fact.

"Mom, do you remember the note?"

She relaxed a bit then and spoke in a calm articulate tone.

“Yes, I remember the note. But you shouldn’t concern yourself with it.”

“Why?”

“Can’t we talk about something else?”

“I need to know about the note. I always felt that bringing it up would just bring up old pain. Can’t you tell me, after all these years, what was on that piece of paper?”

She stood up and crossed her arms over her chest.

“It doesn’t matter what was on that piece of paper. It doesn’t matter because it wasn’t Bill. He didn’t write that note; nothing there had anything to do with him.”

She looked critically at the cornucopia for a moment and then went to her bedroom to fold more cranes and horses.

At first I was angry with her. But, maybe she’s right after all. Whatever Bill might have written in those final moments wouldn’t have come from the Bill I knew either. The Bill I knew would never have killed himself. In fact, the Bill that pulled the trigger that day was a different Bill and I’m not sure I want to know him. I may want to keep my memories of him the way they are.

I went to my old bedroom and leafed through Mom’s scrapbook of Bill’s life again. I stayed there all afternoon looking at the pictures, looking in the mirror, and reading all the little notes and letters and postcards Mom had collected. I remembered Bill walking down the hallway of our high school holding hands with Tracy and saying “Rock” to one of the baseball players while they slapped one another high-five. He wore his REO shirt, his Levi 501s, and his beloved Nike tennis shoes with the blue swish down the side.

As evening fell, I ventured into Mom and Dad's room and found her sitting in her overstuffed chair folding paper into the little cranes and horses.

"Mind if I help?"

"That'd be nice. What color?"

"Do you have pink?"

"Nope, I have blue, orange, and chartreuse."

"Chartreuse? Nobody uses the word 'chartreuse' anymore."

"Well, I do. What color do you want?"

"I'll take blue."

Austin

I woke up around eleven but I didn't open my eyes right away. I stayed there in bed for a while, very still. I decided I needed to do something so I got up and opened a window. I didn't open it all the way; I just cracked it a little.

I had planned it for a while: to spend Christmas day alone and read *Crime and Punishment* cover to cover. I knew Mark was going to spend Christmas with his family in Corpus Christi and I knew I wasn't going home. I only did it so I could tell the story afterward. I wasn't looking for pity. I thought it would make a funny story but I never planned to tell the whole thing. It was just going to be a quick anecdote, a joke for parties, a one liner when conversation slowed down. "Hey, did I tell you about the time I spent Christmas alone and read *Crime and Punishment* cover to cover?"

After I opened the window I got a glass of water. I drank it from the faucet back then, letting the water run over my fingers until it got cold. The little second floor studio apartment had a bank of windows along one wall that looked over Guadalupe Street, or what we affectionately called “the drag.” The kitchen had these little mini-appliances and we had put up a map of North America on one wall and a kitschy tapestry with dogs playing poker on the other. The place smelled like stale cigarettes that day because I had broken my rule about smoking inside when I got home from the bar the night before. It was too cold to smoke outside and I was drunk and I break a lot of my own rules when I’m drunk.

Austin doesn’t ever get too wintry. There are days in December and January when we can sit on the patio at Charlie’s wearing shorts and T-shirts. Last year it was seventy-five degrees on New Years day. It’s only snowed once since I’ve lived here and that didn’t stick and it wasn’t really snow. There are some terrible ice storms, but not any snow. If it gets cold, things just get gray. And it’s a nice gray, a gray I look forward to, especially in July when it gets so hot and muggy.

The book was on the table next to the bed, waiting on me. I started a pot of coffee carefully removing the three-day-old filter and tossing it into the trash. I love the smell of coffee grounds. I pushed the start button and went to take a piss and brush my teeth. By the time I got done in the bathroom there was enough coffee in the pot so I could slide the mug under the drip quickly while sliding the pot to the left. When the mug is full I repeat the motion in reverse replacing the pot under the drip. I always worry that I’m getting a different concentration of coffee than if I would let the whole thing make before filling my mug. But I’m impatient like that.

I check the time: 11:13am. I knew I needed to get started because I had to read the whole book that day or the story wouldn't be as cool. The clock reminded me of Tony, my fat friend Tony that had a crush on me. He was a little older than I; I think he was close to thirty. He gave me the clock out of the blue. I always thought it was a weird gift but I realized that I always thought of him when I checked the time. I really liked Tony. I didn't want to have sex with him, but I liked him and I wish we were still friends. Once, when we were fucked-up on coke he started telling me how lucky I was to have my body and all. I knew he got horny when he did coke and I was pretty sure it turned him on to talk about how I looked. He would tell me I was lucky to be thin and he would look me up and down. I let him give me head that night and things were never the same. It's like that; I wish it wasn't but it is. I thought I was doing something nice for him at the time. Looking back, I know it was probably mean. He would pester me afterward and then we sort of drifted apart and now we don't hang out at all.

I was on page fifty-seven when I realized that my coffee was cold and I had to piss again. After I peed I looked at myself in the mirror for a long time. I've done this since I was a kid, just staring at myself trying to figure what makes me think or what it was like to be dead or what made me, me. I had a little thing in my ear that was sore, a little bump that hurt when I cleaned my ear with a Q-tip. I had been trying to get a look at it for a couple of weeks. I would hold the hand mirror and tilt my head all cock-eyed, but I couldn't see a thing. At the time I was sure it was a melanoma and that's what I started thinking as I stared at myself. The thought of that growing in my ear made me feel like I had a parasite, I felt gross. I was sure it was a melanoma and so I decided to stop thinking about it and I went ahead and poured more coffee and got back in bed with

the book. About two years later I broke my arm in seven places when some woman in a red Nissan Sentra changed lanes onto me while I was riding my bike. While the doctor was setting my arm I, off the cuff, ask him what the thing was in my ear. He said it was like a pimple gone bad that had gotten rock hard. He pulled out a four-inch long tool with a tiny loop on one end and a sharp pointy thing on the other. Getting that thing out of my ear hurt almost as bad as setting my arm.

At page seventy-four I noticed a fly moving slowly across the glass of one of the windows. He looked old and I wondered how long flies lived and I thought I remembered hearing one time that they live about ten days. Ten days is not very long but it must seem alright to them if they don't know the difference. He crawled along like he was in slow motion and he looked like his legs weren't working right. I got up and looked closer. There was a little frost on the outside of the glass that spider-legged across. And the fly, black against it, looked fairly pitiful.

About three o'clock and page one hundred-fifty or so I got hungry so I cooked up one of my special double-batches of Kraft Dinner. I had planned on this also. It's embarrassing and I always wait until I know no one will be around to make it. I don't know why it bothers me so much but it does. It takes three boxes to make my special version. I boil two boxes of the macaroni and then use an extra packet of the cheese powder from a third box. It makes it really cheesy and I add in some chopped up hotdogs. If this isn't bad enough I drown the mac-n-cheese in ketchup. Later I eat the other box of macaroni with some canned red sauce and Parmesan.

While I was eating someone knocked at the door. I panicked partially because of my food, but also because if I talked to anybody that day it would screw everything up. I

sat still and waited. They knocked again. I looked out the windows hoping they hadn't seen me from the street. They knocked again but I didn't answer and after a while they gave up and left. I still don't know who it was. Part of the deal was to be totally alone for the whole day. And I wanted to be able to tell the story and know it was true. I make deals with myself like that a lot. It makes me feel honest. And I would have stuck to it, too. If I answered that door I would have to either not tell the story at all or I would have to include that information when I told it. And if I included that information it would make the whole thing less interesting.

There were a number of other things that could screw up my plan for that day. One, I had to read the book cover to cover between the time I woke up and the time I went to bed. It was ok if I stayed up after midnight, so long as I finished it while I was awake. I had to wear nothing but boxer shorts the whole time. I could wear socks in case my feet got cold and they always did. And I couldn't leave the house; I couldn't even open the door. No phone calls, no visitors, no contact with the outside world. Mark said he was going to call and I told him I wouldn't answer and he said he was going to leave a message on the answering machine anyway. He worried about me staying there by myself but I told him it was something I wanted to do. I didn't tell him that I was doing it specifically so I could tell the story to people it later.

I got back in bed and the sheets felt cold. The heat was turned down to sixty-two because I thought it would add to the atmosphere if the room was a little chilly. It worked, too. But, my feet were freezing, they are always the first things that get cold and they stay cold all winter in fact. I think it's because they are so big, size twelve and a half or thirteen depending on the shoe. I got out of bed and pulled on a pair of socks, athletic

socks, white with blue rings around the top. I like to wear them pushed down around my ankles and I like sitting around wearing nothing but socks and boxer shorts. That's why it was part of the plan. Wearing them got me a little worked up and so I popped in my beat-up tape of *The Young and the Hung*. Who thinks up names for porno movies? The tape is getting pretty fuzzy lately. I could get new videos but I like the old ones without condoms. And all the guys in the new videos have their body hair shaved. I like guys with hairy legs and armpits and that little trail of hair below the belly button is the shit. I don't like them too hairy anywhere else, just those places. And no facial hair, I don't go for the Marlborough man. And a guy who is all shaved except for a little patch around his dick is a real turn-off. I don't like guys who are that into their own body.

I pulled up the covers and settled into reading again. It wasn't long before the light began to fade and I turned on the lamp beside the bed. Mark and I had picked up the lamp at the Salvation Army store over in the Capital Plaza shopping center. It had a routine shade but the bottom of it was this huge round ball painted in earth tones to look like homemade pottery from the 70s. Mark and I had been together for about a year-and-a-half at that time. I think we both knew we would be together for a long time the first night we met. We didn't sleep together for three months because we were afraid it would screw things up. Before we met, we had both accepted the fact that we would be single for a long time. That's when you fall for somebody, when you think it's never going to happen.

