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Losing the Ground Beneath: A Manuscript of Short Fiction

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**Appendix E - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL**

Name: Matthew J. Gilchrist

College: A+S Department: English

Faculty Mentor: Allen Wier

PROJECT TITLE: Losing the Ground Beneath: A Manuscript
of Short Fiction by Matt Gilchrist

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Allen Wier, Faculty Mentor

Date: 30 April 2001

General Assessment - please provide a short paragraph that highlights the most significant features of the project.

Comments (Optional):

I had Matt Gilchrist in two fiction writing classes and knew he was a hard worker committed to making good fictions, so I was happy to agree to direct his honors thesis, a manuscript of three stories with a short introduction. During the semester, Matt and I discussed these stories, only one of which I had seen in an earlier version. After Michael Knight (Matt's second reader) and I read the completed manuscript we discussed Matt's progress and both agree that Matt has made tremendous progress this semester. "The Important Things," is the most recent (and least revised) of the three stories, and it is not yet as fully realized as "Everything Smells Like New Orleans," and "Losing the Ground Beneath." Michael Knight and I agree that "Everything Smells like New Orleans" is the strongest of Matt's stories either of us has read. With very little revision, this story should be publishable. Matt is developing his own, unique fictional voice. His prose is detailed, textured, and paced in such a way that it accrues a mysterious tone that is very fitting for the story being told. I have no doubt that Matt will continue to hone his craft, to read as a writer reads (learning technique from other writers he admires), and go on to produce many more fine stories.

Losing the Ground Beneath

A Manuscript of Short Fiction by Matt Gilchrist

Creative Thesis for Senior Seminar: University Honors Program
Allen Wier, thesis director
Michael Knight, second reader

Introduction

As a senior honors thesis I chose to do a manuscript of short fiction under the direction of Allen Wier with Michael Knight as my second reader. I have had class under both Wier and Knight and feel privileged to have them reading this thesis. As a theme for my manuscript, which I was required to choose while submitting a thesis proposal before the semester began, I chose “loneliness and the need for human intimacy.” In all honesty, I chose this theme because it seemed broad enough to encompass most short fiction. I have been thrilled, however, by what specific creative inspiration has come out of thinking about this broad theme.

My creative thesis consists of three stories: “Everything Smells Like New Orleans,” “Losing the Ground Beneath,” and “The Important Things.” Throughout the semester the evolution of these stories has been both a challenge and a surprise. I feel I have seen my abilities as a writer of fiction grow in many ways through the efforts I have committed to these stories. In this introduction I will explore the many aspects of writing these stories that shaped them into what they are.

“The Important Things” is a story about Frank, a bartender, and his encounter with two customers at the bar. In this story I wanted to capture the loneliness of being single in America and I chose single characters that represented different parts of society in age and sex. To capture the redundancy of loneliness I wanted to express in “The Important Things” I used a very minimal style and repeated themes throughout.

“The Important Things” was the last story I wrote this semester and is admittedly least developed of the three. I have challenges for the future of this story in further

developing character and plot so that it doesn't seem allegorical and theme driven. As it is, I feel that "The Important Things" is a story with potential for the future.

"Losing the Ground Beneath" is a story about Ray, a man who has found he has lost something of himself on his way toward middle age. Though he doesn't initially realize it, Ray has lost touch with some part of his life that offered him fulfillment and has focussed instead on the monotonous progression of coming age. The voice is a third person omniscience limited to seeing inside Ray's consciousness. With this narrator I can be both intimate with and detached from Ray. Through the subjectiveness and objectiveness of this narrator I was able to fully explore the details Ray notices and his thoughts.

In the development of "Losing the Ground Beneath" my biggest struggle was structuring. I had Ray's character fairly well laid out. I knew what themes I wanted to introduce. The storyline was well developed in my head. However, it seemed like these three were contributing to a wordiness and confusing structure that detracted from the pleasure of reading the story. To remedy this I chose to put the action of the story in the present tense and give background information in flashback set apart by space breaks on the page. It was a simple solution that I think really worked for this story. Through flashbacks and present tense narration I was able to make the story slow itself down at crucial points to include the kind of detail it demanded and let it run smoothly over the mire often created by expository information.

In conference, Allen Wier made the suggestion that I look at the details, descriptions, and imagery that I had put in the story in order to be sure I wasn't explaining them away by telling the reader how he or she was supposed to interpret them.

I found several instances in which I had done this and eliminated the unneeded explanation. This not only strengthened my story, but also taught me to trust my intuitions that the meaning of my imagery will be implied without my stating it.

Through the many revisions of “Losing the Ground Beneath” I found a story developing and re-developing into something I am very satisfied with.

“Everything Smells Like New Orleans” is the longest story I have written to date. I have spent many hours finding this story by letting its characters come to life in a car on the way to New Orleans. The action of the story is centered around a trip to retrieve a little girl from her father who kidnapped her from her mother three years before. Though it is the longest story I have included in my manuscript, I feel it is as tightly written as any work I have done. I feel it is my strongest story.

The strengths of “Everything Smells Like New Orleans” have developed through multiple re-writes. I have been over this story countless times ironing out the language and developing themes. It has been such a pleasant challenge to make the first person narrator work as a character who reflects on his past in a straightforward and honest voice. Part of his very detailed account of counter-kidnapping is his guilt. The action of the story leads it to a tragic and lonely conclusion and the narrator’s attention to detail lets the reader know he has been mulling the story over in his mind for some time. He feels responsible that very little works out in the end.

I used an unhurried pace for this long story in order to bring out the sense of importance the narrator placed on the events. I hope that the pace succeeds in making the trip which takes place in the action seem real in the reader’s mind. The trip was an

intense two days of waiting and I slowed the pace of events to give a sense of that waiting.

I wanted the environment of the story to be believable but not overbearing in the prose. I spent a lot of effort trimming description as well as adding it where necessary. I feel that the setting was nicely accomplished without being distracting.

For the most part, I am very happy with “Everything Smells Like New Orleans.” I have future plans to come back to it and further improve on a good thing.

This thesis, I feel, was a fitting culmination to my work as an undergraduate fiction writer. I am thankful for the opportunity to demonstrate my abilities in such a manner. The work included in this thesis has potential for the future and I plan to revisit it to further develop the stories with the hopes of one day publishing one or more of them.

The Important Things

Darrell is an executive. He shares the executive bathroom with six other executives. The sign on the door says LOCKED WHEN IN USE, but the lock has been broken for two weeks. There have been several embarrassing incidents. Darrell once killed a man, but that's not important tonight. Darrell is divorced.

Ramona is a salesperson. Or, rather, she is in sales. When she is on the road she misses her bed. She also worries about her cats. Ramona sells plumbing supplies to construction companies. She once was a violinist, but that's not important tonight. Ramona is also divorced.

Ramona and Darrell both smoke, Frank does not. Frank is a bartender. He wants to go back to school. His associate's degree in technology won't get him a job. He would like to be a veterinarian. He once drove to Canada to see the Northern Lights. He has recently admitted to himself that he is gay, but that's not important tonight. Frank was once engaged, but never married.

* * *

Frank, Ramona, and Darrell were all lonely and all tired of their jobs. They were at a lonely bar like so many others. This particular lonely bar was part of a Holiday Inn in Knoxville, Tennessee. Darrell drank beer. Ramona, gin and tonic. Frank nursed a cup of coffee. They were alone at the bar, the three of them, within seven feet of one another.

Ramona had been at a table in the back before the waitress went off duty at 9:00. She moved to the bar and sat beside Darrell leaving one stool empty between them. She

wasn't tired. She had driven most of the day and had downed too much coffee to be tired. She needed a few more drinks.

Darrell had eaten supper at his convention and networked for several hours afterward. He had set up five lunches and three golf dates. When he got back to the hotel he had tried to lie down, but there was nothing on cable and he was too wound up to go to sleep.

Frank had come in to work at 6:00 and didn't get off until 2:00 AM no matter who was in the bar. The brochure and the sign on the door said the bar stayed open until 2:00 AM. Frank was lonely and bored. He was about to start slicing limes, a job he had to do each night, when he decided he would talk to the two at the bar instead. He had not tried to have conversations with customers before, though he had listened to the sad stories and happy stories of many customers. Whenever he heard someone's story he wanted to be the wise bartender you see in movies that offers one-liners as advice. He wasn't good at one-liners so he simply listened. It was as good as he could do.

Tonight he was lonely so he situated himself behind the bar in front of the empty seat between Darrell and Ramona. They both looked up at him wiping his hands on a towel. Frank said, "My name is Frank," not sure how else to get started.

There was an awkward silence. Frank found himself terrified that neither of them would respond. He had broken the bartending rule of never starting a conversation, only finishing. "Ramona," said Ramona, finally. Frank exhaled, almost in relief.

"Darrell," said Darrell, following Ramona's lead.

Frank stopped wiping his hands in the towel that hung from his apron. "I'm here until 2:00 because the brochure says we stay open until 2:00. Most nights I just watch

Leno. I don't want to do this forever—serve drinks, wipe this bar, watch Jay Leno. I want to go back to school to be a veterinarian.”

Ramona brushed a lock of her curling brown hair away from her face. She was 34 and pretty in a non-conventional way. She had a sharp nose and she often said she thought her lips were too thin, though some men like thin lips. But her eyes were definitely very pretty. They were soft and softened her face. “Veterinarians are wonderful people. I love animals, too. I have three cats at home,” she said.

Frank asked what the cats' names were.

“Britney, Earl, and Cloe,” said Ramona.

Ramona and Frank looked at Darrell. Darrell put his cigarette down. “I don't have any pets.”

The topic of pets seemed to have been exhausted quickly, but Frank was not going to give up so easily. He asked Darrell, “What do you do, Darrell?”

“I'm an executive. An office supply company. We contract with corporations to use our copy machines and paper and buy our paperclips and sticky notes.”

Frank looked at Ramona. “I'm in Sales. Plumbing supplies.” She laughed at herself. “I sell commodes and urinals. It's a piss and shit job and I sure don't want to do it the rest of my life.”

Frank said, “That's the kind of thing people tell me all the time. No, no, don't be offended. See, people tell bartenders about their troubles. They say ‘I hate my job’ or ‘my wife wants too much alimony.’ I'm not complaining. It's a part of the job. I only wish I knew what to say to them. You know, like on TV when the bartender has the best advice.”

