

2014

# Queen City Stories

Charles Tanner Bowden

*University of Vermont*, [cbowden@uvm.edu](mailto:cbowden@uvm.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarworks.uvm.edu/hcoltheses>

---

## Recommended Citation

Bowden, Charles Tanner, "Queen City Stories" (2014). *UVM Honors College Senior Theses*. Paper 30.

This Honors College Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Undergraduate Theses at ScholarWorks @ UVM. It has been accepted for inclusion in UVM Honors College Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ UVM. For more information, please contact [donna.omalley@uvm.edu](mailto:donna.omalley@uvm.edu).

# Queen City Stories

Charles Tanner Bowden

Undergraduate Honors Thesis  
Advisor: Professor Greg Bottoms  
Department of English  
University of Vermont  
2014



## Introduction

Over the past few years new jobs, new schools, and new adventures have scattered the members of my family across the country to places like Montana, Colorado, and Pennsylvania. It's rare that everyone is in one place at one time, but when that does happen it's here in Vermont. Family and friends make the journey home for occasions such as Thanksgiving, Christmas, or birthdays. Food, wine, and craft beer are the required entrance fees. Photos of those who can't make the trip are glued to wooden dowels and stuck somewhere off to the side, often appearing in the backgrounds of any photos that are taken.

Drinking and eating are fundamental to these festive gatherings but their main purpose is to enhance the pleasure of simply being together in one place and catching up. The question "What have you been up to?" and many variations of it is heard repeatedly at the early stages of these events but later, with the help of food and drink, the conversation changes. Recently I was at one of these gatherings and stepped back from what was going on all around me for a moment. At one end of the table a story about an epic mountain biking crash was being told. At the other end, the events of a recent wedding in the family were being remembered and corrected by three or four different people. The room was filled with the noise of storytelling.

My family may have its own traditions and peculiarities but the act of interacting through the telling of stories – whether they be anecdotes, jokes, or something that was in the news earlier that day – is something that undoubtedly occurs at most family gatherings. These stories aren't presented in a book or collection but they are stories nonetheless and their telling is an essential part of

human interaction. They do not make an attempt to be what is generally considered “art.” They often lack those elements that are deemed crucial to literature – character development, story arc, resolution, and so on. They are incomplete, off the cuff, and informal. It may even be that because they manifest in conversation instead of on a page they can never be considered art even though we continue to call them stories.

The eight stories that follow attempt to blur that distinction. Each one is told through the first person as if the narrator were speaking the story out loud. Voice is essentially present but other elements of story may not be. They are fragmented and selective. The setting of each story is a real place in Burlington. They exist on the page but also on a map – in the world and the city around us. They are meant to feel informal, contingent, and improvisational in their telling, seemingly mundane in their conflict, and avoid being “artful.”

The idea for this collection has its roots in another project that I worked on with Professor Kevin Moffett a year ago. Professor Moffett was at the time working on an e-novel called *The Silent History* with writers Eli Horowitz, and Matthew Derby and coder Russell Quinn. Told through first person testimonials, the novel details six generations of people born without the ability to understand language, showing how they develop over time and how the world reacts to their condition. The testimonials were serialized and made available to readers over time, originally accessible only through smartphones and tablets.

Within the framework of this idea the concept of geofiction was introduced. Writers had the ability to contribute their own stories to the universe of *The Silent*

*History* in the form of small encounters and experiences with the Silents. These stories are short – usually no more than 500 words – and occur in real places in the world, taking advantage of real-life details of setting. New technology is what makes these “Field Reports” interesting: a reader can only access these stories if he or she is in the real world counterpart of the story’s setting. The idea is that any detail in the story is real and can immediately be seen or felt or smelled by the reader, providing for a new level of fictional experience.

The stories in this collection draw on this idea. Each is told in the first person. Each setting is a real place in Burlington, Vermont. They can be read at home, in a coffee shop, or in the very place where the fictional events are occurring. My hope in presenting these stories in this way is that the characters and situations will be just as real as the places in which they are happening.

I have carefully chosen the setting of each story for important reasons. With some stories I hope to draw the reader to an interesting, possibly new place, such as Lone Rock Point or a set of bike jumps in the woods. With others I hope to show how some places might be more noteworthy than originally thought, such as Decker Towers, which is the tallest building in Vermont and also an assisted living facility. Finally, my desire is to introduce new perspectives to very familiar places, such as Church Street, through the realism of the characters and what happens to them.