I didn't expect to spend Christmas with Mark's family. They are nice to me and all. And they have me over for dinner every now and then. That's really all I expect. His family is so normal. Dad works for a credit union and Mom stays home. He has a

brother and a sister, the brother a year older and the sister three years younger. They are just so normal, especially compared to my family.

My dad is in love with the idea that the end of the world is imminent. He had been sure the world was about to end in 1983. When that didn't happen he moved the date back to 1991. This gave him some working room and he always said he wouldn't be surprised if it happened sooner. It is a religious thing, the apocalypse and all. I think he is a coward, too scared to live in the real world so he's worked it so he doesn't have to live in it. Instead, he sits around waiting for the end. Sometimes I wonder if he's right. I've pretty much given all that shit up but I have to say that sometimes I do a little what-if, what if the world sinks into seven years of trials and tribulations, as he says it will, and we all die due to famine and pestilence and war? Dad says he and a hundred and forty-three thousand nine hundred and ninety-nine other people are going to be taken away to a place of safety and be spared all the bad stuff. He's been telling me this since I was nine years old. It still scares the shit out of me, at least until I can convince myself all over again that he's crazy. Mom sort of goes along with it. She really loves him and they've been married since she was eighteen. She's in it for the long haul and she'll do anything to convince herself that everything's alright. Even be silent.

Page two hundred-forty, 5:37pm, and it's dark outside. I propped up the pillows and leaned back on them with one arm cocked behind my head, returning to my reading. After a couple of minutes I could smell my armpit, it was a little ripe. I turned my head to the side and took a sniff. I like the smell. Sometimes I purposely don't wear deodorant so that by the end of the day I smell a little. I also never wear deodorant or

cologne when I'm out at the bars. I can't stand a guy that smells like film mixed with cedar. I like a guy to smell like a guy.

I looked out the window at the streetlights. The glass and the frost made the light look like a blob with little patches of color at the sides like the ice crystals were acting as thousands of little prisms. That's when I had the urge for a smoke. I never smoke during the day; I mean usually I don't. And I don't smoke that often at home. But I love smoking, especially when I'm out partying. If I'm drinking I have to have cigarettes. I figure I'll quit when I'm thirty. It's bad for me, I know, and I figure if anybody will get cancer, it's me. I grabbed the beat-up pack of Camel Lights off the table by the door. There were only two bent ones left inside. That was a real pain-in-the-ass; I should have picked up a pack the night before on my way home. I figured if I smoked one then and one about midnight that I would be alright. But reading was going slower than I had thought and I figured I would be up later than that.

I lit the cigarette with a match. I like the sulfur smell and the way it smokes after you blow it out. I took a long drag on the cigarette and thought about having a glass of wine but I was afraid it would make me sleepy and I'd never finish the book. I looked out the windows at the convenient store across the street. There was Barry dutifully selling beer and cigarettes to customers just like it was any other day. Barry had this game he played with customers. He would guess their birthday. He never got it right but he had another unique talent. After he would guess wrong, the customer would always tell him the right date and Barry would recite for them a list of celebrities that shared their birthday. I share my birthday with John Travolta and Molly Ringwald and I feel almost famous.

I drew a circle on the window glass with my finger. I drew it right over my reflection. It seemed only natural to put a smiley face there so I did. I drew two dots for eyes over my eyes and a big smile over my mouth. I was going to want more cigarettes and there was Barry behind the counter down below with nothing to do. I cracked the window open a bit more and let the lit cigarette fall to the ground.

I poured two diet cokes into my big plastic cup that I got at Conan's, a pizza joint about two blocks down the drag toward the university. I sat down on the couch and propped my feet up on the coffee table. I looked at my feet. The socks were nearly new and still very white. I love really white socks and T-shirts and never keep them very long. I don't like it when they start to get dingy or when the material starts to get thin. The socks I wore that day had only been worn a couple of times and they still looked pretty good. I think I might have a sock/foot fetish thing because I like guys in white socks and boxer shorts. I also like guys in athletic gear. That really gets me going. I used to be embarrassed about it but not anymore. Mark is into the Eurotrash look, skinny young things with tight shirts and studded belts and that seems more embarrassing than being into jocks. Come to think of it, I'm not sure why Mark is with me. I'm not really his type at all. I'm too tall and I'm a jeans and t-shirt fag, sometimes a Polo if I have to get dressed up. I think we like each other's company as much as we like the sex. And I think I like the sex more than he does.

Sometimes I think what it would be like if Mark died. I hate it when I do it but I can't stop. I don't do it all the time or anything, just now and then it pops in my head and I go through the whole scene. Sometimes he dies of some disease and sometimes it's in a crash, a car or a plane. I think about what the funeral would be like and what I would do

afterward. I can't imagine not being with him. I think it's twisted of me to have these fantasies and I want to stop but I can't. I wonder what makes me do it. I need to start thinking of something else the minute it starts.

Around 8:00pm and page three hundred forty-three I had to take a dump. I took the book with me because I was starting to get worried about finishing before I got sleepy. I got three phone calls when I was in there. Funny, they say things come in threes. Mark called first. He left a sweet message saying how much he wished he were home with me instead of acting as peacemaker between his mom and his sister. Some guy named Jack called. He said he got my number the night before at the Boathouse. I didn't remember giving my number to anyone, but I probably did. I feel guilty telling guys no and so I always give it to them and then I feel guilty as they keep calling and I keep not answering and Mark keeps listening to the messages and laughing. I'm not sure if he's laughing at them or me. They usually quit calling after about a week.

The third call was from Johnny wanting me to meet him at Charlie's. My friend Johnny is great. He's talented, a drama major at the university. He can sing and dance and act. He's really something and totally hot to boot. He has dark skin and thick dark hair with really angular, exotic features. He says because of his looks he can play anything from Asian to Italian to Mexican to Native American, he says it gets him all kinds of roles. He's also a grade A hustler. There's a separate phone line in his bedroom we call the "bat phone" and he has an ad in the local queer rag. It's surprising who calls him. It's not just a bunch of pitiful old men, he has everything from married accountants to priests to college boys lighting up that phone. He lets me listen to messages all the time. And Johnny isn't one of those tragic cases of runaway kids with no options.

Johnny likes what he does. He could get a job waiting tables at some uppity restaurant but he digs hustling. He says it's like performing and he refers to it as his part-time job.

I brushed my teeth and poured two more diet cokes into my cup. A police car went flying down the drag with lights on and sirens blaring. It was quite jolt out of the peaceful quiet of the empty street. I wondered where he was headed and figured that somebody was drunk and beating up their wife or something. Or maybe some clever young punk figured Christmas day would be the perfect time to rob Best Buy and pick up some new stereo equipment.

I listened to the messages again and smiled as Mark reassured me that he would rather be there with me and I thought, "That asshole is probably eating a huge leftover turkey sandwich and drinking a beer and playing air hockey with the nephews and he wants me to believe he'd rather be here." But I did believe he would rather be with me, maybe not here in the studio apartment we shared, but with me. I erased the message from the guy named Jack, making a little twisted grimace while I did it. Then I listened to Johnny's message and figured he was already at Charlie's where Keith was pouring him a cape cod with two limes.

Keith's been working in gay bars since the early 80's. He has his shtick all down and people love him. Thing is, he knows he's positive but he won't go get tested. People try to tell him about new treatments, cocktails that can do wonders. He doesn't care, though; he's in denial. As long as it isn't official, he isn't positive and he can keep on living as usual. He ran with a group of Dallas barflies in the eighties, a group of about fifteen guys that were pretty crazy and they had all slept with each other. They had these

legendary orgies in an apartment on Lemon Avenue just down from the Throckmorton Mining Company. Keith is the only one still alive.

At 10:17pm and page five hundred six I smoked the last cigarette. I smoked it all the way down to the filter until it tasted terrible. I was skipping pages now, but only if I remembered what happened or if I knew it was a long scene. I dropped the butt out the cracked window and stared out at Barry. He was reading People and drinking Mountain Dew, I figured to stay awake. I paced around the room feeling stiff, stretching and doing a few knee-bends. Since I was out of smokes I decided to pour myself a glass of wine, just one glass to relax.

11:04pm, page six hundred thirty-one. I was skipping large sections now and my head would droop from time to time. My eyes would cross and slip closed and then I would wake up with a jerk and have to figure where I had stopped reading. I would get to paragraphs and think I had already read them and then I would skip ahead a bit more and then my head would begin to droop again. I shouldn't have had the glass of wine. I opened three windows wide as could be and let the cold air flow in. The craving for a cigarette was strong and I looked down at Barry thinking how a pack of Camels was less than fifty yards away. It would take less than five minutes to walk over. Five minutes, that wasn't like really leaving the house anyway, leaving the house meant going somewhere and seeing somebody, somebody other than Barry. I grabbed a T-shirt from the dirty clothes pile and pulled on my Levis. I stepped into my Nikes and headed for the door. I stood by the door for a moment considering things. It was a fucked-up game anyway so I walked down the stairs and jogged across the street.

Barry wasn't very talkative. He didn't even tell me any celebrity birthdays. Of course, there probably weren't any more to tell me because I was a regular, I came in all the time and the game gets old. I started to jog back across the street but I stopped for a moment standing on the yellow line in the middle of the drag. There was no noise other than the hum of the city that's always there. I could see my breath in front of me as I looked south toward the university and then north toward the suburbs. A guy and a girl stumbled out of the Texas Showdown. As they cleared the door she handed him an eight ball she had hidden in the pocket of her coat. He held it up above his head and they laughed as they turned the corner and disappeared.