Ramona and Darrell smiled. Darrell finished the last of his beer. He said, "My wife wants too much alimony."

All three had a laugh. Ramona said, "Divorced? Me too."

On a roll, Frank said, "I was engaged once. She wanted to move to Alaska. But I wanted to stay in Knoxville, get a job with a technology firm and use my associate's degree, so it didn't work out."

"My husband was cheating on me." Ramona knocked the ice around in her glass with the cocktail stirrer.

Darrell did not mention the reason for his divorce. His wife divorced him because he had cheated on her. He said, "I'll have another, Frank." He slid his glass to the back of the bar.

Frank filled the glass. He was afraid the conversation would die. Most customers didn't say much after they ordered another. He put the beer on Darrell's coaster and said, before Darrell could pick it up, "What's the most exciting thing you've done in your life? Or maybe the most significant?"

Darrell wiped the sweat from the side of his glass with his thumb. Ramona stirred her ice slowly. Again, she was the first to speak. "I once played violin for the Chicago Philharmonic. I loved it, but it didn't work out."

Darrell said, "I was in Nam." He was looking at his beer, not at Ramona or Frank.

Frank said, "I suppose mine would be camping in Canada with my ex-fiancé and seeing the Northern Lights."

Ramona finished her gin and tonic and ordered another. Frank was getting exasperated. Each conversation ended too soon and he really wanted to succeed at talking to Darrell and Ramona. He decided he would try one more time before slicing limes.

He put the gin and tonic in front of Ramona. He was about to ask if either of the two had children when Ramona turned to Darrell and said, "Are you happy with your career? Frank and I have already said that we hate our jobs. What about you?"

Darrell turned his glass and wiped the sweat from another spot. "My job pays well. But I hate it. I work with people who don't know me. I don't know them. There are six other execs on my floor and about twenty regional managers who hate us because one of us has to die for them to climb, but mostly because we have a private bathroom. They have to go downstairs with the secretaries and everyone else."

"An older building?" asked Ramona.

"Yes, older. Why?"

"Now days office buildings are constructed with executive bathrooms and employee bathrooms on every floor. Also, executives in new buildings hardly ever share a bathroom seven ways."

Darrell laughed. He explained himself by telling the story of the executive bathroom with the broken lock, starting with the sign that said DOOR LOCKED WHEN IN USE. In the past weeks almost all the executives had been walked in on, or had walked in on another executive, or both. Rumors about executive anatomy were being passed around the building. They all had a laugh.

They traded ridiculous work stories. Ramona had once sold 120 urinals to a guy in New Mexico who thought he was getting urinal cakes, five cases of twenty-four. She had almost lost her job over that. Some of her colleagues still joked with her about it lightheartedly.

Frank worked at a grocery store while he was getting his associate's degree. He told about bowling with frozen turkeys using two liter soda bottles as pins. It had been fun at the supermarket, but tending bar paid better.

Ramona said, looking at Darrell, "Well, then, none of us like our jobs. Frank says he wants to be a veterinarian. I've always wanted to have my own business. What about you?"

Darrell turned his glass of beer on the coaster for a moment before he said, "I suppose I want to be in business for myself as well. It doesn't matter how hard you work for a corporation, you never seem to reap what you sow."

The Tonight Show started and the three were quiet for a minute while Leno gave his monologue. Then Darrell asked, "Frank, where did you get your associate's degree?"

"The technical college by the interstate. What a hoax. No one I know who went there got a real job when they finished. I can network computers and write HTML and even do some work with hardware but I can only get hired to tend bar at the Holiday Inn."

Ramona said, "I have a bachelor's degree in logistics. I sell toilets." She lit a cigarette.

Darrell was ready for another beer and Ramona figured she'd have another gin and tonic.

Frank put Ramona's drink in front of her. She said, "When I was a little girl these were all my mother and her friends would drink. When I played grown-up with my friends, I always pretended I had gin and tonic in my little tea-cup."

"My dad gave me my first drink of beer when I was five," said Darrell. "I remember liking it. I don't believe that shit about acquired taste."

Frank said, "My first drink was communion wine at St. John's. I was eight."

"Can we change this music?" Darrell wanted to know. There was easy listening, instrumental jazz playing quietly.

"It's piped in," said Frank. "Corporate says it's this or live entertainment. We have performances on the weekend."

Now that Darrell had mentioned the music they all heard the easy-listening jazz instead of Leno's interview. It was stupefying music, narcotic almost, and Frank said so. "Sometimes at night I find that I haven't thought a real thought in hours, just let this Kenny G carry me superficially over life. I like to think about the important parts of living. What are the most important things in life?"

"Success," said Darrell, "being satisfied with yourself each morning when you wake up."

"Love," said Ramona, "and practicality, living your life with realism in mind."

"I suppose I want all of that," said Frank. "What about when you were a child? What did you want to be or to get out of life?"

Ramona wanted to be a naturalist. Her parents took her on camping trips to state parks where the naturalists said the most wonderful things about the world. She liked insects and butterflies especially.

Frank said he had wanted to be a priest as a child. His priest said words that were part of another world, an important world, a world of mysteries. The words made him happy and sad at the same time.

Darrell wanted to drive a bulldozer. He grew up when men drove huge machines to re-create the world. It was amazing to see the earth take a new shape and he wanted to be the one to shape it, colossally. He said, "I used to have a dog, Sparks. I tied him to my wagon and we moved my sandbox to a new spot in the yard about once a month. My mother hated the brown patches in the grass, but she let me do it anyway."

Frank observed that Darrell was not an animal hater; he just didn't have any pets right now.

Darrell nodded, "I miss that old Sparks."

Ramona said, sounding sad, "I hope my cats are all right. I left them with my niece. She's not very responsible."

"I'm sure they're fine," said Frank, "cats can usually fend for themselves if they have to."

Ramona lit a cigarette. "Last time I came home from being on the road they had gone wild. They weren't the cuddly, well-mannered housecats I had left. They hid from me and only came out after dark. It wasn't an issue when I was married, but now my niece is my only family in town. I wish I didn't have to travel so much."

Darrell watched Ramona smoke. Frank was somewhere in his own thoughts or regrets. No one spoke for some time. Then Darrell put both hands on the bar and sat up straight. "Why don't we," he said slowly, "start a business?"

The other two looked at him. He went on, "None of us likes what we're doing. Frank knows about Internet programming and computers. Ramona, you know about logistics and stock and warehousing. I know the executive side of business. We could all be partners and start a company. An Internet company. A dot-com." Darrell watched as Ramona and Frank each thought the idea over on their own.

"I like it," said Ramona.

Frank agreed. "What will we sell?" he asked.

Darrell said, "Well, you want to be a vet, Ramona loves animals, maybe we could sell pet supplies."

They all liked the idea. Darrell started scribbling on cocktail napkins and ordered a scotch, neat. He said that the way to go with merchandise was specialization and they decided to go with luxury pet items. Both Frank and Ramona were sure that people would buy pet jewelry and pet food on the culinary par with caviar. Frank talked about some ideas for the website and wrote them in the order book he had in his apron. Ramona was plotting a distribution scheme in a little notebook she pulled from her purse. Darrell scribbled on napkins the names of some people he knew that might be willing to finance the venture.

They talked well past the end of Leno. Frank had to start cleaning up. Ramona and Darrell bought several more drinks and their enthusiasm was evident on the many scraps of napkins and sheets of paper that covered the bar. The two talked the business side excitedly and Frank could only listen from his side of the bar. He didn't know much about business.

It was almost closing time and Darrell finished his last scotch as neatly as it was poured. Both Ramona and Frank watched as he turned the glass up. Darrell was an attractive man. He was 53 but had lots of dark hair left and had dark eyebrows. He hadn't gotten too much of a belly. Plus, he was well dressed and that always helps.

Darrell had knocked back a lot of scotch since they started talking the luxury pet accessory dot-com business. Ramona had finished five gin and tonics. Frank had sipped his way through three cups of coffee. It was time to call it a night.

Darrell suggested they all exchange numbers. Frank wrote his on two cocktail napkins. Ramona and Darrell passed out business cards.

After they all said goodbyes, Frank said, "It looks like we've found our silver lining."

"Absolutely," said Darrell.

"Positively," said Ramona.

On his way out, Frank turned off the lights in the bar and said to himself, "the start of a beautiful friendship."

On his way out, Darrell handed Ramona the spare key to his room.

* * *

Frank telephoned both of his new partners about a week later. He talked to two secretaries who said that they would leave messages. His calls weren't returned. He called Darrell several more times before he was finally put through.

“The whole dot-com thing has gone sour,” Darrell said. “It was sour when we talked. I think I had too much to drink that night and got too excited. It just wouldn’t work.”

Frank understood and said thank you and goodbye.

Frank is 26. He is attractive and dresses nicely. When strangers see Frank they see blue eyes and a straight-toothed smile. Some notice his handsome hands, others his handsome jaw line. Frank is gay, but he’s not sure what that means yet, he has only recently admitted it to himself. Frank is lonely and he works in a lonely bar. When he thinks, he likes to think about all the people he has met in his life (he once met Alice Cooper).

Frank wipes the bar at a Holiday Inn in Knoxville, Tennessee. He thinks about life and wonders what is important. He is sure that some things are, but which?

Everything Smells Like New Orleans

We drove down to New Orleans in 1957 to get Amy back. Amy is my sister Carla's oldest girl. Carla had talked to a lawyer who told her the only way to get Amy back was to go down there and take her from Burcet like he'd done her.

Carla and Burcet had been split for a while when he came to visit the girls. Carla let him stay since he had nowhere else. She was still friendly with him at the time and didn't suspect he would do any wrong. He took off early on a Sunday morning and took Amy, who was three at the time, with him. Carla cried for weeks. She still had the baby, Elizabeth, but not having Amy tore at her terribly. Three years after Burcet took Amy, Carla was still out of her mind and so, when she told me what the lawyer had said, I went along with it. It looked like the only thing to do.

Four of us went in my '41 Plymouth. I drove the whole way and Brenda, a girl we knew, sat up by me. Carla and her boyfriend, Stillman, rode in the back. The Plymouth was an old car, but it had been well taken care of. I got it cheap from a man my father knew who had gotten too old to drive it. It was a big car and we all had room to be comfortable. We listened to the radio that I had put in the Plymouth a few months before. We switched from one station to another as each faded out behind us.