The narrators and peripheral characters you will find in these stories are not epic creations of fiction, they have no exaggerated qualities, and nothing incredibly remarkable befalls them. They exist only in story but their voices, desires, and inner conflicts are those of everyday people. The narrators are the ordinary people who

have stories but might not normally get to tell them. They do not use flowery language or speak of abstract truths or ideas. The stories they have are told in a way that is clean and straightforward, just like any story you might tell your friend. They simply want to say, "This is what happened."

These eight stories are fictional, but they strive to be real. The blurring of fiction and reality attempts to detail lives and perceptions of our generation. The conflicts experienced by the characters and the choices they make and live with are those that many people are familiar with. These are stories that are simple and yet shed light on the thoughts, hopes, and struggles of everyday people leading everyday lives, and in doing so show that there may be no such thing as an everyday life. There will always be a story worth telling.

# BURLINGTON VERMONT

Scale 1:50,000

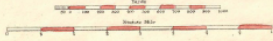


TABLE OF CONTENTS	
Where It Ended .....	3
Waste .....	10
Rédemption Center .....	18
Weekend Trip .....	26
Knots .....	35
Smut .....	44
The Bottom .....	52
Undone at the Whiskey Room .....	60



Topography by H. D. SWANSON, Assistant to 1879.  
Hydrography by F. D. SPANGLER, Hydrographer in 1877.





# Queen City Stories





## Where It Ended

We used to come here together often. I'd ride down the bike path the few miles from downtown on my uncle's old Chesini during her lunch break and we'd sit in the grass underneath the shade of the oaks and eat ham and cheese sandwiches that I brought with me. We did this on the nice days when it was 70, maybe 80 degrees, and sunny but with a breeze. She usually talked about what she was doing at work that day and I'd just sit and listen and eat my ham sandwich. I'd always finish eating before her because she talked so much and sometimes I would go down for a quick swim so that I could cool off and she could get some food before heading back to the office. She never finished it. She always left the last bite out of habit and principle. When I came back from the water she would give it to me and I'd eat it and lay

myself out in the grass to dry while she smiled and watched me, no longer talking. Then she would go back to work and I'd stay in the grass until my skin got that itchy feeling and I'd go get in the lake again.

I'd ride back home on the bike path, past the Stonehenge rocks and onto Harrison Avenue for a few blocks before the path starts up again near the train tracks and runs alongside them, separated by a fence with vines and ivies growing all over it. I never wanted to get my shirt wet so I packed it into the backpack with our trash and let the ride home dry me off. The leaves from the plants and bushes that grew over the fence and through its wire links would slap my arms and shoulders until the path approaches the bridge and the rail yard. Before the bridge there's an oven manufacturing warehouse backed right up next to the path. The windows were always open, steam and yells and sounds of machinery radiating out as I passed by on the bike, briefly catching a glance in at the men working there. From the rail yard it was just a short ways further to the waterfront, and then a mile or so up Battery to the apartment that I lived in.

At the beginning of that summer I had considered answering a post on craigslist about a manufacturing job that entailed assembling ovens for eight hours a day. I considered it for a few days, the ovens and the manual labor in a crowded factory room, and all that heat got to me so I ended up taking a dishwashing job instead. It wasn't until later that I realized that if I had taken the oven assembly job I would have been working at the place next to the bike path that I passed every time I went to meet her for lunch in the park.

The kitchen might've been hotter than that oven warehouse in the end. My shift started at four p.m. and ended whenever the last of the diners finished their drinks and decided to climb College Street in search of some other place to go, so I never get home until late. The dish pit was on the second floor while the actual kitchen where the food was made was on the first, so I was constantly running up and down a flight of stairs carrying bus tubs loaded with fish-shaped plates – dirty on the way up and clean on the way down. I was good at washing dishes though. “A fast worker,” the manager always told me, “hardworking, diligent, a really good guy.” And I was, too. The way I saw it, the sooner those dishes were clean the sooner I was on my way home. One night he even had me weigh in on a menu change. Came up to the dish pit and asked me if I liked curry chicken salad. I told him, “Yeah, sure, actually I really like it.” After he and the chef went to work creating the dish, which would eventually run about fifteen dollars over a reasonable price for that kind of thing, he had me try it and then asked what I thought was missing. I told him that I thought it could use a little more of a kick and maybe some celery, but in my head I kept wondering why a restaurant manager would go to the guy cleaning the pots and pans for opinions on how the food should taste.