I slammed the door accidentally and kicked off my shoes. I stripped off my T-shirt and jeans, tossing them into the corner. Then I poured another glass of wine, shut the windows, and opened the pack of cigarettes. I fired one up and sat down on the couch looking out the windows. I looked down at my stomach, at the trail of dark hair below my navel that disappeared under the waistband of my boxers. I picked up the book and started to read.

I woke up at 8:30am. I thought about Tony as I looked at the clock. My wine glass was nearly empty on the coffee table and I was lying with my face on the open pages of the book. It was open to page six hundred fifty-seven. My mouth felt dry and tasted like cigarettes. I went into the bathroom and started the shower. Then I got a drink of water from the faucet.

Mount Veeder

Dinner was served in a mountain grotto covered in dainty laurel and rugged redwood trees. The table was set with crisp off-white tablecloths and silverware sporting geometric patterns. The fog in the valley looked like clouds when viewed from the privileged vantage of the mountain ridge and it slowly opened over the vineyards below as the servers brought out the aperitif in delicate long-stemmed glasses. As the last hazy shapes drifted out of the valley, the two pianists played music from Verdi's *Falstaff*. We made polite conversation as we sipped the sparkling wine gently spiked with fresh red grape juice. A woman with profuse hair and a briefcase seemed at ease as she spoke to a pale old man, a librarian from Geyserville. The banter and gestures, leaning in to catch the key line of a story, everything seemed choreographed and comfortable. I sat quietly holding the bowl of my glass against my cheek knowing I would be expected to participate in the conversation before the evening ended. As I set the wine glass down, I caught the edge of its base on my finger bowl sending a sliver of glass into the dish of butter. A dark skinned man with large graceful hands asked the broad-shouldered Japanese boy with the dramatic shock of black hair to remove the dish of butter and assured me that not everyone handled finer vessels well. I nodded solemnly in agreement.

The Mount Veeder Winery straddles the ridge that separates the Sonoma and Napa Valleys. A Victorian house hangs precariously on the edge of the mountaintop just above the grotto where dinners are served outdoors. Old-growth vines crawl up out of the rocks, volcanic rocks that lie exposed by eons of wind and rain. The vines were planted many years ago by a group of monks that tilled the reticent fields. The grapes

that grow from these vines seem to remember the flavor of every past season. Each grape holds secrets from the hard winter of thirty-six and the early spring of fifty-four. Flavor is packed deep and rich in the pulp that ripens under the thick grape skins. Every year these vines produce a fraction of the fruit of the vines that grow from the black soil of the valley floor. But the few small grapes that come to fruition in the mountain air are concentrated with a distinct flavor that rises from this landscape and its discrete climate.

The sun and moon briefly shared the sky as we dined on bitter greens, tart capers, and sweet peppers. The sun slipped over the lip of the ridge as a handsome young man with quick blue eyes and cropped blonde hair lit torches around the perimeter of the tables. The conversation grew more intimate as we sipped a surprisingly flinty Chardonnay. A light-skinned woman with an aquiline nose asked the dark-skinned man with large graceful hands if he was married. Two women on the east side of the table flirted relentlessly with a young gentleman from Canada. I took a sip of wine, set my glass down carefully, and speared a leaf of Swiss chard being sure to use the correct fork. I looked over the stony ridge that gave way to grassy hillsides divided by lines of grape vines as I absently brought the bitter green to my mouth without noticing the size discrepancy. I pressed the leafy morsel between my lips leaving shiny smudges of vinaigrette dressing on each cheek. The pale old man, the librarian from Geyserville, chided me from across the table with a wink and a grin.

Stars began to pop out of the dark blue night. The two pianists played music from Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty* as we dined on roasted duck breasts with pears and peppercorns. The pear was boiled in red wine and baked beside the duck breasts until it became the color of blood that has yet to touch the air. A tall olive skinned man with soft

almond eyes served up wine that tasted of domestic berries and exotic spice, a wine wrought from a blend of the red Bordeaux grapes displaced long ago from their original appellation and grown in the sunlight above the fog covered California valleys. To the disappointment of the two young women sitting on the east side of the table, the woman with profuse hair, the one with a briefcase, she inquired how long the young gentleman from Canada had been engaged; then she asked him when he was to be married. Everyone stopped talking and listened intently as the young man described how he met his fiancé in Nova Scotia on his way to visit family in England. I listened too, watching the young man's eyes come alive as he related his story. As the stars in his eyes struggled to outshine those in the sky, I dropped a perfect triangle of wine-soaked pear onto the front of my cream-colored wool sweater. The dark-skinned man with graceful hands gave me his lace napkin he had dabbed in his water glass. I worked at the stain on my chest with the borrowed napkin for some time before giving up.

The wind came in from the ocean smelling slightly of sea salt and time. A lovely woman with red hair and porcelain skin laid a chocolate mousse with hazelnuts and whisky sauce in front of each guest as the broad-shouldered Japanese boy filled stemmed glasses with a rough and tumble, slightly young Zinfandel, a wine dark and rich and untamed. I had been trying to remain transparent for the last forty minutes; I spoke no words. Unfortunately, the red stripe from the boiled pear denied me the luxury of invisibility. The conversation had gone around the table as each person told their story of someone they loved or someone they had loved. I anxiously waited for my turn as the two pianists played music from Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*. The old pale man, the librarian from Geyserville, finally turned to me.

“Do you have someone in your life, a wife or girlfriend?”

I pulled my shoulders up involuntarily as if I had wings. Everyone at the table looked at me.

“Let’s say I’ve been in a relationship for seven years,” I said.

The old man leaned back in his chair and lifted his furry eyebrows.

“You’ve been in a relationship for seven years and you don’t call her your wife or girlfriend? Then what do you call her?”

“I usually call him Steve,” I said.

The old man chuckled and raised his glass in my direction.

“Here’s to Steve.”

I lifted my glass to his and let them clink gently together.

“Cheers.”

We said it together. Then he turned to the woman with red hair and porcelain skin.

“Bring us the ‘83 Sauternes so we can finish this evening off right.”

She nodded and disappeared behind the light of the torches.

Doorways

I stared at my faint reflection in the dark glass barely able to recognize myself. The blurred outlines of my faces in the glass traced the face of the misshapen man standing on the other side, behind the window. My eyes were still adjusting to the darkness of the entryway. I didn’t know what I was supposed to do.

“I’m sorry, but I have no idea what you just said.”

The guy's mouth was dragged down to the left as if he had been hooked like a tuna; he had a dent in his head above his left eye. The eye itself seemed to be sliding off his face. When he spoke, he sounded like he had old newspapers stuck in his cheeks and he spit. He repeated the instructions to me. It might as well have been a foreign tongue.

"I'm sorry, but I've never been here before. Are there lockers inside, or what?"

He was getting pretty agitated at this point. Finally, he shoved a piece of paper through the opening in the bottom of the window. I picked it up, and to my relief, there were instructions. I started to ask why he hadn't given me this in the first place, but I figured I wouldn't press my luck. I started to read out loud.

"Place all valuables in the envelope provided. Write the number of your key on the envelope. Okay, so far so good. Twenty-five dollars for four hours. It's two-thirty now, so I need to be gone by six-thirty, that's cool, I gotta meet Tracey at nine anyway."

I shoved the envelope with my wallet and glasses, along with Twenty-five bucks, through the opening at the bottom of the window. The guy behind the glass took it, placed it in a box with a bunch of other envelopes and shoved a key on an elastic band through to me. Without saying a word, he hit a button on the counter to his left and a muted buzzer noted. I stood there for a moment and then realized he was buzzing me in.

I opened the door and stepped into an even darker room. A tall thin guy, about nineteen, stepped out of a small room to my right. He was wearing shiny black pants that hugged his lithe body. His shirt was also black and unbuttoned at the top revealing a glassy-smooth olive chest. His eyebrows had been shaped into perfect arches over his big black eyes, eyes that were accented with long black lashes. The boy pursed his lips,

tilted his head forward, and looked up at me as if he were looking over his glasses, except that he didn't wear glasses. He handed me a large white towel.

“Here, you might need this, or maybe not. Don't mind Quasimodo there. He acts like that to all the new boys. Figures they're already nervous, so he makes it harder on them. Gets his kicks that way, hon. Guess he better get them somehow cause ain't nobody gonna help him get them any other way. I think he likes to watch.”

“Uh, thanks. My name's Jan.”

I self-consciously looked to my right and my left.

“Girl, nobody wants to know your name. See the number here on your key? That's who you are for the next four hours.”

“So, where am I headed?”

“Ooooo girl, Maybe to heaven and maybe to hell.”

And he stepped backward, disappearing into the small room.

A long hallway stretched in front of me. Naked bulbs hung from the high ceiling about every thirty feet or so, valiantly striving to light the space. There were doors on either side of the hall spaced about every ten feet; they led into small rooms with wide benches along one side. The doors were numbered. Some of them were open. At the end of the hall, two guys with white towels wrapped low around their waist were leaning toward each other whispering. I walked down the corridor watching the numbers. I walked by the guys whispering without looking at them and turned left. Another hallway confronted me, exactly like the one before. I looked behind and found another long passage flanked by numbered doors. The place was a maze of corridors with numbered doors and naked bulbs hanging every so often shedding their dim light. There were other

guys milling around, most of them with nothing on other than the white towels wrapped around their waist. Everyone spoke in whispers and moved in and out of shadows as if the event had been choreographed.

There was a room with a brighter flickering light at the end of one of the passages. I walked by and noticed a little old man wearing tan knit slacks and a blue windbreaker sitting alone on the wood bleachers situated opposite a large screen showing porno movies in a continuous loop. The little old man looked over at me, turning his head slowly. After staring at me for a moment, his face broke into a strange smile. I hurried away, down another corridor, counting the numbered doors softly to myself.