It was late February, but warm, the smell of spring already in the trees. We went in February because the lawyer said to go during the carnival season so that we wouldn't draw attention to ourselves. The lawyer was a man who thought straight, as anyone in town would tell you, and I was glad to have his advice. His plan was simple and I respected that. I had some doubts, though, because there was no way to know what to

expect in New Orleans. It was on my mind and so I said, putting the question out for anyone, “How do you think it’s going to happen once we get there?”

Stillman always had an opinion. He said, “I say we do it just like the lawyer said. He knows what he’s talking about. We pull up and see her playing in the yard and we grab her and go. Easy. In and out and we’re gone.”

“But what if she’s not in the yard?” said Brenda, “What if she is and so is her daddy? We can’t bank on her just being there alone by the woodpile or something.”

“Well, then we just have to drive on by and come back later. That’s the only way I see to do it,” said Stillman, answering her question shortly.

Brenda was a girl who hung out at JR’s bar where I, and sometimes Stillman and Carla, went in the evenings after work at the mill. JR served pretty good food, especially pork chops, and poured lots of cold beer for the guys from the mill. The regulars kept things in line and the place seldom got rowdy.

I wasn’t quite sure why Brenda had come along on the trip. I think she liked the danger of it. One night when I was talking to Carla and Stillman about our plans, Brenda slid into the booth next to me. She had a way of squeezing in on conversations and soon she was a part of the trip to New Orleans, though none of us knew how it happened. She was a pretty girl, though young, only 22, and I didn’t really mind her being along until she started talking a mile a minute. She was from Ohio and sometimes you can’t get those northerners stopped once they’ve started.

I looked at her next to me in the Plymouth. She had squinted her eyes and was looking south along the road at the blue horizon. I could almost see her turning thoughts around in her head. She only really wanted to help and she seemed hurt by Stillman’s

sharp reply. I regretted thinking that she was a noisy Yankee. "I'm just saying, it would be one in a million to drive by and see her unguarded," she said, still looking ahead.

Stillman repeated himself, "Then we drive on by and come back later."

"We could go in and talk to him," said Brenda, "just like he did. We act like we came to visit and we take off with her."

"What if he catches us doing it?" said Stillman. Her questions were annoying him. I wished he'd understand how much it hurt her to be spoken to so sharply when she was only trying to help.

"Well then, I guess you and Jeffrey will have to fight him," said Brenda, shutting him up.

I hadn't thought, until then, about fighting. I had always been one to talk things over and tried to avoid a fight when possible. After Brenda's comment, Burcet's big arms came to my mind. I knew he would beat me if it came to a fight one-on-one and I was sure that Stillman wouldn't be much help. I had seen Stillman head out the door at JR's when two old boys had an argument that came to fists. I had helped to break the two up and threw one of them, the one JR said had started things, out. Brenda said something that night about me being brave. I suppose that's how she got the idea I could fight Burcet.

I had thought about the idea of knocking on the door and pretending to visit but Burcet would suspect us immediately. Carla and the lawyer had been sending strongly worded letters demanding Burcet give Amy back. Besides, he stole her that way in the first place and would see it coming a mile off. I put the idea aside again. The car was

quiet and I realized that both Brenda and Stillman were waiting for me to say something about fighting Burcet. "I'm hoping it won't come to that," I said. I turned up the radio.

The air was getting warmer as we drove. The afternoon sun was glaring in on the passenger side, heating the car through the windows. Brenda moved across the seat closer to me to get her face out of the worst of it. I turned the vent fan on full and we tried rolling the windows down but the rushing air at 65 miles per hour was too loud. It had been warm for February even at home in Clarksville and we were south of there, almost to Birmingham, by about two hundred miles.

Brenda put her window down again and Stillman yelled that it might be fine for her but it was blowing him away in the back. Carla, who hadn't said a word to complain about the sun, unfolded the blanket that lay on the seat between her and Stillman and draped it across the windows. She anchored it by rolling the corners up between the glass and the car door.

The blanket was the quilted baby blanket Mother had made for Amy when she was born. It was made of yellow fabric with single blue flowers that bloomed on a curling green vine connecting them together. Amy's little sister Elizabeth had used the blanket after Amy was gone and it was thin with age. But, even when Elizabeth had dragged it behind her as she walked around the house, we had all called it Amy's blanket.

Amy was my first niece, the girl who had made me an uncle. I still remember the first time she said my name. Mother had been watching her at the farmhouse that day. Burcet and Carla were gone to Nashville and were staying the night to hit the honkytonks, the only thing Burcet enjoyed doing in Tennessee. I was on the farm that day to help Daddy reclaim a piece of the far pasture that had gone to brush. We cut

scrubby trees and vines all morning and piled them to dry and be burned. It was spring and the air was cool, making the work feel good. I wasn't sweaty or even tired when I came into the kitchen where Mother was quartering apples for a crisp. Amy was in her chair chewing on a slice of apple. Mother looked up from the cutting board and said, without stopping her slicing, "Amy, can you say 'Uncle Jeffrey?'" Amy, with her mouth still around the apple slice, said my name in the way babies have, something like "Uncle Jeffrey." I smiled at her and she beamed back, her eyes glowing blue between the black curls on her head and the yellow bib under her chin.

* * * *

We had all been sitting in our own thoughts for some time while the Plymouth roared south on 11. I watched the passing farms and compared them to our own. The car could have been driving itself. I remembered none of the minutes before Stillman spoke what had been on his mind. "What if she doesn't want to come?"

The question sat in the car with us. We had all avoided thinking about it, but now it was there with us and we couldn't avoid it. I knew what Stillman was asking, but I said, "What do you mean?" putting the burden back on him. He didn't mind.

"I mean, say we get Amy but she doesn't want to leave? It's been three years, after all, and if she was only three when he took her, she might not remember Carla. What if she thinks we're kidnapping her?"

I glanced in the rear-view at Carla. She sat very still, staring out the window

beside her. Looking back at Stillman in the mirror I said, "I would say she will remember well enough. No one forgets their mother. Did you ever forget yours?"

"No, I never did. But I've seen it happen," said Stillman. "When Nathan Harmon came back from the War his own son didn't know him. The boy was scared of his daddy for about a week or so and he was five years old. Anyone can see not knowing your daddy's face if he left when you were only two but, Nathan's wife had been telling the boy about his daddy coming home for weeks. What I'm saying is that the boy knew Nathan was his daddy and he was still scared of him. What if Amy is scared of us? She might tell somebody we took her."

Carla was still looking out the window and I couldn't see her face. Stillman watched me in my mirror, waiting to hear what I had to say. "If she doesn't know us, I guess we'll just have to tell her who we are," I said. I wished I knew how to shut Stillman up. I wanted Carla to be as positive as possible about all of it. She had been grieving for so long and this trip had offered her some hope.

Stillman said, "That's what I'm saying. We'll tell her but what if she's scared anyway? Or what if she doesn't believe us?"

"That's a good question," said Brenda.

I said, too loudly, "We'll have to cross that bridge when we get to it." I felt bad about snapping at Brenda but I was worried about Carla's anxiousness. I turned up the radio and laid on the gas a little more.

The truth was I was sick of worrying about the plan. It had been all I had thought about for a week and a half and it was the same questions that I couldn't answer.

Worrying wouldn't help at all. The way I saw things we just had to get there and figure everything out after we could take a look at the situation.

It was quiet in the car except for the radio. After about ten minutes Brenda got restless. She took the opportunity of a commercial on the radio to ask, "Has anyone been to New Orleans? I hear they've got good food and lots of crazy people."

I'd never been to New Orleans and I knew Stillman hadn't been much of anywhere. I watched Carla in the mirror. She turned away from the window to look at Brenda and said, "I've been there. I met Burcet there."

Brenda turned around in the seat to face Carla. "I'm sorry I didn't mean to—"

"That's OK," Carla cut her off. She gave Brenda a weak smile and nod. Carla never shied from talking about Burcet, though sometimes it was obvious how much it troubled her. She still loved him even then, I think, and she told Brenda the story from a distant place in her mind, as if we weren't there in the car with her.

She'd gone to New Orleans on a mission trip with New Providence Church of God. They were helping to rebuild a chapel. One day she noticed Burcet looking at her while she was stenciling little crosses on the walls of the church. He was one of the local boys that were doing the roofing. He was sort of short but his blue eyes under his dark eyebrows were what she noticed most. During the lunch break, he asked her if she wanted to go to the picture show. They weren't allowed out at night, but she said yes in spite of the rule. Carla's girlfriend, Sue Morgan, gave Carla her pillow to stuff under the blankets. Carla snuck out every night the rest of the week. "He showed me everything," Carla said. "New Orleans is such a town, you wouldn't believe it. The night before we left, he asked me to marry him. He was so desperate in love that I said yes."

Brenda cooed and Stillman grunted, saying, "He's a kidnapping bastard if you ask me."

"No one did," scolded Brenda.

Burcet had come up to Tennessee to marry Carla. Our father got him a job at the linen mill where I worked. I liked Burcet, but he didn't fit in at home. He was Catholic and he wouldn't go to church with Carla. That bothered Mother and Daddy. Burcet's Cajun accent drew attention to him. He liked to drink and didn't mind if anyone knew. The whole town started paying attention to our family and our strange in-law. By the second year of their marriage, Carla and Burcet fought like Red Bailey's cocks, lots of fuss and flying feathers. It wasn't long after Elizabeth was born that there were divorce papers.

I had to sign a statement that I was of the opinion that Burcet was unfit as a father and a husband. The divorce was what Carla had wanted at the time. I wanted her to have everything she deserved, so I signed. Carla was glad she had gotten the divorce but she hated it for the girls. After the divorce and before she lost Amy, she often said, "They can only have one of us, either him or me. That's my only regret."

* * * *

We were somewhere in the middle of Mississippi and there hadn't been anything to see but pine trees for miles. Stillman and Brenda had fallen asleep and Carla hadn't said a word, just stared out the window. The shadows were growing across the road and into the Plymouth. I looked over at Brenda beside me and down at her legs. She was wearing a skirt to her knees and little brown and white saddle shoes. She had nice legs

and her feet were small and pretty. Distracted, I hit a bump in the road, hard. Brenda and Stillman jostled awake. “Goddamn,” said Stillman. He’d hit his head on the window.