Even after the last few people left their tables and the bar was closed down I still had to take care of all the mess in the kitchen and those were always the bad – pans with marinades burnt into the metal, greasy tongs that'd been dipped into the friars over and over. The worst was the soup pot that had been sitting over a warm burner for hours cooking clam chowder, welding it into its own bottom. That one took some good scraping. Once I finished washing and had swept the dish pit and

made sure there weren't any wandering avocado pits under the prep station I replaced all of the dishes and gave the kitchen a quick wipe-down. Then I locked up and was free to go home. I'd give her a call on the way to see if she was still awake but she usually wasn't – she had to be up early for her own job. I would usually just go home and end my night with a shower, scrubbing sour cream out of my hair and clam chowder from underneath my fingernails.

That's how most days went that summer. She'd work and I'd work and we'd have lunch together in between. She worked Monday through Friday and I worked the weekends and then some. Somehow that was enough, enough for both of us, at least it seemed like it was. We both had our days off from work, but they barely ever lined up. When she had one she'd come over to my place the night before and wait for me to come home in my sweat-soaked shirt with bits of food all over me. She'd ask me how work went. "Shitty," I would say. Then we'd go take a shower together and get into bed without bothering to put clothes on. It was nice when she had a day off. When I had a day off I'd come here at the end of her day and we'd walk along the path past the pavilion and duck into the trees to find a spot on the rocks where we could sit together and go for a swim. We lived for those little in-between times where the schedules of our lives overtook each other like the waves coming in against the sand sometimes do.

Sometimes though, not often but sometimes, things lined up and we found ourselves with the same off days. You'd think we would leave town, maybe head out on I-89 and get into the mountains and go hiking or find a swimming hole. Not us though. No, we'd come here, just like usual. Maybe it was our lack of creativity in

living that made things go the way they did, our sole reliance on the comfortable and familiar that made things too predictable. Who knows, maybe we just got bored.

For whatever reason, it was one of those odd days when it happened. It was a hot day and we drove instead of riding our bikes and parked on Flynn and walked down the sidewalk to the main beach, crossing that small stream that was filled with cans and wrappers on our way through. It was crowded, mostly families with young kids but there were a few older couples there as well. We made our own little spot on the sand a ways down in front of the big concrete blocks that make a barrier between the lake and the grass area. We spread some towels out and lay down to our books - she was reading a book about business and success a co-worker had given her, one of those self-motivate books with a title like *The Power of Habit*. I was probably on something by Palahniuk or Thompson.

A couple of hours must've gone by without any talking. I put my book down and looked over and saw that she was asleep so I put a hand on the small of her back to wake her up and ask if she wanted to take a dip. She said, "Sure," and we got up and started to wade into the water. I was ahead and had gone out a ways to get where it was chest-deep. The lake bottom stays shallow for a long time here and when I stopped to turn around I saw that she had stopped back when the water was only up to her knees. I yelled for her to come in further but she shook her head and said it was too cold and then turned around and headed back for the beach. She got out but I stayed in for a long time. I swam out underwater as far as I could on one breath of air and when I came up panting I couldn't touch the bottom anymore. I



floated on my back for a while looking up at big clouds going by and let the water slosh up over my face and then decided to head back.

When I made it back to where the towels were spread out on the sand she was back into the business book. “Hey,” I said. She lowered the book and I could see that she was crying. She was sad, angry. She said I had spoiled the day by staying out so long in the water on my own. What was the point of spending the day together if you want to be by yourself? That’s what she said. What’s the point of spending the day together if you just want to sleep and read that stupid book? What’s the point of spending the day together if we come to the same place and do the same thing *every single day*. That’s what I said. It wasn’t the right thing to say.

After that a simple argument turned into a fight with the yelling and the sobbing and the anger and the sadness, the whole package. I sat there with my back against the concrete block staring out into nothing beyond the white clapboards of the old lighthouse and just let her go. It was like when we’d come for lunch and she’d go on about her job. She called me an asshole, said I should go back to school, said I was a dead-end waste. She said she didn’t really care about me. She said I didn’t care about her. Then she stopped, and we sat in silence for a while.

“It just hasn’t been working, has it.”

“No, I guess not,” I said.

“We barely ever see each other.”

“I know.”

“I need to focus on myself for a while.”

“Yeah.”

“You should look for a real job.”

“Yeah.”