Finally, I came to the door marked with the number on my key with the elastic band, the band that I had wrapped around my wrist. I tried to unlock the door but the key wouldn't work. I worked the key this way and that, delicately, then firmly. Then, I grew frustrated, jamming the key in and out of the lock, turning the key more and more violently, then giving up, leaning against the door, the number imprinting on my forehead.

I stood there for some time, feeling spent and awkward. Suddenly someone gently touched the small of my back. I started and then turned around. He was taller than I was with short dark hair and huge shoulders. He wore only the white towel around his waist. I stood in his shadow as he wrapped his hand around my upper arm and slowly let it slide down over my elbow, down my forearm, to my wrist. Then he lifted my wrist in front of his chest and removed the elastic band from which the key dangled. He turned to the door and lightly let the key slide into the lock, turning it slowly, opening the door. He stepped back from the doorway and held the key out in front of him. He was looking

very serious the whole time he performed the ritual. I thanked him nervously and stepped into the small room quickly shutting the door behind me and falling onto the padded bench that ran along one wall.

I lay on my back for a very long time, immobile, dreaming of places, far away hazy places where the lemurs spoke with French accents and tiny monkeys with elegant tales flew from branch to branch among eucalyptus trees singing bawdy pub songs. The smell of the animals mingled with the fresh minty trees. Slowly the colors inside my tightly shut eyes began to zip around like paisley water bugs and left my little fantasies unfinished. I sat up and looked around the cubicle lit by a single naked bulb hanging near my head. The bench, the only furniture in the room was covered with a Naugahyde pad. The walls were dark gray, sort of slate colored, with determined messages written here and there. The smell of weary cleansers and bad cologne mingled with the scent of the rut.

Someone on the other side of the entrance to the tiny room tried the doorknob, but it was locked. I stared at it, motionless, until they walked away. I pulled my T-shirt over my head and kicked my sneakers off. I stood up and pulled my jeans down around my ankles, stalling for a moment before pushing my boxers down, too. The fake leather pad was cold on my ass as I sat down and tossed my jeans and under-shorts so they lay in a crumpled heap beside my shoes. I sat there naked, except for my socks, thinking things over, staring at the white towel folded neatly beside me. Finally, I stood up and wrapped the towel tightly around my waist, tugging on it, testing it to make sure it was secure.

The corridor was empty as I cracked the door and peaked out. I opened the door a bit more, looking both ways, stepping into the faintly lit hallway. I wandered through the

labyrinth, conspicuous dances continuing without notice of me. Sometimes I found shadows in which to hide for long periods.

I was hiding around the corner from my door, sitting on a black tiled ledge just out of the light when the tall guy who unlocked my door came walking down the narrow corridor toward me. I drew in a breath remaining motionless, hoping he would walk right by. He passed me without looking at me, giving me the opportunity to study his chest, faintly covered in soft looking hair. He was about seven steps beyond my hiding place when he abruptly stopped and without turning around took a step backward. He remained motionless for a moment and then took another step backward, still not turning around. I was petrified. I lowered my eyes, looking down, noticing his legs and feet. Another step backwards, then two more; he was standing in front of me, facing away from me. I did not move, couldn't move. He slowly turned around, stepping in front of me, facing me while I sat on the ledge, wrapped in my white towel with my feet dangling in the air, telling myself everything was okay. He placed his hand on my knee, the knee that stuck out of the folds of the towel. I still didn't move. He started to move his hand up my thigh. I stared straight ahead, his face obscured in the dim light of the passage. I grabbed his hand, stopping it. We stood frozen for a few moments, both breathing in quick steady breaths. Suddenly, the naked bulb above us flashed and exploded as glass tinkled to the floor. Then the next naked bulb, just down the hallway exploded in a flash, then the next and the next and the next. In the darkness, I squeezed his hand, pulling him close to me and I said.

“This is my first time. I really don't belong here at all.”

Taurine

Jake woke up sucking hot air. He felt like he was suffocating. The sun slid through the window of the car, beating down on him so relentlessly the hot wind coming from the open front windows did nothing to alleviate his discomfort. He regained consciousness slowly, his head cloudy. He couldn't figure out where he was; he only knew he was uncomfortable.

Jake didn't open his eyes because the sun was too bright. He could see the red glow on the inside of his eyelids. The smell of dried blood mingled with his sweat; the taste of old blood mingled with his spit. As the previous events slowly started to organize themselves in his head, he opened the eye with the least sunlight shining on it, lifted his head a bit, and recognized the interior of the rented Ford Taurus he had picked up Friday afternoon in Greeley, Colorado. Blood covered the seat under his head and the car rolled gently along humming as it sped over nice road. He felt pain, pain in his head and mouth. Jake lay on his side with his legs bent so that he fit the back seat of the blue sedan. His ankles were taped, his wrists were bound behind his back, his left side ached, and millions of tiny pricks up and down his left leg told him that while he was coming to the leg was still sleeping soundly. He leaned up a bit and winced as the tape pulled at the hairs on his wrists. The cloudless blue sky filled the window, but no landscape came into view.

Last Friday, the guy on the phone at the rental business in Greeley had sounded ordinary.

“Yea, you can rent an Intrepid. We have those in our fleet.”

Jake was thinking about buying a new Intrepid since the day he accepted the teaching position in Greeley and he wanted to get a long test-drive in on the trip to Vegas. He loved teaching, but he always envisioned himself taking a break between grad school and a full time teaching position to travel, to see the world. But, he needed the money to pay off his loans and Colorado had become his home over the last six years. Jake had a tight group of friends and colleagues and he liked his job. Still, there was something about the predictability of it all that nagged at him.

The skinny kid wrote out the contract for the Ford.

“The man that took my reservation said I could get an Intrepid, a Dodge Intrepid.”

“I hadn’t ever seen an Intrepid come through this lot. We only get Taurus’s.”

“Tauri,” Jake said.

The kid didn’t get the joke.

Jake sat reading the Greeley paper and waited for the kid to bring the rental car around. In the top left corner of the front-page was a picture of Horace with the caption, “Go west, young man.” Jake chuckled because that is what he intended to do if the skinny kid would get the car ready.

The rental car sped along blissfully unaware. Jake, however, began to wonder who was driving. He tried to pull his head around to see between the front seats. A sharp pain shot through the side of his face and he settled back to nearly the same position he had been in before, crumpled in the back seat. He barely caught a glimpse of a smooth tanned arm.

The drive to Vegas was uneventful. Jake had driven from Greeley to Las Vegas to see his family four or five times since moving to Colorado. The interstate made it convenient though sterile. He arrived at his parents around noon on Saturday and by Wednesday night he had reached his limit of family time.

“I’m going out for a while.”

“Don’t go. I never get to spend time with you when you’re here.”

“Mom, I’ve been spending time with you and dad non-stop since Saturday.”

“Well, you be careful if you go. And call if you’re going to be late.”

“I have a Ph.D. and a curfew. Nice.”

“Just be careful smart-alek. You know I don’t care how smart you are or how many big words you know, you’ll always be my baby.”

The first couple of bars were dead so Jake headed to the porn store on Spring Mountain Road. If he wasn’t going to get laid, he decided to pursue the next best thing: porn. There was a young guy in the video arcade that kept following him, staring at him. Jake figured he was a hustler. The young man looked about nineteen or twenty. He wore a tight white ribbed undershirt and baggy khaki shorts. He was a little taller than Jake, thick-waisted and broad-shouldered. The muscles of his chest and stomach were outlined by the undershirt. He had red hair cropped close. Jake began to stare back, his temples giving slightly at every rush of blood. They walked through the dark corridors, between the peepshow booths, almost dancing. Jake tired of the game, growing irritated at the thought that some hustler would think he had to pay for it.

The car veered a little to the right and slowed. It came almost to a complete stop, turned left and sped up again, not as fast as before, but at a good clip. Jake drifted in and out of fitful, painful sleep. The car slowed again and turned to the right. Now the tires rolled over gravel and the bumps in the road grew progressively worse, slowing things down more and more. The gravel road took a few turns this way and that until Jake lost track. Finally, the Taurus rolled to a stop and a dust cloud caught up to the car. Jake was too confused to be scared.

The driver's footsteps crunched their way around the back of the car. The door above Jake's head opened and hands grabbed him under his arms and pulled him out of the car dropping him on the rocky ground. Jake looked around, side to side and up, getting only a glance at a brown hiking boot, a thick sock, and a muscular tanned calf covered lightly with reddish hair and large freckles. Then the sun flashed in his eyes, blinding him. Whoever pulled him from the car walked back to the other side of the vehicle before Jake got a chance to see any more of him.

The kid had walked up unseen as Jake unlocked the car door in the parking lot of the porno store.

"Hey," he said.

Jake jumped slightly at the unexpected address.

"Hello," Jake said.

Jake opened the car door and started to get in.

"You from Vegas?"

"Nobody is from Vegas."

Jake hesitated for a moment.

“Look, if you’re a hustler, forget it. I don’t pay for it.”

The kid laughed nervously as Jake stared at his face.

“I ain’t a hustler.”

The kid said it quickly and with emphasis.

He was stocky with red hair and large freckles on his face and arms. In the light of the parking lot, Jake could see his blue eyes that contrasted strikingly with his skin. His head was huge and round, it reminded Jake of a giant tortoise from the Galapagos Islands. The kid had scabs on his knuckles and dirt under his finger nails. Jake figured him for nineteen or twenty years old, maybe older.

“Look, I need to go,” Jake said.

Jake only felt the first few blows thudding against his head and face. There wasn’t much pain because he blacked-out so quickly.