I apologized. No one said anything for a long moment so I spoke up, lonely after miles of not having talked to anyone. “The biggest bump I ever hit was riding with Billy Milsaps down to Florida for the greyhound races. He was driving along just as straight and flat a road as I had ever seen when the car bottomed out in a pothole. KaWhap! We both hit the roof with our heads and slammed back down in the seat. We kept going about 55 miles per hour. It seemed like everything was fine except for a couple of headaches. On the way back home we dropped the transmission.”

Brenda giggled a little. Stillman grunted to imply that he wasn’t impressed with Florida. He had never been to many places.

Brenda, smiling, said, “Last year Sissy Mills and I drove out to Rocky Creek. She drove too close to the edge of the road and we ended up with two wheels off the road and in the air. The tow-truck man laughed his tail off at us when he saw what happened, but it didn’t hurt the car at all. He said we were lucky to be alive. We might have gone over the edge and drowned in the creek.”

“Hmphh,” said Stillman. I was sorry I woke him up.

We stopped for gas in a town called Laurel. It was the only town with a normal sounding name that we had been through since Priceville, Alabama. We had driven through towns named Warrior and Cuba in Alabama and Pachuta and Enterprise in Mississippi. Laurel sounded comforting.

There was only one bathroom at the station so we agreed that the girls would go first. Stillman paced around saying, "I've got to go," under his breath. I walked around to the back and peed in some brush so I wouldn't have to hear him complain.

I bought cigarettes; Brenda insisted on Lucky Strike. Carla got the cooler out of the trunk and Brenda spread a picnic blanket on a grassy patch next to the station. The girls made sandwiches of ham on biscuits with sliced tomato. I poured water into paper cups from the big jug we had filled at home. It was getting a little cool in the evening and we sat on the picnic blanket and ate as the sun went down behind the pines. It was a colorless sunset as sunsets go, monochrome yellow and unexciting. Stillman and I passed a beer from the cooler between us and we talked about the flatness of Mississippi. I brought up the pine trees that lined the road so that all you could see was pine in all directions but straight ahead. Stillman said, "It's so flat and straight here you could drag anywhere. Back home we've only got that one straight mile out on Cave Road and the cops know where to watch. Here you could just rev up anywhere and tear up the asphalt." I nodded and smoked my cigarette.

After our supper we talked about our plans. It was getting dark by then and, if we kept on, we'd get to New Orleans in the middle of the night. We decided that we would put up for the night in Laurel. Carla decided that sometime in the late morning would be the best time to find Amy in the yard so we would leave Laurel early to get to New Orleans sometime around 10:00. I was glad to stop for the night because the driving was wearing me out. I had thought more than once about making Stillman drive, but he gunned it too hard for my taste.

Carla and Brenda packed the cooler away and Carla said she figured we would drive in and out of Louisiana without stopping. The lawyer had told her that our only danger was there. She had brought Amy's birth certificate along listing her as the mother. We would be fine as long as Burcet couldn't have us arrested and make a paternity suit in his home state.

I was relieved that the little motel in Laurel looked pretty clean and I paid the clerk \$11 for the double room. Stillman said he was going to walk down the road to get beer and I gave him money to get the girls and me some as well.

I went to the Plymouth and got the suitcases from the trunk. I put the girls' cases on the pavement. Stillman had put his things into two brown paper sacks. A piece ripped off the top of one when I tried to pull it out with one hand. With his sacks on the pavement, I had to bend all the way at the waist to reach my suitcase in the back of the deep trunk. My suitcase was one my father let me use when I traveled. Daddy never used it anymore himself so I considered it mine. It was kind of beat up but I was proud of it next to Stillman's grocery bags.

I closed the trunk and made the first trip inside with the girls' cases. I put them on top of the dresser and went back out for the rest.

Stillman brought back three quart bottles of beer and we poured them into paper cups. The beer went down cold after the day in the hot car and we all relaxed a little. I smiled at Carla, trying to reassure her. She smiled back and I felt better. We all sat on one hard mattress and played Hearts. When Stillman lost three games in a row, he quit, saying he was tired. Brenda put a rubber band around the cards and we all had a cigarette.

Brenda mentioned the early morning. We were getting up at six to be sure we made New Orleans before 10:00. Carla emptied the ashtray. I poured the rest of the beer into our cups and put the empty bottles into the trashcan. Everything in the room was some shade of tan or brown except for the carpet, which was burgundy. The blandness of the room drew my attention to a cheap print on the wall between the beds. It was a cowboy scene with a horse tied next to a waterwheel mill. The girls went into the bathroom to put their night things on and I lay backward on the bed and looked at the print.

In the picture, it was early evening and the horse looked weary. He hung his head almost to the ground. He was saddled, but there was no rider. The light brown horse was tied very close to the edge of the little stream that powered the mill. The creek wound into the picture and out again without any sign of where it had come from or where it was going. It was a sad, lonely picture but I looked at it instead of talking to Stillman, who was still upset about Hearts.

After a few minutes, the girls came out of the bathroom in their nightgowns. Stillman took off his shoes and shirt. In his undershirt, he took one of his bags to the bathroom to get ready for bed.

The girls put their suitcases in order. Brenda said, "Carla, will you help me put my hair up?" They sat on the bed and went to work on Brenda's hair rolling it into curls. Carla did the rolling, kneeling behind Brenda, while Brenda handed her pins and rollers from a yellow cotton bag. They did the work without concentration, reminding me of folding yards of towel cloth rolling off the loom at the mill, a job I could do without thinking.

They gossiped while they worked about people back home. They both giggled when they stumbled across the story of one of my old flings. The preacher's son had jilted her not long before and the whole town was talking about it. I smiled at them to let them know I didn't mind. She was a silly girl and I felt foolish for having spent so much time with her.

Stillman was in the bathroom for a long time. We heard him brush his teeth and gargle loudly. I was tired and wished he'd hurry. When he came out I could smell his fresh aftershave from across the room. He was humming while he put his brown sack next to its match beside my suitcase on the floor.

"Stillman, you and Jeffrey can share that bed," said Brenda without looking in his direction, "Carla and I will sleep in this one."

"What?" said Stillman, objecting, but Carla looked up from Brenda's hair with a look that made him know it would be that way. He had been living with Carla for about five months in the little house that used to be on the Pearsons' farm before Daddy had bought half of the land when old Pearson folded in '42. Stillman flopped down on the bed I was going to share with him and rolled over with his back to the rest of us.

I got my toothbrush and pajamas out of my suitcase and went to the bathroom. It was a small bathroom, but a mirror covered the wall behind the sink and made it look larger than it really was. The mirror had a small crack across the bottom and the lid of the tank on the back of the commode was cracked as well. In the mirror, I looked tired. The brighter lights of the bathroom made my whiskers into dark shadows across the lower half of my face. I splashed my face in the sink then brushed my teeth.

My pajamas were blue flannel. I wore them sometimes in the winter on very cold nights when the stove couldn't keep the house warm through the night. They were the only nightclothes I had and, since we were all sharing a room, I had to put them on. I would be hot that night.

Outside the bathroom, the room was dark. Carla and Stillman were already lying down. Brenda was sitting up in bed next to Carla. She was filing her nails under the lamp, which she had covered with a blouse to let Carla and Stillman sleep. I walked past her and I lay down above the covers on my side of the bed opposite hers.

“Goodnight,” said Brenda.

“Goodnight,” I said.

Brenda put her file down and turned off the light. I lay very still above the covers in my flannels. I found a place on the very edge of the bed, far from Stillman who had much of the middle. I could hear Brenda breathing in the bed next to me and I wished the room wasn't quite so dark.

* * * *

We started the next morning early at the café across the street. We had eggs and bacon with biscuits. No one said much. There were a few regulars, truckers and bachelor farmers, eating in the restaurant with us. Carla and Brenda were the only women in the café besides the waitress and the men kept looking over at our table between bites of egg. We didn't mind so much because no one asked what we were

doing down there all the way from Tennessee and we didn't have to put our Mardi Gras story to the test.

I was still tired after a restless night above the covers. The pillow had been too thin and the room was too dark for me. I asked the waitress to fill my coffee cup three times. The coffee was strong and I felt more awake when I got into the car.

The morning was hazy and cool. The flat road faded into the damp gray ahead of the Plymouth. I drove carefully, watching for deer. It was still before 7:00 and I had often seen deer near the road on early mornings in the fog back home.

Brenda and Stillman went to sleep within half an hour. It was quiet in the car. I looked at Carla in the mirror and said, "This is it."

She nodded and smiled. I smiled back, but my smile was as forced as hers had looked.

I felt something like I did the day before my first date. I had been eighteen. We never had money when I was a kid and I didn't have nice clothes to wear to high school. The day I turned eighteen, I got a job at a dairy farm cleaning up. With my money I bought a pair of brand new shoes and three new shirts intending to ask Jeanie Gibson out. It wasn't until she said yes that I got scared. Not knowing what would happen, not even knowing what to do, made me sick in my stomach. But I couldn't stop it or even slow it down.

I wondered again if the trip to New Orleans was something we should be doing. There was so much that could go wrong. I stayed steady on the gas knowing that we couldn't do anything but go through with it. The strong morning coffee churned acid into my throat. I took a roll of Roloids from the glove box and chewed two. Putting the

Roloids back, I accidentally brushed Brenda's knee below the bottom of her blue skirt with my arm. She opened her eyes and blinked a few times. "Where are we?" she asked.

"About fifty miles from Louisiana," I said, watching straight ahead.

"How long until we get to New Orleans?"

I thought it would be about two hours. Brenda shifted closer to me on the seat and pulled the rearview her way. She put lipstick on in the little mirror and scooted back to her side. The radio was quietly playing a bop station I had found. Brenda turned it up because she liked the song. Stillman woke up and said, "What the hell are we listening to?"

No one answered him. "How far are we?" he asked.

"Two hours," I said.

The Plymouth roared beneath us. It was stuffy inside and I was tired of sitting. A few houses along the road were decorated brightly in carnival colors with flags and painted masks hanging on the porches. We passed one man hanging a string of electric lights on the rusted body of a car that sat on blocks in his yard. It was strange that there was so much excitement about Mardi Gras so far from the city. The colorful purple, green, and gold decorations got thicker as we drove south. I didn't know anything about Mardi Gras and it was like entering a strange Christmas with different colors and phantom masks instead of nativities and Santa Claus.

We hadn't climbed a hill in hours when the Plymouth started losing power. The engine pushed in spurts and, even with the gas pedal to the floor, we slowed to about 35 miles per hour. We rolled into Picayune, a town just shy of the Louisiana border.