She used that one moment to represent the entirety of the past few months.

Things were quiet for a bit again and then I suggested maybe we just leave. We walked back to the car with bare feet over the bits of broken windows on the sidewalk and then I took her home.

I still come back here and sit and watch the people go by and I see things I didn't before. There's an old Asian man in between the trees with a spinning rod trying to catch a fish for two young kids. A shirtless guy walks by drinking something out of a paper bag. Some joggers go by on the bike path. On that day when we fought we decided to take a break for a few weeks and then those few weeks became forever, but I kept up the routine of coming here as if nothing had ever happened, ham sandwiches and everything.



## Waste

People always say you can tell a lot about a person from looking at their trash. Now, I've been a trash collector, or a garbage man, or whatever you want to call me, for going on of eleven years now and I'm still not quite sure what I'm supposed to be learning about the people whose cans I end up tossing into the back of the truck. I bet you can learn a lot more about a person by looking at what they don't throw away, or even by looking at their recycling – all that junk that they don't want or need anymore but feel should go somewhere other than the landfill.

The one thing that I do know is that you can usually tell, or at least make a pretty good guess at, who is living in the building the cans sit outside of every pick-up day. Based on the contents of the garbage I mean. We pretty much know where

certain people tend to live anyways, which buildings go to college students, the ones that belong to families, townies, refugees and so on. The tenants shift so often though and every once in a while you get a can that doesn't quite fit the trend of that particular building and you start to wonder. I do at least.

I don't want to sound like I'm looking at the stuff in every garbage can I pick up, but when you're lifting the same couple hundred loads from the same people on a weekly basis you notice things without meaning to notice them. I'm talking about even small changes. When a bin that every week is usually overflowing with pizza boxes and untied bags that've been ripped and torn open by squirrels all of a sudden only has one or two of those Glad scented trash bags you know something's changed on the inside of the building. You know the bags I'm talking about - I've got no idea what "Hawaiian Aloha" is supposed to smell like but it makes no difference - those nice perfume smells that those companies soak into the plastic bags always get mixed in with the smell of rotting vegetables and steak bones and you get the garbage stink anyway.

That's what brings me to what I'm actually trying to get at. Not the scented bags - the changes. See, a few weeks ago during my route we get to 89 Buell and I go to grab their three cans. Jeb and I take turns pulling cans - we alternate every building just to keep from zoning out - and it just happened that I was the one who got this building. Two of the garbage bins were standard - stuffed with bags til the green plastic lids start bulging up over the stink heap underneath - but then the other one had what looked like a sleeping bag sticking out from it. A lot of these college kids, you know, mom and dad are footing the bill, and sometimes they throw

away things that are totally usable or simply need a little patch job, so I flipped open the lid and take a look.

All that's in the can besides the sleeping bag – which is in pretty good shape by the way – is a zip-up blue Nike duffel bag, a small drawstring backpack, and an pair of sandals. It was almost as if someone had stashed the stuff there. I looked up from the cans to see if anybody was watching. From where I'm standing my head is just about level with the railing of the building's front porch, close enough so that I can see that the gray paint is flaking off but I'm pretty sure nobody in the house can see me, which was good because I'd been handling these cans long enough for someone to wonder what I was doing. The duffel bag's zipper was undone and it's filled with clothing, some of it spilling out from the inside. There were two or three pairs of socks that were on top of the clothing and the other bags so my guess is that they were probably thrown in last, and they looked like they were clean. Clean socks, and they didn't look that old. The sleeping bag wasn't in bad shape either and I started to wonder if this stuff was really meant to be in a trashcan.

I looked up from where I was once more – nobody coming out that heavy red door – then looked back down. Part of me wanted to open up the backpack to make sure, but I knew. I thought maybe some girl got mad at her boyfriend and in a fury decided to throw out all his stuff. Maybe somebody actually did stash it there, for whatever stupid reason. Things like this happen. I made my decision and closed the lid and walked back to the truck without it. Maybe whoever it was would come and grab their things, and if not, we'd pick up the can in a week and take it to the landfill.

Before Jeb could say anything when I hopped back in the truck I told him the can was empty, and off to the next house we went. That red door went out of view quickly enough and he never thought to ask me what took so long. I was sure someone would come and take all that stuff back. That's what I hoped at least. Truthfully I'm not really sure why it bothered me so much but for some reason I was rattled. It was some sort of gut feeling. Maybe it was the Casella "Core Values" finally kicking in after eleven years; "integrity, service, teamwork, responsibility, trust" – all that stuff we're supposed to be upholding when we're out picking up after the city. Who knows, maybe I've just been doing this job for too long.