The morning sun, already relentlessly hot, cast long shadows over the desert. Jake’s face lay pressed against the earth as he surveyed the landscape spread out before his insect point-of-view. The car was parked on a ridge that overlooked an expansive barren valley, a valley that fell away from the rough brown mountains on both sides, a valley that stretched miles and miles in width and longer in length. Everything seemed larger in this country. There was a narrow line of green as if a riverbed or possibly a river ran through the bottom of the dry valley. Jake noticed the gray ribbon of interstate winding just his side of the river and he figured it must be the Virgin River and that he was about thirty-five miles northeast of Vegas on the north side of Interstate 15.

Jake was lying there mulling over his situation when the driver came back around the car. He looked up and saw the kid from the porn store in Vegas. The kid looked ungainly in the daylight as he squatted in front of Jake, leaning over him holding a shiny pocketknife. Fear rushed up out of Jake's gut as the kid rolled him over and cut the tape from his wrists and ankles.

“Don't fuck-up faggot.”

Jake didn't say anything. The kid walked back around to the driver's side of the car. Jake stretched his battered limbs and struggled up until he was on his hands and knees. The pain was so tremendous that he hung there for a few moments pulling himself together. He finally made it to his feet with the help of the car door. He looked at his reflection in the car window. The face that stared back was bruised and swollen, unrecognizable.

“You're pretty fuckin tough for a queer. I didn't think you'd be standing up for a while.”

“I guess we take pain like a woman,” Jake deadpanned.

Jake stood hanging like a scarecrow on the opened back passenger door of the Ford while the kid leaned back relaxed against the opened front driver's side door. The two spoke to each other across the shiny blue metal top of the car.

“You're funny. What were you doing in Vegas?” the kid said.

Jake spit a thick glob of blood that almost perfectly matched the rocky ground.

“What was I doing in Vegas? I was just getting away for a long weekend before classes start.”

“Fucking college boy.”

The kid pulled off his T-shirt and used it dry his armpits. Jake looked at him, studying his skin, the slope of his shoulder that curved down to collide with apple-shaped biceps. His nipples were pink and small.

“I teach English at the university in Greeley. Greeley, Colorado.”

“Oh, a fag professor. You look too young to be a professor.”

“I’m not actually a...”

Jake trailed off as he realized how little difference titles made in the desert.

“What do you want? The car? Money?” Jake asked.

“Were you with somebody in Vegas?”

“No.”

Jake lied. He wasn’t sure why he lied, but it felt good to be in control of something, even if it was only this small piece of information. He didn’t want the kid to know anything about him.

“So nobody’ll know where the fuck you are. Good.”

Jake again felt fear creep through his body as if the fear had some corporeal form. And the fear seemed to mingle with desire until they became indistinguishable somewhere deep within his skeleton.

“Tell me what’s going on. Maybe I can help,” Jake said.

The kid looked at the ground, shook his head, and lifted his back off the car door’s frame. He started around the back of the car toward Jake.

“I need to get out of Vegas. I got sideways with a dealer because a titty-dancer did a bunch of blow I supposed to sell. I only fucked her once and now I’m headed to Virginia. That’s where my family came from and I’m going back.”

The kid seemed to drift away in thought for a moment. Then he kicked the car's back tire and sat on the trunk. The trunk made a loud popping sound as it dented in under his weight. Startled by the noise, he moved forward a little with a jerk and settled on the sturdier lip of the trunk.

"I just need the fuckin car to get there and since nobody'll be expecting you to be anywhere, you can come with me. I could use the company, and your credit cards. I'll let you go once we get there, if you don't fuck things up."

Jake stayed with the conversation as he watched a bead of sweat creep out of the patch of dark red hair under the kid's left arm and trickle its way down his side before being absorbed into the khaki waistband of his shorts.

"I hope you don't plan on living-it-up too much on my credit cards. They won't get you too far," Jake said. .

"Fuck you and your goddamn credit cards, fuckin uppity faggot. You got it good and you don't even know it, driving around in your car and shit. Quit whining to me man cause I could tell you shit, you know?"

The kid jumped off the trunk of the car and began pacing back and forth like he was agitated. Jake looked out across the desert.

"I don't know and I don't want to know," Jake said. "Look, I won't give you any trouble. I'll do anything you want me to, anything. I just want out of this at some point."

"I bet you do. We'll see how it goes. Just don't fuck-up, okay? Hey, what do you come to Vegas for all alone anyway?"

Jake turned and sat on the edge of the back seat, leaving the car door open.

“I don’t know. I like going someplace where I don’t know anyone. I like to walk down the street without having to be anything. I like to follow my impulses without thinking of the consequences sometimes. Vegas is perfect for pretending to let go. It’s a big place in a big desert.”

The kid watched Jake, listening intently.

“Yea, it is fuckin big. The land is big, you can see for a long ways out here. I’m going to miss it some.”

The kid walked around to the passenger side of the car, reached under the driver’s seat, and pulled out Jake’s pistol. He stood up cradling the weapon in his hand, looking at it in awe.

“This yours?”

Jake looked blankly at the gun.

“Yea, I guess. I don’t know why I brought it. I don’t even keep it loaded,” Jake said.

“I know. Shit, the clip isn’t even in it. What the fuck good is it going to do you in the glove-box without the fucking clip? I bet you wish you had it loaded when I fucked you up in the parking lot of that porn store.”

He started to play with the pistol like a toy. He put it in his waistband and pulled it out, quick-draw style. He did it over and over, as if he were trying to get it right.

“I wouldn’t have used it anyway,” Jake said.

“Fuckin pussy. You suck.”

He started laughing loud so that it sounded a little forced.

“Get it, you suck.”

Jake nodded without laughing.

“Where’s the fuckin clip? I want to put it in.”

Jake hesitated, saying nothing. The kid walked over to him and stood with his face about two inches away. Jake could smell his body and see the shape of each freckle. He could feel the breath on his face as the kid spoke slowly and clearly.

“Where is the mother-fucking clip? I want to put it in.”

He jerked the pistol up catching Jake on the right cheek just under the eye. Jake fell to the ground holding his face, rolling over on his side. The kid kicked him in the back and Jake arched in distress.

“Where’s the clip?”

“It’s in the storage bin between the front seats.”

Jake said it groaning and on the rocks of the rudimentary trail that ran along the ridge that looked out over the wide expanse of desert valley. He said it and regretted it and felt relieved, all at the same moment.

“Cool!”

The kid was excited. He leaned into the Taurus, and tried to open the storage bin. The top stuck for a moment and in a mini-tantrum, he pried the lid off with his bare hands. He popped out of the car and pushed the clip into the hole in the bottom of the pistol grip. Once again, he started to yank the gun out of his belt over and over, trying to get it right.

“Yee-ha! This is the shit, dude. I fuckin always wanted one of these.”

“You need to watch out. Make sure the safety’s on.”

“Shut the fuck up. You fucking piece of shit, what the fuck do you know about it, huh? You probably don’t even know how to fuckin use it. You don’t even have the balls to keep the fuckin thing loaded.”

He stopped quick-drawing the pistol from his waistband again and aimed it at various objects.

“This mother-fucker feels good in my hand. I think I look good with it. What do you think? Do I look good?”

Jake looked at the kid’s bulging eyes that stuck out from his big round face, then scanned down his neck, over his chest, down his stomach until the trail of hair under his navel disappeared into the boxer shorts that hung just above the khakis.

“You look good. Now quit pointing it at everything.”

The kid held the pistol in one hand with his arm stretched out straight as a fence post, pointing it at a large rock that jutted out of the side of the ridge. He stood very still for a couple of seconds. Then, holding his arm stiff and the pistol steady, he slowly turned around until he was pointing the gun directly at Jake’s head.

“How about if I quit pointing it at everything but you? You think if I kill a faggot that hangs around porn stores anybody’d give a shit? Cause I don’t.”

Jake could feel the blood and adrenaline separate in his arteries. They stared at each other for an eternal moment.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“You’re goddamn right I’m fuckin right.”

The kid kept the pistol aimed at Jake.

“My name is Brett. Don’t fuck-up and I’ll let you live.”

Jake remained silent. The kid was in control, perhaps for the first time in his life and Jake knew it. The kid turned back toward the rock and emptied the clip in a series of deafening bangs.

“Get in the car.”

Jake limped over to the rented car and started to climb in the back seat, but Brett motioned him into the passenger seat up front. Brett got behind the wheel, started the car, and did a three-point U-turn in five points. They wound along the gravel trail, working their way slowly down the hill until the trail t-boned into a narrow paved road with faded yellow lines down the center. They followed this road for about fifteen miles until they came to the interstate.

Jake noted the exit as they crossed the overpass and turned left onto the access road of Interstate 15, exit 100. He had been right; the narrow strip of green that ran down the barren valley was the Virgin River. He knew that Mesquite was only about thirty miles ahead. He needed to think of some way to get Brett to stop there. As Jake stole a peek at the fuel gauge he wondered what would happen if he went along for the ride. Brett was still jacked-up, volatile. Jake hung his arm over the side of the car with his head out the window in an attempt to catch a little air. He felt bad for the kid, figured he never had a chance. Jake studied his legs, covered in light red hair with thick thighs and calves and bulky ankles. He was drawn to him and repelled by him at the same time. Jake tried to imagine him as a child, full of potential, at least at some point he must have been, Jake thought. He wanted to take Brett home with him to Colorado, to protect him, maybe give him some hope.

Jake was lost in the daydream, trying to feel the sun on his face because it felt comforting on the bruises when Brett pulled the pistol out of his shorts. He played with it as they sped down the interstate, pointing it toward the windshield of the car.

“You got the safety on this time stud?” Jake said.

“Fuck you, faggot.”

Brett looked straight ahead. Jake wondered what he was thinking to have said it.

“Sorry Brett. I just mean to say. ‘Be careful.’”