The Plymouth lurched as I pulled it into the first service station we saw. The place was called Garland's. A young man came out from behind the little garage and watched us get out of the car. "Hey there," I said and waited for his nod to go on. "Can you get to us today? We're supposed to be in New Orleans today."

"Garland's not around," he said. "He should be back in a bit. I just do gas."

We waited almost an hour for Garland, a large man with a whisker-faced smile. We had bought beers from the boy that ran the pump for Garland and were sitting on a little bench in front drinking them from the bottles. "Hope they're cold enough," said Garland. He smiled brightly as he walked up. "Car having trouble?"

I said that the beers were nice and cold and told him about what the car had done. We didn't have much money and I hoped he could fix it cheap, even if it wouldn't last forever. I walked with him across the gravel to the Plymouth.

"Heading down for Mardi Gras?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, "we sure are."

"First time?" Garland was under the hood already and talking at the engine.

"Sure is," I said.

"Well, you are in for a treat. Where are you planning to stay?"

"No plans," I said. "We're just going to see what we can find."

"You won't find much, this late." Garland stood up and looked at me while he wiped his hands on a rag. "I think it's just clogged up in the carburetor. It shouldn't take long. Why don't you go inside and get me a beer out of the icebox? Grab yourself one, too. Tell Larry I sent you after them."

I passed the rest of my group on my way in the door and told them about the carburetor. On the way back out, Stillman looked at the beers in my hand as if to say, “Where’s mine?” I walked past him, pretending not to notice.

Garland took his beer and had a huge swallow. He smiled while I took a drink of mine. He took the cover off the carburetor. “Looks clean,” he said. “It must be jammed up, not opening.” He took a toothpick from his shirt pocket and broke off a piece. He worked it around in the carburetor for a minute and left it wedged inside somewhere. He put the cover back on and had me start the Plymouth.

The Plymouth started and idled nicely. Garland closed the hood and said, “Let’s take it out for a bit and see what it does.”

He got in on the passenger side and I yelled to the rest that we were going to try it out. I pulled out with Garland beside me.

“What’s your name?” he asked.

“Jeff,” I said.

“Well, Jeffrey, it looks like we got it fixed for now anyway.”

I nodded.

Garland looked over at me. “Who’s with you back there?”

“My sister, her boyfriend and a friend of ours.”

“Not your girlfriend?” he asked.

“No.” I felt my face getting hot. “She’s just a friend.”

“You should change that,” he said. “I think she likes you. I saw her looking.”

He chuckled.

I smiled nervously.

“I really don’t think you’re being honest with me,” he said.

For a second I thought he knew the real reason we were going to New Orleans, but he went on, “I think you like her, too.”

I smiled, relieved. He laughed a great big laugh and I laughed, too, caught up with him. His smile took his whole face up in wrinkles and turned his cheeks red. His laugh was deep and somehow infected everything around him.

He stopped laughing abruptly, almost surprising me, and said, “I really don’t think you’ll find a place to stay in the city. Not a place you’ll be happy with.”

I didn’t say anything, just drove. I was never a good liar and I especially didn’t want to lie to this man who seemed to be a pretty good sort.

“If you want to see a good time at Mardi Gras,” he said, “you and your friends should stay with my wife and me. We have a little place just west of the city. You could put up there. I’d let you air it out for us and stay on after we come down. I would show you New Orleans in a way tourists miss out on.”

I said, “That sounds great. But we would hate to impose.”

“No, no. We love guests. It’s great to have first-timers to show around.”

“I’ll mention it,” I said, “when we get back. I’ll see what the rest say.” I didn’t know how to talk my way out of it.

I turned the corner back to the station and pulled in. Outside the car, I said, “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing, as long as you say you’ll stay at our place for Mardi Gras.” Garland laughed again and I couldn’t help but be caught up in his happiness.

Garland went inside. I told the rest quietly what he had said so that he wouldn't overhear. Stillman said to tell him we would open the place up and just not do it. He wanted to know why Garland would invite us to stay with him if he didn't know us. It didn't sound good to him. Brenda wanted to say we had friends that we were meeting so that we could be polite when we declined but I had already told him we didn't have plans. We hadn't decided what our story would be when Garland came to the door and said, "My wife, Carol, just called. She's bringing lunch and I told her to put some together for you folks."

We tried to say no thanks, that we had to get on the road, but he said, "Where do you have to be in such a hurry?" We had no answer.

Carol was a beautiful woman in her forties. She had curly auburn hair and brown eyes that were so light they held my attention. She brought chicken gumbo in a ceramic warmer. She said, "I brought some chicken gumbo and some cheese sandwiches in case you all aren't fond of spicy things." She had a voice like sweet cream. Her smooth southern accent hinted at the beauty hidden deep in the history of my own mountainous drawl. Her open top dress showed her well-fed breasts. I wished we could stay with Garland and his wife. Their happiness made them beautiful and warm and I wanted to be a part of it.

We sat on a red picnic table in the shade of a stand of hickory trees a hundred yards from Garland's shop. The gumbo was wonderful and hot. Garland passed cold beers to all of us from a bucket of ice water. Brenda talked about moving south from Ohio and all the differences she had found. She loved the South, she said, and would never go back north. People in the South treated strangers like family.

Garland told his wife that he wanted us to stay with them for Mardi Gras. She said that we must stay, "You'll be able to see things with us that tourists just miss."

The four of us looked at each other, not sure what to say. It was Carla who spoke. She told them the truth, the whole story from the start. Carol and Garland sat quiet. Garland nodded slowly and Carol's eyes got red and moist.

When Carla finished, the birds chirped above us and no one spoke. Carol said, after a long minute, "I hope you get her. I hope you get her back and love her more than life itself."

Garland agreed. "Stop here in Picayune tonight on your way back. You can rest up at our house."

We agreed to stop and the girls helped Carol put the meal away.

Garland pulled me off to the side. "Listen," he said, "I really want you to be sure and stop here tonight. There's someone I want you to see. He's a voodoo man, understand?" I looked at Garland and he must have seen that I didn't. "If you go down there and grab that girl," he explained, "her family there is sure to have some voodoo put on you. I know a man here who can take it off. You be real sure to stop. You don't want to take chances when it comes to voodoo magic."

I was sure it wouldn't hurt to see his voodoo man. I wanted to stop anyway to see him and his wife again. He smiled and slapped my back. "Good then," he said and I laughed with him.

I had Garland's boy fill the tank before we left. Stillman thanked Garland and his wife several times for the meal and all their kindness and told them that if they were ever

in Tennessee he would personally make sure they were comfortable and well taken care of. Before I got in the car I asked again, “How much do I owe you?”

“Nothing,” said Garland. “Just come back here with that girl safe with her mamma.”

I promised we would and shook his hand. I never saw Garland or his wife again.

* * * *

In the car and back on the road, we talked about Garland and Carol. It was wonderful that they had been so nice, not even wanting money for the car repair or the gas. We all looked forward to seeing them again that night with Amy. I felt more ready than ever. The stop in Picayune gave me a sense that what we were doing was right. We’d been honest and ending the lie felt good. We crossed into Louisiana talking about Carol’s gumbo.

It was bright in the early afternoon when we came to Lake Pontchartrain with New Orleans waiting just beyond. The bridge across the lake was like no bridge I had ever seen, so low it seemed like the road was paved right on top of the water. Halfway across the eight-mile bridge I imagined we were being carried across a sea, as if the hand of God were carrying us to Amy.

The land across the lake looked very much like the water. It was flat and smooth and reminded me of my visit to the Atlantic Ocean in North Carolina on a trip to see Daddy’s cousins. Nothing we could see rose above anything else in view.

We had Burcet’s address and a map of the city. Before we left home we had spent an evening at JR’s looking at the map. The streets were all laid straight across

themselves making the map look tiled in green. Carla had circled the block Burcet lived on and we had drawn our route into the city, across Burcet's block, and back out to the highway in heavy blue ink.

I felt pretty good about the map. It was comforting to know exactly where we were going even though I had never been there before. But when city closed around us from nothing, I felt like we had arrived at some foreign place not connected to the rest of America. There were so many strange streets with names I couldn't pronounce. The buildings were like no others I had seen. Brenda kept me calm by calling out the turns to me and we drove deeper into the city following the map's blue line.

The houses we drove between were very close to each other. They all had little porches near the street and shutters on the windows opened to the air. It was warm and we opened our own windows, being off the highway.

The air was salty like the ocean air in North Carolina, but with something else I couldn't quite place at the time. It was like the smell of coal smoke or wet wood or feet, but not a bad smell and really not like any of these. I inhaled deeply again and again and the scent has been in my memory ever since. I've come to understand it as the smell of something living; salty sweat and warm breath and hair and everything mixed. Sometimes, when I'm near a river or sleepless and lonely in bed at night, the smell of New Orleans enters my mind and the whole trip holds my thoughts until it drains through me and lets me move on.

Brenda was the only one who spoke in the car, giving directions like, "Left here for six blocks." I took it easy on the strange streets, smelling the smell and taking the turns slowly. I watched ahead from stop sign to stop sign.

“Right, here,” said Brenda near a large house with a stone wall and an iron gate. I took her right turn and drove a block before we saw that a crossing street ahead was filled with people. We had come up on a parade and our way was blocked. Brilliantly painted floats pulled by tractors stopped and started slowly past. The floats were separated by marching bands and groups of horses ridden by brightly costumed men who wore masks and large feathered plumes. The riders looked like the knights I had seen in a storybook.

People lined the street. Children sat in boxes attached to step ladders that let them see above the crowd. Parents stood behind and among the ladders. Teens walked along the back of the crowd in both directions, anxious to get to something better and missing out on what was there already.

“Let’s try to get around it,” Stillman said. I turned to try to get past the parade, thinking it might be possible to outrun it. It didn’t take long to find that the parade was looping around, cutting us off. We drove back to our starting place and waited for it to end.

We watched the parade from a block away in the parked Plymouth. The costumed men on the floats tossed strings of bright beads into the crowd. The afternoon had grown cloudy and the floats and beads were like the flames of a winter bonfire, so bright compared to the rest of the landscape that nothing else seemed worth looking at.