The next few days went by just as they always do. Picking cans from punch in to punch out. Monday I had the day off and that night my wife and I made it to Spare Time over on Hercules Drive in Colchester for their nine dollar all-you-can-bowl special. We played four games and when I wasn't knocking 'em down I was at the bar knocking 'em back. Twelve-ounce plastic cups are usually meant for water but at bowling alleys they're meant for cheap beer. I hit a lot of spares that night - spares are what I go for when I play and I always catch flack for it. A strike scores better, sure, but there's more skill in throwing a spare, more style. You gotta plan your second shot differently every time depending on which pins are left standing after the first. I could use a garbage metaphor and say it's like picking up the trash that's left behind, but that'd be too much. Picking up trash is easier than hitting a spare anyhow.

The reason I say all this about bowling and the cheap beer is because everything was totally normal. I hadn't thought of that trashcan with the sleeping

bag and clean socks since that day I found it, so when I stopped the truck in front of that house with the pale yellow vinyl siding and the big red door it was enough of a reminder to kick me out of the hangover I had won at the bowling alley the night before. It was Jeb's turn and he made a move to get out of the cab but I jumped out before him and told him I had this one. As I walked around front of the truck, engine grating in idle, I could hear him say something about how I did the last house but I didn't turn around to explain myself, just gave him a wave.

I opened up the first can and there were just plastic garbage bags in it but instead of bringing it down to the truck I moved right on to the next. Jeb probably thinks I'm losing it at this point, and then when I pull a trash bag *out* of the can and throw it on the cracked asphalt next to me he's probably pretty certain I'm still loaded from the night before. The stuff was still there, see, and somebody had thrown that bag in on top of it all and that's why I pulled it out. There was gunk that had spilled out onto the sleeping bag that looked like kimchi but smelled worse so I pulled it out and started to wipe it off and I think that was probably when Jeb decided to get out of the truck and come see what the heck was going on. He started to say something and was getting ready to ream me out when that red door sunk into the building and one of the tenants walked out onto the porch right in front of us.

The guy came out and looked down on us from the porch and said, "Morning fellas," or something along those lines. Average looking guy, most likely a student I judged from how old he looked and the backpack he was carrying. Jeb was shaking his head because I still had the sleeping bag in my hand and the only thing I can

think to say is, "This yours?" The guy glanced at it and then his eyes go big like he recognizes it and he goes, "Yeah, wait'll you guys hear *this*." Then he starts telling us this story, him up on the porch on one side of that flaking railing and us down on the other side with the garbage cans.

He tells us how the other day he came home from work and went to throw a Frisbee with a buddy in the small yard they have out back and noticed the duffle bag on one of the patios they had back there. Apparently one of the people who had the lease the year before had left a queen size box spring out there along with a bass drum and a coffee table and some other random stuff – stuff that we charge extra to pick up. He saw the bag and had the same notion that I had when I found it in the trashcan – the notion that it looked as though it didn't belong there. When he went over to see what the deal was he found that a homeless person had set up camp on the back porch.

People don't always talk to their garbage men but a lot of the time when they do they get all buddy buddy. It's as if because we're blue collar we always want to shoot the shit, and that's the way this guy was telling the story – as if we were friends or something. He told us how the box spring was leaning up against the house in order to create a makeshift lean-to and that the sleeping bag was laid out underneath it with the duffle bag as a pillow. Whoever it was would've been protected from the rain and the wind and probably would've been pretty warm and comfortable under there. The guy told us that he even had some old rope going between two of the pillars that supported the roof above and was using it as a clothesline in order to dry his socks and some other bits of clothing. The rest of his



stuff was neatly organized underneath, clothing folded and everything. This guy wasn't having any of it and it really pissed him off to think that someone was spending the night on his back patio. He had no shame when he told us that he collected everything up and brought it right to the trashcan where I found it afterwards.

I couldn't believe it. I thought about punching him in the teeth. After he was done telling all this to us he kept standing there looking for some sort of nod of approval or some recognition about how crazy it was for someone to do something like that. To sleep under a box spring on a random patio, now that is something I could never imagine. Jeb was embarrassed, I could tell, but gave him a "Damn" and then grabbed one of the bins and took it to the truck. That must have been enough to satisfy the guy because he put his headphones on and walked off the porch to the sidewalk and up the street.