“And I just mean to say, ‘Shut the fuck up.’ I’m trying to think. I need to get some cash. I can’t keep using your credit card cause somebody’s going to bust me on how you sign your name. You sign it like a bitch.”

He put the pistol back into his waistband and then he turned and stared at Jake for a long time. He stared at Jake until the car hit the ridges on the side of the road designed to let you know you are off course. Brett swung the wheel around, overcompensating. The Taurus lurched left across both lanes sending gravel from the median flying from the fender wells on the driver’s side. Then he jerked the wheel back around to the right, jumping on the brakes, sending the nose of the car around, and spinning out of control. They came to rest pointing in the opposite direction, pointing back west on the shoulder of the right side of the interstate about twenty feet off the pavement.

Brett sat motionless for a few seconds, his hands at two and ten. Then he looked around at Jake and laughed.

“This thing handles pretty good.”

“Pretty well,” Jake said.

“What the fuck did you say?”

“I was agreeing with you.”

“I wouldn’t have thought it would handle like that being a family car and all. I wouldn’t mind a car like this some day, four doors and a trunk: everything you need.”

“Yea, it worked really well for me on the trip out,” Jake said.

He was trying desperately to make the situation seem normal. He wanted talk to Brett as if they were friends. Brett sat staring at the two or three cars whizzing by on the empty interstate.

“Look at these assholes. They don’t even notice a fuckin car doing a three-sixty-plus-some in the middle of the road.”

Jake flipped the visor down inspecting the scabbed wounds on his face. “Nobody wants to get involved at the time, but they all want to know the details in retrospect. Then, they all have an opinion,” He said.

Brett pulled the car around so they were facing the right direction again. At the same moment they both noticed a young woman riding a horse on a trail about sixty yards from where they sat on the side of the interstate. She was wearing a red tank-top, jeans, and tennis shoes. Her blond ponytail bobbed out the back of a blue baseball cap. She looked at them, laughed, and shook her head as she rode by.

“She’s fuckin hot, isn’t she? Guess you ain’t the person to ask, huh?”

Jake said nothing. They were both still breathing heavy.

“Were you scared any?”

“Yes, I was scared,” Jake said.

Brett nodded in agreement, then puffed up his chest.

“I wasn’t.”

“You did a good job keeping the car on the road. You kept your shit together,” Jake said.

“Yea, I did, didn’t I?”

Brett sounded a little surprised. He pulled the dust covered Taurus back onto the highway and turned up the radio. He started singing along to some old Guns-n-Roses. Jake rode along in silence. In a few minutes, Mesquite came into view. Brett took the first exit and pulled off the highway into an old run-down Texaco station that stood about a mile from the heart of town. The only other building around was a dilapidated old casino across the street with a couple of pickups parked in front. He screeched the rental car to a halt in front of the glass doors of the store. He looked at Jake strangely and took the gun out of his shorts. He was shaking a little.

“I’m going to go in there and rob that fucker. Don’t move. Don’t talk. Don’t do anything. I’ll be watching him and you both, got it? When I get out of the car, I’m going to walk in there like nothing’s going on. You’re going to slip behind the wheel. Leave the engine running. If you try to leave, I’ll shoot him... and you. I’m pretty good with this thing when I’m paying attention. When I come out, you’re going to get us the fuck out of here, okay? Don’t fuck things up. I don’t have anything to lose.”

Jake nodded.

Brett got out of the car and walked into the station. Jake scooted his sore body behind the wheel. Brett stopped with his back to the register, took a deep breath, and turned around pointing the pistol at the clerk. The guy looked confused as he slowly put his hands up in the air. Brett glanced out the glass doors at Jake, smiled, and gave a head-jerk in the direction of the clerk as if he were telling Jake to look at him. Brett said

something to the guy and pointed the gun at the register. The guy reached down to open the drawer but it wouldn't open. He kept fiddling with the buttons. Brett became more agitated, jumping up and down, screaming. The guy kept punching buttons frantically. Brett moved closer, keeping the pistol pointed in the guy's general direction. Brett glanced out the window like he wanted to see if Jake noticed anything was wrong. At that moment, the clerk jumped over the counter and grabbed Brett's pistol hand by the wrist. The gun flew out of Brett's grip, hitting the glass doors, sending a crack upward through the glass. Jake jumped out of the car somehow hoping this was the end of everything. He started to run over to the trashy little casino across the street, but he couldn't help himself; he turned around to watch. The clerk put one arm around Brett's head and started punching him with his free fist. Jake started walking slowly toward the glass doors of the store. Brett slumped to the floor as Jake stepped into the store and picked up the pistol. The guy turned around, looking disappointed, as if his victory was to be short-lived. Jake stood holding the pistol limply. It dangled from his fingers, pointing at the floor.

“It's okay. I'm not with him. He, he kidnapped me, I guess,” Jake said.

Brett started to stir.

“Put the gun down then.”

The clerk looked from Jake to Brett and back again, trying to keep an eye on both of them. Jake stood there holding the gun, barely holding it.

“Put the gun down, man, so I can call the police and have them take this little son-of-a-bitch away.”

Jake stood there. Brett got up on one knee, leaning forward with blood dripping from his nose and mouth onto the white tile floor. The clerk kicked him in the chest, sending Brett sprawling again.

“Put the damn gun down, dude.”

“No,” Jake said quietly, but resolutely. He paused a moment and then continued, “We’re going to give the kid a break. He’s made some bad decisions, but haven’t we all?”

The clerk shook his head.

“This is a little bigger than your usual goddamned teenage bullshit.”

“Agreed, but we’re still going to give him a break. Everybody gets one; this is his.”

The clerk started for him and Jake jumped. The gun went off three times hitting the Marlboro display, the hotdog roller, and winging the clerk in the right arm. Brett looked up, bewildered.

“Get in the car Brett.”

Brett shook his head, getting up slowly. As he started to head to the car, the guy grabbed him from behind putting his forearm under Brett’s chin, choking him. Jake shot blindly, hitting the clerk in the shoulder this time and sending him falling over the coffee pots, spilling hot coffee on him. Brett ran out the glass doors and jumped into the car. Jake stood staring at the wounded guy who was rolling around in pain. Jake was still pointing the gun at him.

“You are with him you bastard. You’re scum just like him,” the clerk yelled.

Jake looked around the store and nodded slightly, "I think you're right. Now get into the back room and stay there for a while."

Jake walked slowly to the car. Brett was screaming frantically to hurry. The sounds were distorted, as if they were coming to Jake through a long pipe. Colors seemed inordinately defined and garish. He got into the passenger seat and Brett screeched out of the parking lot, turned onto the entrance ramp of the interstate and headed for Utah.

Interstate 15 runs northeast in a valley with the Mormon Mountains to the north and the Virgin Mountains to the southwest. Lake Mead, the engineering marvel, lies directly to the south. The Virgin River runs along the interstate until it turns south and empties into the lake. When driving northeast along the valley floor, the elevation is around fifteen hundred feet above sea level. Right around the Nevada border, the valley ends. It looks as if the cars on Interstate 15 are going to drive into a solid wall of eroded rock that seems to be climbing out of the flat desert valley. It isn't until the wall of yellow and red rock looms over the car that the traveler can see the narrow gorge cut by the Virgin River that leads through the isolated corner of Arizona to Saint George, Utah. The entire trip through the gorge is less than twenty miles but in those twenty miles the elevation rises from fifteen hundred feet above sea level to somewhere near forty-five hundred feet above sea level. Interstate 15 here, like Lake Mead, is an engineering marvel, climbing through the narrow gorge with walls of rock rising almost vertical on either side eclipsing most of the sunlight that shines so relentlessly in the desert that lays a stone's throw behind.

They drove fast out of Mesquite, neither of them acknowledging what Jake had just done, but for different reasons. As they approached the seemingly impenetrable wall of stone, Brett began to look worried. Jake thought back to his first time through the gorge remembering how he had the same look on his face as he wondered where the road could possibly go.

“What the fuck happens to the road? It looks like it runs into solid rock.”

“Wait for it. You’ll see in a minute,” Jake said.

Brett grew anxious. He kept saying there was no place for the road to go. He looked vainly north and south, but the gray ribbon ran straight into the wall of rock and disappeared. They finally came to the point where it becomes obvious the north and south walls of the gorge overlap as the interstate turns gently left becoming enveloped in the shadows.

“This is fuckin nuts. You can’t see the opening until you’re like a hundred feet from the entrance.”

“Amazing isn’t it? The rock on both sides of the gorge is the same color so it looks like a solid wall of stone until you get right there. I always like driving through here,” Jake said.

“I wonder what this looked like before they built the fuckin interstate through the middle of it. I bet it took you days to get through. And the sign said Saint George is only seventeen miles from here. How far does it go like this with the canyon walls on either side?”

“Almost all the way to Saint George, it evens out a little before.”

They drove through the gorge in silence looking at the uncanny natural rock formations. Jake knew that Brett was thinking about the store back in Mesquite, but he didn't know what he was thinking. Brett finally spoke.

“Why did you do that?”

“I don't know,” Jake said.

“You want to fuck me, don't you?”

“No, I wanted to help you. I wish things were different.”

“I think you want me. I think you look at me all the time.”

Brett's voice was cold and sharp; Jake grew angry.

“Jesus-fucking-Christ, you breeders are all the same. You think every fucking queer fucking wants you, don't you? Well fuck you. Fuck you! Oh, and fucking sorry for stealing fifty fucking percent of your fucking vocabulary. You know Brett, I usually like to have a fucking conversation after I fuck a guy, okay. That would be rather fucking difficult to do with a fucking punk that hasn't read a fucking book since the third fucking grade. Wouldn't you fucking agree?”

Brett drove on through the gorge in silence. Jake lied again. He wanted to control something again, even if it was a small piece of information.

“Seems like that's what queers want mostly.”