Carla told us that purple, green, and gold were the Mardi Gras colors. She said that they celebrated Mardi Gras in New Orleans because the French Catholics, like Burcet, were getting ready for a season of fasting before Easter. The fasting was supposed to remind them that Jesus had suffered as a man. All the decorations we had seen on the way to New Orleans made a little more sense to me then. Before, I had

thought of Mardi Gras as something of another Christmas with its own colors and different decorations. I realized, after hearing Carla and seeing it all, that these people were celebrating their own lives. They were happy with what they had and the festival let them enjoy everything good that life had to offer before they remembered all the parts of being men that were hard and hungry and hurtful.

Stillman got out of the car several times and paced back and forth. Brenda asked me if I would go with her to the parade to get her and Carla some beads. We left the car and weaved through the crowd and between the ladders until we were close enough to stand where the men were tossing beads and little prizes. She put her hands up and smiled when the first float passed. They tossed several strings her way. She caught two strings and kids scrambled at her feet for the beads that had hit the ground. When the next float chugged past us, I put my hands up as well. The men threw beads at Brenda and, standing next to her, I caught a strand. The beads were shiny and gold, about the size of marbles. I almost put it around my neck but I felt foolish and handed it to Brenda.

We walked back to the Plymouth after several more floats had passed. Brenda had more than ten strands of beads around her neck and she gave Carla half. Stillman asked if we were able to see the end of the parade. "No," we said at the same time.

We stayed parked for an hour and a half before the parade ended and the intersection was opened. Children and parents left slowly with their ladders. Young people draped with beads and wearing feathered masks hurried by on their way to parties or whatever the coming evening had in store.

When the street was clear enough, I pulled the Plymouth across the intersection and the crunch of broken beads popped under the tires. The parade had broken my

nervousness about being so near our destination but Carla's quiet concentration brought me back to the task. Brenda must have felt the same tension because the strands of shining beads around her neck no longer fit her mood. She was calling out directions in a serious tone and was the only person who spoke. When she announced that we were at Burcet's road, my heart began beating fast. "Six blocks," she said.

We rolled slowly between the houses, close on both sides. Some were brightly painted and many were peeling. Children were everywhere, black and white, riding bikes and running after each other from the sidewalks onto the street. I counted the blocks in my head from six down to one.

At Burcet's block I slowed to the speed of walking. We watched the addresses and found 913, a yellow house with peeling paint. There, in the little yard, was Amy.

Amy was playing with two dolls by a cinder block, drawing something in the dirt beside her with her finger. She was there, alone in the front yard, just as we had planned. It was hard to believe that it could have worked just so. I was frightened, but we didn't have time to feel. I stopped the car and Carla got out quickly.

"Amy?" she said. Amy looked up from her dolls. Carla was already crying. "Hi, baby," she said, "it's Mommy. Do you remember Mommy?"

Amy sat still, looking.

"Come here, Amy," said Carla, "let me see you."

Amy was quiet, but then said, "No, no. Non, non." She stood up from the ground and walked to the porch watching Carla over her shoulder.

Carla was crying loudly. She looked ready to fall to the ground and didn't move after Amy.

I opened my door and ran around the front of the car. Amy was looking at Carla and didn't see me coming. I grabbed her under the knees and around her back and hurried with her to the door that Carla had left open. Amy was stunned at first, I had come at her so fast, but then she began screaming. She bucked and wiggled and I dropped her in the dirt on her back. I quickly got one arm around her chest so that she wasn't able to run. Time slowed down as I wrestled to get the struggling girl back in both arms. Finally, holding her with one arm around her waist and the other across her chest, I had her firmly.

I put her carefully into the car and put myself between her and the door so that she couldn't slip out. I yelled at Stillman to hold her but he sat watching like a scared animal. Neighbors were coming out onto front porches and staring. It wouldn't be long before one of them called the police. Carla came behind me and squeezed past my body into the car. She held Amy tightly and I closed the door.

A woman came out onto the porch of Burcet's house. She was gray-headed and small, Burcet's mother. Her mouth opened for a moment before she screamed, "Amy."

I was in the car and throwing it into gear by the time the grandmother had come down off the porch. She stood behind the car in the middle of the road as we drove away. We heard her sobbing through the open windows, "Non, Carla. Non, non. Amy."

Amy's voice was terrified. She shouted "Grand-mère" again and again as we pulled away.

Carla and Brenda talked about it years later. I was there in the kitchen of the farmhouse and Brenda asked me if I didn't think it was the saddest thing ever when the old woman ran into the street screaming. I supposed I did, I said. It was the loudest

screams I have ever heard and it is still hard for me to believe that it came from such a small lady.

“Go,” said Stillman, yelling above Amy and her grandmother.

I was going, fast. I wanted to hit him for being such a coward when we were trying to get Amy in the car. If we had gotten out of there a few seconds earlier we might have been able to avoid the scene that the grandmother created. Amy was breathing quick and shallow breaths that sounded almost like gasping sobs. After several blocks Brenda said, “Slow down, don’t get pulled over.” I slowed down. “Left here,” she said.

We cut through the streets looking always for the police. Every person we saw seemed to be watching us, suspicious. Amy was crying loudly by then, having regained her breath, and we decided to roll the windows up so that no one on the streets would hear. With the windows closed, the smell of the city was bottled up in the car with us and it quickly turned stale.

I retraced our blue line back to the highway and out of New Orleans, concentrating on Brenda’s directions and watching the mirrors for police. We’d planned our exit on the map trying to avoid main roads figuring we’d have less chance of a run-in with the cops. There was an anxious moment when we passed two cops on a corner. Slipping past them felt like being the crook in the movies that tries to act relaxed by whistling and looking around at nothing in particular. They were less than five feet outside the car and none of us looked in their direction, afraid that meeting their gaze would show our guilt. Carla shifted over between Amy and the window so that the officers wouldn’t see the sobbing girl in the back seat. I tried to drive as normally as I

could, not too fast and not too slow. When they were out of sight we were relieved that the cops hadn't seemed to take any special notice of us.

Finally, I had the steadiness of Highway 11 in front of me again. Amy cried quietly between Carla and Stillman saying, "Grand-mère," over and over in whimpers. Her face looked like I remembered mine looking in a department store mirror when I had lost my mother on a trip to Nashville as a child, a hopeless face, sure that the world has ended. Carla was crying as well and saying things like, "Sweetie, it's me, Mommy."

We crossed Lake Pontchartrain again. I could sense Mississippi ahead, like a haven. Halfway across the low bridge Amy began to wail. Carla pleaded with her but that only made it worse. I set my jaw against her sobs. The sky was getting darker and I wanted night to come quickly. I wanted people to be in bed and ignorant of our passing.

We crossed the Mississippi line with more screaming from Amy in the back. It was Stillman who said, "We can't stop." I accepted that Picayune was a town we would drive through fast. I didn't mention Garland's warning of voodoo to the rest. Everyone was already on edge and I figured superstition would only make things worse.

I tried to forget Garland and his wife. I had felt justified when we left their little station in Picayune. Now we were sliding past in the night like thieves. I wasn't sure why it bothered me so much that we were passing in the dark, we had only met them that afternoon, but it was somehow like a betrayal. I told myself that stopping with our unwilling passenger, must be worse than not making good on a promise. We could hardly bear the sobs and Garland and Carol certainly wouldn't understand. I didn't slow down as we passed Garland's garage.

We didn't stop to sleep that night, only for gas and coffee. We told Amy stories while we drove about the house on the farm and her little sister. Carla tried to remind her of dolls and her bedroom and covered her with the quilted blanket Mother had made. Amy got quiet, no longer crying. We asked her questions like, "Are you hungry? Would you like some vanilla ice cream? Amy, honey, do you need to use the bathroom?" She didn't speak to us once the entire trip home. She slept a little in the night, trying hard in her sleep not to touch Stillman or Carla.

We drove through most of Mississippi and Alabama in the dark. I was very tired but I drank enough coffee that I was sure I wouldn't fall asleep. Twice in the night I thought I saw an animal or person standing in the road. I braked hard only to see nothing when I approached the place the figure had been. I lied to the rest, both times saying I had braked to miss a turtle. They all slept off and on that night, even Carla.

I felt sick by the time we got to Tennessee. The hills and curves we had climbed back into and not sleeping during the night made my head and body hurt.

We got to the farm an hour after sunrise. Mother came to the car carrying Elizabeth on her hip. She was crying from happiness and didn't notice our exhaustion. She put Elizabeth down and held Amy's head to her stomach. Amy stood without expression while Mother hugged her and said many things about missing her and how wonderful it was to have her back and how everything was going to be wonderful from now on.

Elizabeth, dropped by her grandmother in favor of Amy, hugged Carla's neck. Carla told her Amy's name. "This is your big sister," she said.

Elizabeth looked at Amy and started to cry, hiding her face in Carla's chest.

* * * *

The news of Amy's homecoming traveled fast. Many of our neighbors came to see her. They brought lemon pies and sugar cookies and sliced ham. Mother told them to take the food back with them, that we didn't need it, but they insisted and she ended up accepting it all.

The preacher and his wife stopped by. She brought sweet potato casserole. She said, "Look at all this food. People are so nice. You would think someone had died when in fact one of our own has been brought back to us."

The preacher wanted to get all the details of our trip to get Amy back. He dedicated an entire sermon on regaining the lost lamb to our success and mentioned it, a "miracle from the hand of God, a deliverance from captors," for many Sundays afterward.

Through all of the attention, Amy said very little. She only spoke when she needed something and sometimes answered a question with "yes" or "no." We were secretly happy that she was so quiet. Her unspoken words, had she said them, would have accused us. We weren't sure that the town would have been so happy if they knew that Amy hadn't wanted to come home at all.

As Amy began to speak to us we were finally able to understand that Burcet had told her Carla was dead. It was weeks before she accepted us as what we were, her family. It took months for her to sleep through the night without waking and crying for her Grand-mère.

Carla worried through many nights that Burcet would sneak in and take both girls while she slept. He called on the telephone a few times and threatened to come to Tennessee and make off with the girls. Carla told him over the phone that it would only hurt them more. One time, she said, he called and did nothing but cry on the phone. She thought he was probably drunk.

I don't know if what we did was the right thing. Who could ever say? I know we gave Amy the best we could throughout the years. Carla did let Burcet come and visit. She wanted Amy and Elizabeth could know their Daddy. She insisted one of us be with him always when he was around them and that he had to get a hotel room and couldn't stay with us.

Years after our trip to New Orleans, Burcet even said he was glad that Amy had grown up with her mother and her little sister. He even liked Mitchell, the man Carla remarried, because the girls would have a man in the house.