Once he was gone I walked back along the left side of the house to see what was left of the squatter's camp. Sure enough, there was the box spring back there. It was old, worn, and stained and had one of those ugly floral patterns on the side of it and I couldn't help but think how I wouldn't want to sleep *on* that thing let alone underneath it. The patio itself was simple concrete. The other junk was still there, too: the coffee table, the bass drum. In the corner there was a piece of cardboard on the ground that read, "STAY THE FUCK OUT OF HERE" in thick black permanent marker. I picked it up and turned it over and on the other said it read, again in black permanent marker, "Will write rhymes for food or money."

I went back and pulled it all out of the trashcan. The sleeping bag, the duffel, the drawstring backpack, and the clean socks. I pulled it all out and brushed it off as best as I could and brought it around back to the patio and left it there beneath the floral box spring. That guy might've been able to throw it all away but I wasn't about to bring it to the landfill. Jeb didn't ask what I was doing so he must've understood how I felt about the whole thing. If the owner hadn't come back in the last week to claim the stuff he or she probably wasn't coming back at all but it made no difference to me. The cardboard sign with the permanent marker was the only thing from that address that made it into the back of the truck that day. A few weeks later the routes got reshuffled and Jeb and I had a whole new set of cans to pick up every day.



## Redemption Center

Twelve-ounce cans in the first right-hand box. Sixteen-ounce cans in the second. Bottles in the large box on the left. Fifths and handles get boxed and piled. Once the muscle memory kicks in you develop a rhythm that only breaks when one of the boxes fills up and needs to be replaced. One, two twelve-ouncers, three, four, five sixteeners – and on up to ninety six with some glass bottles thrown in there and that’s four dollars and eighty cents. Write that down and wait for the grey tub to be refilled with the next bag. No deposits on any hard cider. Add up the tally. “That it?” Print the slip. It’s that easy. Then there was that one day when it was impossible.

I’ve been counting empty cans and bottles long enough to know not to count the days. Monday through Friday, eight to five. It might not be much of a life by

many people's account but it is what it is and that's what I've got to work with. Jim and me sort the empty cans and put them where they belong and that's where we belong. Sure, it's a "service to the community" that we provide here but that's not why we spend the days sorting cans and bottles and throwing them in boxes around a garage – I won't pretend that there's some selfless sense of chivalry attached to the job. The reality is that it's a job and it pays and it's what we got. Jim probably doesn't even know what chivalry means. If we don't do it, someone else will have to do it, so by and by it might as well be us.

Jim's got nothing to say about it either and he's even older than me. He keeps to himself mostly and even more so now after what happened. He's a small guy with a scraggly beard and hands that look about thirty years older than his face because they've been used too much throughout his life. He doesn't talk much and I don't know too much about him but I do know he used to do some construction work when he was younger and then did some logging in the central part of the state until an accident left him with a bad leg. He started here not too long after I did. He gets around the shop well enough though and moving the boxes and bags doesn't seem to bother him. Then again, if it did, I doubt I'd hear about it.

He's a good guy though and he's got his moments. Just today a woman came in trying to carry two blue recycle bins that were filled with bottles of Pellegrino and microbrew empties. I was busy sorting through the aftermath of a house party and she was left standing there trying to balance everything while she waited but Jim noticed right away and rolled a shopping cart over to her.

"Oh, should I put them in there?"

Nod. Not the most tactful communicator but he gets the message across.

She set down the bins and Jim took the cart back into the shop and started sorting while she retreated a little ways back toward the door and waited. People like this always seem to feel out of place on the inside among our collection of rubble. In the summer we keep the main door open and people can wait outside but otherwise they're in here with us. The woman looked down at the two white plastic chairs that we keep in the corner for people when there is a long line and I think she almost sat down, but then must've thought better of it. She was just a visitor. After she got her slip for a couple bucks she'd be gone from the can and bottle heaps until the next time the bins were full. These are some of the little moments I notice, all without losing the count.

We get a lot of different types coming through our door. Everybody drinks something that comes in a container worth five cents. Everybody. That's one of the things about working here. It's an intersection. You get her and then you get the college kids who she was waiting behind and you get some people who barely speak English, but they all want to recycle their cans and get their deposit back. And then you get the collectors. The boy was one of them, born into it by circumstance or bad luck or whatever you want to call it. These are people who harvest nickels out of the trash and recycling bins in order to amass a couple extra bucks, one can at a time.