“You know, if it's this large a problem maybe you should quit hanging out in predominately queer porno shops.”

Brett started to snicker and a smart-ass grin came over his face.

“What's your fuckin name faggot?”

“My name is Jake, fucking breeder.”

“You’re okay for a faggot.”

“Yea, well you’re a shitty breeder,” Jake said.

Brett laughed out-loud. Jake pondered the situation for a moment before the insanity of the conversation finally settled on him full-force and he allowed himself a slight smile before he turned away from Brett and stared out the window. Jake wasn’t thinking about shooting the clerk in Mesquite, he figured he’d live. He was trying to figure out what he was doing.

They rode along in silence again, out of the gorge, through Saint George, and up over the low rugged hills of southern Utah. The land becomes greener as the elevation rises north of the little farming communities of Leeds and Torquerville just west of Zion National Park. Then the landscape descends gently into the semi-arid Parowan Valley that runs from the southwest to the northeast below the eastern Plateau. The valley is filled with farms and ranches and irrigated fields of alfalfa and wheat and vast pastures of cattle. A bit further north is the junction of Interstate 15 and Interstate 70. These roads meet in the middle of nowhere. There is no town, no truck stop, nothing but green pastures and mountains on either side. Interstate 15 continues north, through Idaho, Montana, and finally to the Canadian border. Interstate 70 heads east, through Colorado, to Chicago, and then on to the East Coast, Baltimore, and the Chesapeake Bay.

They looped around onto Interstate 70 around 6:00pm and followed the road east. They made it over the first pass about forty-five minutes later and then descended into the Sevier Valley passing small farming communities situated along the highway.

“We got to get some fuckin petrol.”

“I was thinking the same thing. What do you think we should do?” Jake asked.

“I want to get some fuckin gas,” Brett seemed agitated.

“Okay, okay.”

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. Then Brett spoke sheepishly.

“Is there a town up ahead where we can get gas?”

“Yes, Richfield isn’t too far. There are stations there, and a couple of stores, a K-mart or Wal-mart, I’m not sure which.”

“What the fuck do you need at K-mart?”

Jake was staring at his faint reflection in the car window trying to recognize the cut and swollen face.

“Jake, what do you need at K-mart?”

“I think we could both clean up our faces a little, don’t you?”

“Yea, I guess we’re sorta beat-up, aren’t we? You think you’ll have scars?”

“What?”

“Do you think you’ll have scars on your face?”

“I hadn’t thought about it. Guess I had other things on my mind,” Jake said.

“Are you saying that you don’t give a fuck if your face is all scarred up for good?”

“If my face is scarred, then I guess they’ll belong to me.”

They pulled off the interstate and into the small town of Richfield. Brett drove to the K-mart on Main Street without Jakes input. He took a parking spot next to the handicapped spaces. They sat in the Taurus for a few seconds in silence. Brett retrieved his T-shirt from the back seat and pulled it over his head. Jake wondered what Brett was thinking.

“Can I fuckin trust you?”

“I think at this point you should know you can. I could have ended this back in Mesquite, but I chose not to. Now, we need to get something for our faces and a couple of sleeping bags. We’ll spend the night out in the National Forest area. It’s okay to camp anywhere as long it’s National Forest,” Jake said.

Brett nodded in agreement. They limped into the store looking fairly rough. Everyone in the store had blonde hair and they stared at Jake and Brett as they walked in the glass automated doors. Jake found it all amusing in a strange way; he liked being the focus of attention. He liked that fact that some patrons were visibly shaken by the site of the two men together with bloody faces, limping along as if they owned the store. Jake began to feel confident, even smiling at people and nodding hello. They went to the sporting goods section and Brett picked out a couple of sleeping bags. Then they went to the medicine aisle and Brett picked out bandages and cleaners. The entire time Jake was smiling and nodding to people. He even picked at a scab in the corner of his mouth so a little fresh blood would flow for them.

Brett was getting nervous. He was extremely jumpy by the time they got to the checkout line. Jake handed the checkout girl a credit card as the store manager approached. The young woman looked at Jake and winked.

“That’s Clark. He’s awful nosy. He probably wants to know what happened to you two.”

Jake smiled at her. “It’s not as interesting as it must seem,” he said.

Brett was shifting his weight from one foot to the other slightly rocking back and forth, trying desperately not to make eye contact with the store manager.

“This darn credit card machine never works right. It’ll be just a sec.”

Jake smiled again and thought about inviting the charming girl along on the trip.

“That’s fine. We’re in no hurry,” he said.

“Who’s not in a fuckin hurry?” Brett was in Jake’s face when the manager arrived.

“Hi gentlemen. Is everything okay?”

“We, uh...,”

Jake let Brett stutter for an instant before intervening. “We had a rough time on the bike trails outside Moab. We’ll just pay for these things and...”

Jake turned to Brett and winked before finishing his sentence.

“...then get the fuck out of your way.”

The checkout girl handed Jake the charge slip. He started to sign it when Brett suddenly spoke up.

“Get the fuck out of my face fucker. I’m not doing anything, just buying some shit, okay?”

As the store manager stepped back, Jake signed the charge slip. Instead of signing his name, he wrote: call for help 702-589-xxxx. He handed the slip back to the checkout girl. She put it in the drawer without looking at it. Jake picked up the bags and grabbed Brett by the arm.

“Sorry Clark. He’s a little impetuous at times,” Jake said, hustling Brett out to the car and shoving him toward the passenger seat before tossing the bags in the back.

“That’s why you won’t make it home Brett. You can’t control yourself,” Jake said.

“Fuck you. Fuck you mother fucker. I fuckin hate every minute of this shit. I want out, I want the fuck out.”

Brett was shaking, almost sobbing. Jake put his face in his hands and leaned forward onto the steering wheel. “Shouldn’t that be my line?” he said.

“Fuck you.”

They gassed-up and headed east again on Interstate 70. The road rides up out of the Sevier Valley entering National Forest lands on the way to the next pass. The sun was sinking behind the horizon marked by a row of mountains that seemed to march toward the southwest. Jake started to regret writing his parents number on the charge slip. He didn’t want to go back, but he didn’t want to go with Brett either. He considered these his only choices.

“I’m going to pull off here on one of the National Forest access roads. We can drive in a short distance. No one will bother us there,” Jake said.

“Do whatever the fuck you want.”

Brett was sulking. Jake took the next exit marked with a sign that said “Ranch exit no services.” At the bottom of the exit ramp there was another sign that said “National Forest Access, Fish Lake National Forest.” They drove in about fifteen miles before the road got so bad the Taurus couldn’t handle it. Jake stopped the car in a clearing just off the trail. They had gained enough elevation so that there were large evergreen trees and wildflowers everywhere.

Brett sat in silence as Jake reached around and pulled one of the sleeping bags from its plastic cover. He handed it to Brett and reached around for the other one. Jake kicked off his shoes and tossed them along with his shirt into the back seat. Brett

arranged the sleeping bag over him. They settled in for the night with the front seats reclined and the steering wheel tilted as far up as possible. They didn't speak for some time.

"Sorry about losing it in the store."

"It's fine, Brett," Jake said.

"No, it's not fuckin fine. I don't know what happened. I thought that fucker was going to bust us."

"He was trying to be important. He thought he was supposed to be in charge."

"It's not just that Jake."

Jake didn't speak, he waited.

"It all pisses me off. I feel like, I don't know, fuckin pissed off."

"What pisses you off?"

"You're the only person that ever did anything for me. The only person I could ever trust, ever. And you're a fuckin faggot."

"Go figure," Jake said.

The Projectionist

"In the beginning, there was light. And soon after, humans came along. And not long after that, humans began to manipulate light." -The Projectionist

The odor hung in the air like cigarette smoke. It was especially hypnotic when the projectionist opened the film canister and the smell of fresh emulsion on celluloid mixed with the musk of his sweat. The room was small with yellowed white paint and old faded movie posters. Two projectors sat side by side on a tall gray metal stand in

front of a tiny window with a commanding view of the theatre. To their left, there was a bin filled with film reels. The bin had a sign on the front that said “Used.” Another bin on the right of the projectors held a number of unopened film canisters. This bin had a sign that said “Unused.” A single naked light-bulb hung unlit from the middle of the ceiling. There was a four-drawer metal filing cabinet at the back of the room next to a plain wooden table. The projectionist sat at the table with a half-eaten baloney sandwich and a Diet Coke absent-mindedly watching the projector whirring away.

The projectionist looked to be in his forties and he had black under his fingernails and in the cracks of his dry hands. He wore a tight white undershirt, a ribbed tank top style, worn khaki pants, and huge black work boots. He slumped forward and exhaled, placing his right elbow on his right knee and clasping his forehead in his right hand. He leaned back and ran his hand over his smoothly shaved head. The projector continued to whirl with a regular rhythm that the projectionist found soothing and maddening at the same time.

The projectionist put down his sandwich and went to the projectors. He picked up a canister of film from the “Unused” bin, opened it, and began to carefully place the reel of film on the empty projector. After he finished, he went to the tiny window and looked out over the theatre. There was a young boy and girl sitting in the back row kissing each other passionately. The projectionist smiled.

“That kid looks just like me.”

There were other people in the theatre, men and women, old and young. They were all eating popcorn out of white and red striped boxes and staring dumbly at the screen. All except one woman who sat near the front of the theatre on the far right side.

She was not watching the film at all. Instead, her eyes wandered around the dark theatre from person to person watching the people watching the film.

The projector's regular rhythm was momentarily interrupted by a slight, almost human groan that emerged from the belly of the machine. The projectionist peered at it, squinting his eyes and looking very concerned. Then the rhythm returned; everything returned to normal.