Carla didn't stay with Stillman for very long after the trip to New Orleans. He said he was going west after Carla turned him out. We didn't hear from him again. Her husband, Mitchell, came from Kentucky and met her at a church revival. He was a good man, a machinist, and he loved Amy and Elizabeth like daughters. I was glad Carla got the good turn she deserved.

Brenda stayed in town. She got married to a volunteer fireman and had four kids. She and Carla, both widowed now, still sit together at church.

Amy grew up quickly. She was a serious child but she grew into loving us eventually. I wondered how much she remembered of New Orleans before the day that we took her. Even when she was very young she seemed somewhere else most of the

time and I thought to myself that she'd lived a harder life than most kids, first losing a dad, then a mother, and then back again.

She made top grades in school and went to college and got a degree. She does advertising in Nashville now and lives with her husband, Dan, in Brentwood, a town I can't believe has become what it is today, full of mansions and golf ranges. Dan is an accountant and he does my taxes each year when I go to Brentwood to visit them with a shoebox of papers. Amy and Dan are still young, only fifty, and they are talking about retirement, something I'd like to have done years ago. Their son, David, is on his own after college and they figure they have enough to make the two of them comfortable until they die.

We don't see much of Amy back home, but I think of her when I think of the smell of New Orleans. I've never been back there but the smell stays with me. When the thick scent comes to me in my room on a summer night I remember the trip and watching Amy grow up to be a young woman. I remember her sad eyes. They never had the spark that lit them the day she first called me "Uncle Jeffrey." In the end I think she was glad she lived with her mother as a child, but it must have been something growing up knowing what people could do to each other.

It's hard to sleep on the nights when everything smells like New Orleans. It wasn't so bad when I could roll over and smell the sweetness of my wife's hair, but I'm a bachelor again, my first wife divorced for thirty-eight years and my second dead for nearly seven. Now when New Orleans comes back to me there's only me to smell. I thought for a time that I smelled the chicken coop behind my window, not New Orleans,

but I tore the coop down long ago. I've learned to lie still and let it pour through me, let it drain out. Usually it won't happen again for a few weeks.

Losing the Ground Beneath

Ray cracks the tab on his beer and leans back in the deluxe, shock absorbing patio chair. The chair is part of a set Maggie purchased the previous year to replace the old patio furniture that he had assembled in the garage of their first home. Jason and Jill were still kids when he put the old set together, now they were gone too, one in college and one beyond. The new patio set matches the deck on Maggie and Ray's new house on Archer's Ridge Golf Course. Past the unnaturally sloped earth of the golf course, the early autumn sky stretches out forever into the midwestern evening. One star lights itself against the dimming sunlight.

Ray puts one foot up on the glass table in front of him. He'll have to wipe the shoe prints off the top of the glass before Maggie gets back. She cleans the house daily, but has been gone to the Holy Land for two weeks. She went on the trip with the Ladies' Auxiliary from St. Joseph's Catholic Church. She called last night, her voice sounding close over the thousands of miles, closer than if she had been in the room with him.

She said, "It's four thirty in the morning here and I couldn't sleep."

It wasn't like her not to be able to sleep. She did whatever she put her mind to, sleeping included. He said, "Wow, that's late."

"We got back from Bethlehem last night. It was amazing."

Ray thought of the Christmas carol. Bethlehem, the little town. He wondered how little it was.

"I miss you," said Maggie.

They hadn't been apart for more than a few days at a time in as long as he could remember. "I miss you" wasn't a part of their vocabulary with one another. He thought for a moment. Did he miss her? He didn't know. He said, "It won't be long. Tuesday." He was picking her up at the church parking lot at 3:20 on Tuesday. The church van had brought them to the airport and was bringing them back. "Are you having fun?" he asked.

"Yes, I suppose. But I think that's what has been on my mind tonight, the whole thing, the whole experience I mean. It's powerful, like your closer to God here. I wish you would have come." It was so quiet on the phone that Ray wished for the static of long distance calls when he was a child, so loud at times you would have to yell into the receiver. A few husbands had gone with the Auxiliary and Maggie had asked him again and again if he would go. It wasn't his idea of vacation, he had said, without fishing. On the phone he had nothing to say so he listened to the silence across the digital lines, thousands of miles of silence.

"What's wrong?" Maggie asked.

"Nothing," said Ray, "nothing."

Ray finishes his beer. He is thinking about what Maggie said on the phone last night about being closer to God. He thinks he could feel closer to God anywhere but here. This is the house he said he would never have back in '68 when he had long hair and he and Maggie were college students in love. But here he is, 54 and living on the eighth hole of Archer's Ridge.

The eighth hole is a par three and Ray can usually bogey. He has never been a serious golfer. Some nights he goes out to play only the eighth for practice after the last foursomes with late tee times have played through. Sometimes on Saturday he plays the first nine holes solo and walks back through two fairways to the house. Maggie was very glad that he started golfing more after they moved to the new house. She hopes he will find some new golfing friends in the neighborhood but he wants to practice his game a little more before debuting in front of others.

The sun has dipped below the horizon. It will be dark in thirty minutes. Ray wipes the sweat from the side of his empty beer can. He prefers bottles, but Maggie buys cans because they are less bulky, easier to trade for the nickel at the grocery store. He hasn't gone to the grocery store since she left and there are three twelve-pack boxes filled with empties in the garage.

It is a nice fall evening, the time of year just before the last of the locusts have quieted their buzzing drone. The sound they make tonight, though not nearly as loud as the thunderous choruses of late August, is no less hypnotic. Ray stares at the reeds across the fairway of the eighth hole. The locust noise quiets steadily with the dimming light of sunset.

Ray is almost startled when a blue heron flies past, close to the ground. It lights silently in the reeds past the long grass of the rough. Its landing, like its flight, is elegant, surprising for a bird so large. It hides itself in the reeds, its stalk legs indistinguishable from the vegetation that surrounds them. Stalking around for a few moments, the heron becomes suddenly slower, moving as if time flowed over it at half speed.

As a boy, he used to watch the perching herons with his father on the shallow lake behind their house in southern Minnesota. The unnamed lake, more of a pond really, has since dried up. Later, Ray took his own children on drives to country lakes each fall to spot a few of the majestic birds on their way south. Wonder filled the car when one of them spotted a heron. Each year he told Jason and Jill where the birds were going. “South, some go to Florida, some all the way past Mexico to South America. They don’t like the snowy winter here.”

Jill was five when she said she remembered one of the birds from the previous year. “What’s his name?” Ray asked. “Poldy,” she said. They watched until the bird flew away and said, “See you next year, Poldy.”

The kids have been gone away for years now. Jason is a geologist and Jill is about to graduate from State. There hasn’t been a drive to see herons since the kids were teens.

The heron behind Ray’s new house is the first he’s seen in years. It moves very naturally in half-speed, its movements slow but not deliberate. It throws its long beak back and forth in an evenly paced arc across the eighth hole as if it were panning a movie camera over a scene. It stops abruptly, standing perfectly still among the slightly wind-swayed reeds, its beak pointing to Ray’s deck like a divining rod drawn to a source. “Is this where you meant to be?” he asks the bird. “Have I put a house on your perch?” The heron clicks its head to the side, one of the ticking movements herons make with their long legs and necks that makes them look almost insect-like.

The bird takes flight abruptly as if it had made up its mind when it landed that it would take its leave at such a specific moment in time and now was taking part in an act

somehow already in the past. Ray stays a moment to wonder if the heron will be back next year. He'll have to name it then.

The heron circles to the west in the last light of evening. It takes its southern course again, bound for tropical warmth. Ray's son Jason is in the south. He lives in Phoenix, both west and south. The heron might be going there, Ray thinks, but he remembers there is not much water in Arizona. It's desert there, like the Holy Land. On his visits to Phoenix, he prefers to stay inside where the sun is not so severe. The dry heat that comes off the hard-packed earth of Arizona is always a shock to him. It seems strange that the golf course Jason once took him to in Phoenix is somehow greener than Archer's Ridge.

It has become cool outside after the sunset. Inside the house, it is dark and silent. Ray runs his hand along the wall before finding the switch near the sliding glass door. The wall clock ticks quietly as he puts his beer can in the sink to be rinsed out. At the refrigerator, he opens both the freezer then the fridge. There are several varieties of frozen microwave meals and a package of cold cuts. He grabs another beer and goes to the pantry for potato chips, whistling through his teeth over the ticking of the clock.

It's about the time of the evening that Maggie called the night before, just past sundown in Iowa and just before sunrise of the next day in Jerusalem. He hopes Maggie is not having trouble sleeping. He doesn't know what he'll talk about if she calls. He skipped church this morning because he didn't feel like getting out of bed and he doesn't want to have to explain himself if Maggie asks how mass was.

He decides he will golf the eighth hole a few times so that if she calls he will be able to say that he was out practicing his game. She would be happy to hear that he was using the new clubs she had bought him for his birthday in August.

Ray walks through the kitchen to the door that leads to the garage. He takes his beer and the bag of potato chips with him. The garage still has the faint smell of new concrete. It is almost twice the size of his old garage. One of the options they had with the contractor was a three-car garage instead of the standard two and the space for the third car, which Ray and Maggie don't have, is dedicated to Ray's workbench and the lawnmower. His tools and jars of nails and screws are organized on pegs and shelves along the wall. He hasn't used any of the items on the workbench since he hung the pictures on the walls of the new house.

His clubs sit near his workbench. The heads of the irons shine slightly in the light of the uncovered bulbs in the garage. He puts the bag of potato chips on the workbench and shoulders the strap of the golf bag. He has become used to the weight of the clubs and shrugs only once to adjust the position of the strap. He pushes the door opener button and finishes his beer as the motor pulls the door up into the tracks above him.

Outside it is a little chilly, the first hint of the biting cold of a coming Midwestern winter. The street lamps make long shadows of the young trees in the front lawns that line the street. Ray walks through the thick turf of his lawn from the front to the back. It was an instant yard, the sod rolled out by the landscapers like wall to wall carpet. Maggie was elated when the black dirt that had been watered for weeks in anticipation of the sod was finally covered with the deep green rolls of farm-raised grass. "It feels like home now," she said. He wasn't sure.

* * *

Ray met Maggie at the University of Iowa. He went back to school after having bummed around the country for three years after high school. He had read *On the Road* and wanted to live the life of the novel. For a time he succeeded. He met interesting losers, interesting successes, and interesting waitresses. He went from coast to coast twice. He was sure that life was to be found out there by simply living according to whichever rules a new day offered. He didn't understand the sadness of the end of *On the Road* until he found himself with nothing but a duffel bag of toiletries and a janitorial job in Akron, Ohio. It was there, renting a room by the week, that he decided he had to do something with his life and not vice versa.

He started at Iowa in political science, hoping to change the world. He met Maggie in an economics class. She thought his shoulder-length hair was sexy. She had long legs and a warm smile and he liked them both. They went to lunch and then a movie and soon were together. The experiences of his traveling years seemed important again because she was so interested in hearing every detail. Often, she cooked supper for him in her apartment and he told her stories until early in the morning. They made love, sometimes until morning when they had to go to class.

Ray changed his major three times before deciding on marketing, a decision Maggie's father approved of almost as heartily as when he cut his hair short the summer after he and Maggie started dating. He cut his hair to stay cool in the warehouse where he worked ten-hour days to save money for the next term at school. He kept it short after the summer because Maggie said she liked it even better that way.

Ray and Maggie married before their junior year and honeymooned, poor as they were, in Niagara Falls. They spent almost all they had on room service and a hotel room they rarely left. With fifty dollars left, they drove up into Canada and camped. It was the first time he had been to Canada though he had lived in Minnesota as a child. Maggie laughed at her well-traveled husband who had never been north of the border.

They traveled through Canada for two weeks, wiring Maggie's father for money when the fifty dollars ran out. The fishing in Canada was amazing, the lakes and streams seeming to throw fish onto Ray's line. He fished every day and Maggie took photographs and wrote in a journal she had found in a souvenir shop with a picture of Niagara Falls on the cover. Each night they fried the fish he caught. When it was dark they lay on a wool blanket under the stars and looked up at the night sky rotating slowly above them. They talked and held each other, moving their bodies closer and finding their way out of clothes easily. They worked naturally against one another, losing the ground beneath them and making love surrounded by stars.

After the honeymoon they moved to a small apartment near campus. It was a part of an old house that had been converted to four apartments with the growth of the University. The landlord was a nice man, he said, as long as the rent was paid. He let them have an old red couch that he was going to throw away.

There were dogs in the neighborhood that barked all night. Several times the police came to evict tenants in the neighboring rental properties and once even in Ray and Maggie's own building. It wasn't a nice place, but they could afford it and enjoyed the sexy, dangerous feeling of being on their own. They combined their possessions in

the small space and made every inch of the three-room apartment a part of the new life they were beginning to share.

In 1970, a year after they made the small apartment their own, Jason was born and things started to move quickly. Ray and Maggie graduated. He got his first real job as a market forecaster. They bought a house, and then Jill was born. Ray was twenty-nine on the bicentennial and a part of everything American. He drank beer and sang “God Bless America” with his neighbors. Kids ran from everywhere waving sparklers above their heads like clusters of shooting stars burning through the Iowa City night.

The little family took camping vacations whenever they could, often taking off on a Friday afternoon for a weekend at a state park. The years were punctuated by summer trips to Yellowstone, Sequoia, the Smokies, and various parks in Canada. At least once during each summer trip Maggie and Ray let the kids stay up late on a clear night. They spread out the wool blanket under the night sky and watched the stars. Jason liked to count the shooting stars. Jill liked to learn the names of constellations. Ray and Maggie liked the feel of soft grass under the blanket and of their babies’ heads on their shoulders when they carried them, exhausted and asleep, back to the tent.

It was hard to think about getting older when life always seemed so fresh. Like most things, it didn’t happen at once. Ray slowly got older without realizing it until a few months after Jill moved off to State. He was having lunch at a café near his firm when four college kids sat across from him and talked fast at one another about classes and sex. It was then that he realized what the eighties meant. He was almost forty.

* * *

Ray is putting for par, a rare opportunity for him. The ball and the hole are the lightest and darkest things visible on the green. He is putting by the light of the lamps that line the cart path for walkers and joggers who do their exercise at night. The ball rolls slowly across the green and disappears into the hole. He is satisfied. It is his third time playing the hole tonight, the other two ended in double bogeys. Feeling good about himself, he decides he will quit now.

It is a wonderful night, cool but not cold. The half moon is rising slowly against the stars. He bends to get his ball from the hole then stands up quickly, tilting his head back to look up at the night sky. He is dizzy for a moment and the stars spin slightly with his vision, then steady themselves, and the ground seems to move beneath his feet. He turns around 360 degrees then lays down on the close cut grass of the green so that he can see the entire sky at once.

The stars are brilliant tonight and remind Ray of a night in Manitoba, Canada, when the kids were twelve and eight. Jason counted the most shooting stars ever on that June night and the sky lit itself in brilliant colors to the north. They were seeing the Northern Lights for the first time. It was something they talked about for years.

Ray wonders who he is now that the kids are gone and he and Maggie have a routine that rarely varies, these past two weeks being an exception. He wonders if he is still in love. He couldn't point to the exact day he fell in love with Maggie and figures that falling out of love goes somewhat in the same way. You don't know when it happens, one day you simply realize that it has. He doesn't think he has fallen out of love. But what if he is on the way, in the process?

There haven't been any vacations lately. In fact, he and Maggie haven't done anything lately. When they leave the house together it seems that it is always to go to church. Church used to be such a little part of their week. Amid the events of life, it used to be that church was a time of calm to regain perspective. Often now, going to mass is a chore for him, something he is obligated to do. Sometimes, sitting in mass, he thinks of all the things he and Debbie haven't done lately. Like getting drunk together or taking a weekend trip or lighting candles simply for romance.

The stars above slide slowly into the horizon, an illusion of movement caused by the rotating Earth. They have been in the same position since Ray was a child and even since Jesus was a child in Nazareth, the Holy Land, 2,000 years ago. Ray wonders if they looked the same in Jerusalem twelve hours ago. Did Maggie sleep under the same picture in the sky? Was her night as cloudless as his?

It somehow seems important to Ray that he remember something, though he doesn't know what. It isn't his anniversary, which is in the summer. He can't think of an appointment he has missed. He clears his mind and lets thoughts come and go as he glances at each star in turn.

Maggie folds the towels very nicely. After two weeks he has had to do the laundry and the towels look piled, not folded, in the bathroom linen closet. Maggie holds a spoon with three fingers. Once, a few years back, he watched her clipping her toenails in the back yard with the sun at her back and thought she was beautiful. He remembers her writing a note on a calendar not long ago. It was something simple, a reminder to drop the car off for brake service, and he doesn't know why he would remember that.

Perhaps that's what he has been missing, he thinks. He has forgotten the things that matter though they shouldn't. Maybe life is in the little moments between the marriages and car accidents and babies' teeth and new homes. It's the grilled cheese sandwiches and sharing a Sunday paper that make up days and weeks. Perhaps the big moments aren't so big as they seem.

Ray's golf clubs stand above him on spring loaded tripod legs that fold out automatically when he puts the bag on the ground. Something occurs to him when he sees the golf bag standing among the stars.

Ray is in his new basement. Like the garage, it smells faintly of fresh concrete. He has come to get a telescope he hasn't had out the box in years. It was moved to the new house packed in the foam it came with. He had figured he would pull it out sometime when the kids were both home, maybe with kids of their own before long, and make a family event of looking at stars like they used to on summer nights when the telescope was new. But tonight he is glad to be alone.

He finds the box and carries it to his deck. He puts the telescope on its tripod remembering the steps of its assembly easily even after seven years. It is an impressive canister, looking almost canon-like in its bulk. The evening has become even cooler and he goes inside for a light jacket. He listens to the ticking wall clock on his way to the closet. On his way back through the kitchen, he stops to turn around and get a beer.

On the deck Ray can see Venus, the evening star, in front of him in the west. It is the most brilliant point along the horizon. He points the lens toward the planet and brings it into focus turning one knob and then fine-tunes the image with another. Through the

telescope, Venus is a blue crescent moon. He can't remember why some planets have phases like the moon. He knew the answer once and it bothers him that he must trouble over it now, but after a few minutes of thinking he has it: Venus is between Earth and the sun. He visualizes the light from the sun catching Venus on one side. Venus could reflect only a part of that light toward Earth because of their angles in relation to one-another. Venus would almost always have part of its dark side turned toward Earth. He looks at Venus for a few more minutes, satisfied that he has solved the puzzle.

Ray scans from star to star and soon is bothered that he can only see half of the sky; his roof blocks the view of everything east. He puts the telescope on his shoulder and folds the tripod legs in. He carries the assembly down the stairs of his deck and onto the green of the eighth hole. On the green he can see red Jupiter in the east. Through the telescope the planet is a streaked gem in the sky. Jupiter's Great Red Spot stares back at him like an eye on the planet's surface. Maggie is in the east. The sun is rising there.

He points the lens of the telescope straight up and looks deep into the galaxy through untold miles at the light of untold stars. He loses something of his firm sense of perspective and feels both small and godlike at once. In one way it is looking up at vastness from below. In another it is looking down into the universe from a great height. He spends an hour before going back to the house looking at the cloudy nebulas of unborn stars and deep into the layers of the Milky Way formed by billions of stars close to home.

Maggie calls. It is almost eleven. "Were you asleep?" she asks.

"Yes," he lies, not sure why. He feels immediately ashamed.

She says, "I thought you might have been. I just missed you and had to call. I wish you could have seen the stars last night. They were brilliant."

Ray says nothing. He wants to tell Maggie about the stars on the golf course, but doesn't.

"Have you done any golfing?" she asks.

"Yes, I went tonight. I'm getting better."

"Good. I still think you should call up Richard and invite him out to play the course. He wouldn't care that you aren't a pro."

Richard Hess is one of his partners at the market research agency. "Yes," he says, "maybe next week."

"You'll be there to pick me up Tuesday?"

"Yes, three-twenty," he says.

"I miss you so much," she says.

"You too."

"I love you," she says.

Ray thought about everything in the span of a few seconds, the years and the kids and the vacations then the stars and the telescope and Maggie. He remembers Maggie planting flower bulbs two days before she left. He loves her, he says, and Tuesday is the day after tomorrow.

With the phone back on the receiver, Ray can't sleep. He has so much on his mind. He thinks he could stay awake until morning and if Maggie were here he would. He'd take her out onto the course and bring the telescope and the old wool blanket.