The projectionist looked up at the movie screen as the black and white image of workers leaving a factory flickered across. The film seemed to be an image of the past, filmed long ago and lost for some years before being found and returned to the theatre. The grainy figures moved in jerky staccato motions and the finer features of the individual faces were undefined.

The projectionist turned on the still projector at just the right moment. As the other projector ran out of film, the loose end of the film flapped helplessly on the uptake wheel that continued to spin. He stopped the projector and gently removed the reel and dropped it into the bin marked "Used." Then he placed a reel from the bin marked "Unused" on the now-silent projector preparing it for the next exchange.

The door opened and the woman from the theatre, the one that was not watching the movie, walked in. She had wavy auburn hair and white skin that was smooth. And, she held a canister of film in her long graceful hands.

The projectionist motioned to the bin marked "Unused."

"You can drop those in there."

The woman shook her head and brushed her hair back with her free hand. She dropped the canister in the bin and stood there looking at the projectionist, pausing for a moment and noticing a slight vibration in the air before speaking.

“I’ll be back later.”

“I know.”

The woman left and the projectionist turned to the screen peering through the tiny window. He could hear the voice of a woman singing, a lovely voice like he used to play on the phonograph when he was a boy. He could hear the purr and the crackle in the background of the song and he noticed a lithe young woman with short blonde hair dancing in front of numerous white pianos that sat on ever rising platforms that spiraled up out of the frame and off the screen.

The projectionist turned back toward the projector, pressing the back of his head against the glass of the tiny window, looking into the round lens and watching the image upside-down. He looked deep into the glass, trying to see what was behind the inverted image. But, he couldn’t see anything other than a faint, somehow ethereal glow that seemed to suggest some form of knowledge.

The projectionist returned to the table at the back of the room, the one by the filing cabinet. He finished his sandwich and his soda and leaned back in the chair again.

“The hours go by like circles. The viewers come and go, but the screening never ends. The hours go by like circles. The images come and go, but the screening never ends. The hours go by like spirals. The viewers become the images, but the screening never ends. The hours go by like circles and spirals. The viewers are images; the images

are viewers, but the screening never ends. The hours go by like permutations of circles and spirals. The images and the viewers were never here, but the screening never ends.”

The door cracked open slightly.

“Can I come in?”

“I don’t know why you ask.”

The woman with auburn hair, the one from the theatre, the one that wasn’t watching the movie, she came in. She was carrying another film canister, a bag of bright orange circus peanuts, and a twin-pack of Twinkies, all clutched tightly against her off-white rayon blouse.

“I thought you might like a treat.”

She offered the projectionist the circus peanuts and Twinkies.

“You consider these treats?”

He took them from her and tossed them carelessly on the table at the back of the room.

“How long have you been a projectionist?”

He looked beyond her at the tiny window. He couldn’t see the image on the screen from where he stood, but he could watch the light flicker against the glass. Her face was darkened, obscured a bit by the backlighting.

“The hours go by like circles.”

She crossed her arms over her chest placing her porcelain hands on her opposite shoulders and looking down slightly.

“You must enjoy the stories.”

He reached under his shirt and rubbed his stomach.

“I don’t watch the stories any longer. I have stories, too.”

She held her arms crossed over her chest and looked up at him, smiling.

“Will you tell me one of your stories?”

He picked up the bag of orange circus peanuts, opened it, and offered her some. She nudged a couple of them out of the way before settling on one that wasn’t too near the top of the bag.

“I’ll tell you a story. But, you have to promise to listen very closely and with all of your senses.”

She nodded seriously. He stood up straight and spoke in a formal voice.

“I was in love once. I met her at the Mithra Theatre where we had seats next to each other for a performance of Christopher Hampton’s play *Total Eclipse*. Her name was Aila and she was breathtaking.

“We went for coffee afterward and she talked on and on about her pictures. She described what it meant to her when she captured an image that would never occur again, an image that would inspire a moment of rapture, a moment when the viewer might touch the divine. I asked her to describe the photos but she refused saying using words to paint them would be an injustice, it would be illogical. She also said it was sad to capture those moments and it was only later that I understood what she meant.

“We were together all the time. Yet, we were together for months before she ever took a picture of me. One day she walked onto her bedroom where I was sleeping naked and she started taking photographs of me. From then on she took photos of me every day. She must have taken thousands of them and soon I began to feel weak. She quit making love to me and it seemed all she wanted to do was to photograph me.

“We took a trip to Maine during the summer when the sun doesn’t set until after 11:00 pm. She took photos of me in our hotel room and on the little skiff we had rented in Stonington. She took pictures of me feeding the gulls and lying on the rocks in the spray. I became weaker and weaker while we were there. She had to drive all the way back to the city when our time was finished.

“I was home for about a week when I finally went to the hospital and the doctors told me my blood had thinned out like bad wine. They had no explanation for it and there was no cure. I stayed in the hospital for three days and then I returned home. There was a note on my door from Aila telling me she was leaving me, telling me she felt the photographs were diminishing me somehow and that she couldn’t stay with me and quit taking them. She said she loved me and that she always would and that she was sorry things had turned out so badly. She said not to try to find her because it wasn’t meant to be. She said there was something in the photographs, something between the three of us that was inexplicable and quite frightening and that it was something we shouldn’t toy with.

“I never believed it was the photos that made me ill. I think my liver just quit working for a while and then started back up all on its own. It doesn’t matter though because I lost her, and I’ve never seen her again. And I realized afterward that for all the photos she took of me, for all the photos she must still have, I haven’t a single image of her. And there are days when I can barely remember what she looked like.”

She embraced him as he stood rigidly.

“That was wonderful. You do have stories of your own.”

She left. The projectionist went back to the tiny window that looked over the theatre. The young boy and girl were gone. An ancient old man and an equally ancient woman sat in their seats holding hands. Once again, he turned on the still projector at just the right moment. The loose end of the film flapped against the uptake that continued to spin until he stopped the other projector and gently removed the spent reel. He dropped it into the bin marked "Used" and replaced it with a reel from the bin marked "Unused."

The projectionist looked at the screen and saw a swath of bright color flash by. He looked at the audience and noticed a woman in her fifties swaying back and forth with one hand stretched out toward the screen. He looked back to the screen and saw a woman in a tailored gray Chanel suit get out of an impossibly green Jaguar saloon.

The running projector began to shudder. The projectionist looked the machine over, bringing his eyebrows close together and leaning in to gain a better look. He tenderly removed the side panel and watched the film gliding through the gate. He sniffed slightly at the insides of the machine, smelling hot metal and warm celluloid. The projector's shiny legs bent a little and moved slightly, jarring the image on the screen. Then everything became quiet again. He replaced the side panel and walked toward the table at the back of the room.

The woman walked into the room again. This time she brought a camera on a tripod and placed it near the front of the room in the corner to the right of the projectors and facing toward the back of the room pointing at the projectionist. He wiped his hand across his mouth.

"What are you doing?"

She fiddled with the knobs on the side and looked through the lens focusing on the projectionist.

“You don’t mind if I film you, do you? I just thought it might be interesting.”

He shrugged his shoulders. She placed the film in the camera, checked the focus one more time, and began to shoot him. He stood emotionless and expressionless.

“This is wonderful. Don’t move, stay just like that.”

He remained as he was, staring straight at the camera. She left the room.

Soon, the camera stopped filming the projectionist. The air in the room was heavy, stagnant, and still the smell of chemicals mixed with sweat was omnipresent. The woman returned carrying a small black case, which when opened revealed a shiny set of miniature tools. The projectionist slumped into the chair at the table in the back of the room. He put his elbows on the table and his head in his hands. She raised her eyebrows slightly and tilted her head to the left.

“What’ wrong?”

He kept his face buried in his hands.

“Nothing. What are you doing with the camera?”

She smiled.

“I’ll show you. I think you’re going to like it.”

He leaned back in the chair and tilted his head back letting it hang limply, staring at the ceiling. She moved the camera so that it was directly behind the still projector, still facing the back of the room, still aimed at the projectionist. They looked like two large metal bugs scuttling in tandem. The running projector beside them whirred away sending its images hurtling toward the screen.

“Whatever you’re doing, it’s not going to work.”

“It’ll work. Just watch.”

She took out a screwdriver and removed the side panel of the camera. She changed screwdrivers and removed the side panel from the still projector, removing a number of parts from each machine and arranging them carefully on the table. She attached an uptake and feeder wheel to the top and bottom of the camera. Then, she removed the film from the camera and threaded it through the still projector, running it over the uptake and stringing it back to the wheel on the bottom of the camera. The running projector continued its rhythmic cycle without regard to the operation being performed on the other two machines.

The woman took a bit of tape and spliced the ends of the film together so that it formed a loop, a sort of a simulation of a cinematic Möbius strip that ran through the camera to the projector and through the projector back to the camera binding the machines together. The projectionist sat in front of the camera, every muscle in his face completely relaxed. The woman closed the small black case and cleaned her hands on her shirttail.

“Are you ready?”

“It’s not going to work.”

The woman shut off the running projector. The spectators in the theatre let out a collective gasp of disbelief. People looked to their left and then their right, trying to understand why the movie had stopped. Then, the woman flipped the switches on the camera and the projector at the same moment. The film began to slide through both of

the gates, looping over, filming the projectionist and projecting his image at the same time. The viewers collectively mumbled their way back to a quiet hypnotic contentment.

“See, I told you it would work. If you move your head slightly, the images will pile up on themselves and the lines of your face will become blurred. If you continue long enough, every piece of the film will become covered with the lines of your face until there is nothing but black, a black image of nothing constructed from image upon image with subtle variations.”

The man moved his head to the left, just barely. The image on the screen blurred a bit.

“You were right. This is working. How long do I have?”

“I’m not sure. It depends on the variations I suppose.”