Most of these folks bring however much they can fit on the back of a bicycle or in a shopping cart and sometimes they'll make a couple trips in one day. Some are young, some are old, and some are older. It's rare to get a family, especially one with a young kid. They'll come in with a load, get some money, enough to buy a twenty-

four-ouncer or some scratch-off tickets, and then go out collecting for the next purchase. Not all of them use it on beer, but some do. When empty cans and bottles and the smell of stale beer surround you all the time it can be hard to drink, but you get past it. I personally had to quit drinking only four days into the job. Then later I had to start again – like I said, you get past it.

Not all of the collector types spend their money on beer as soon as they get it though. I think some of them save it hoping it'll get them somewhere else. Like the boy's father. He's lucky enough to own a red '96 Tacoma and he takes his wife and his son out collecting cans and bottles every week. They showed up here about a year or two ago with a full load in the bed of that truck and it was late in the afternoon and we were busy trying to clear up some space in the shop. The man left the woman and the boy in the truck and came knocking on the side of the open garage door.

“No more big loads,” I told him.

“Are you sure you can't do one more? We won't be able to make it back tomorrow and we've got everything all set right now. It'd be a huge help.”

The boy and the woman were both looking into the shop at me through the windshield of the Tacoma and the man looked anxious. Not desperate or panicked, just a bit worried, but also hopeful. There was something about him and just the fact that he was doing it with his family that got me to say yes. Jim and I were ahead of schedule so I figured what the hell.

“Alright then, load up the bin.”

The boy and the woman got out of the truck and then all three of them started bringing bags over and emptying them into the gray sorting bin. Jim came over with his shopping cart and helped the boy put a bag he had up into the cart.

The father said, "What do you say now?" The boy went red and looked up at Jim.

"Thank you!"

"Thatta boy. Go help your ma with another bag." The boy ran back outside to the truck and Jim watched him go. There was a connection between those two; I'm not sure why but I know that it was there. "Tryin' to teach the boy to use his manners, no matter what," the father said to me.

After that they came with a big load pretty much once a week. After the cans were unloaded from the truck the father and mother sat in the chairs and waited and the boy looked around the walls of the shop. He must've been about eight, and the paraphernalia we put up on the walls amused him I think. There's the big buck whose head we mounted up and the boar and buffalo, too. A Miller flag, a Genesee sign, a Molson poster with a skier. NASCAR posters, newspaper stories about a man killed a few towns over. My college diploma was even up there somewhere with all that stuff. I don't think he'd ever seen so much stuff in one room before. He walked all around the shop looking at it, even came back where we sort to check things out. I remember the time when he found the picture of the lady drinking a Coke in nothing but her old-fashioned swimsuit his eyes went wide. Good kid. Whenever the sorting was done I would give the slip to the father and the boy would run over from whatever he was looking at up on the wall and say, "Thank you very much!"

At first I didn't think that they were collectors and that they'd been getting all those empty cans and bottles from other people's recycling. A lot of the guys who do that going around collecting stuff do get pretty good hauls considering, but it was nothing compared to what these three brought in. The father told me their story one of the times they came in. They'd travel around town in the truck stopping at houses. The woman would knock on apartment doors with the boy right there with her and when whoever answered the door showed up, she'd just politely ask if they could have their cans and bottles. "We don't want to take without asking permission. We want to bring the boy up right." That's what she'd say. People usually said yes – I imagine it'd be hard to say no to a kid collecting bottles with his parents – but when they said no there wasn't any fuss. They just said, "Thank you," and moved on to try the next house.

There wasn't any trick or scheme involved – they were just trying to get by and bring up their kid. It was as if they believed that simply by redeeming cans and bottles for the deposits they could make enough money to better their situation, to be more like the woman who visits every once in a while with her recycling bins and her Pellegrino bottles. Or maybe they just wanted the boy to know what life had in store for him so that he'd be accustomed to it all by the time he was old enough to realize that he wanted more. There wouldn't be any rows of boxes to throw cans into, no piles of empty liquor bottles heaped in the corner. It would all just be normal and because of that it wouldn't exist. Not the way it does for me. I look around the shop, at all the junk we've thrown on the wall, and I can't help but wonder what things might've been like. The truth is that I was jealous of that boy. I



see this place for what it is: just a big garage with two large gray and red doors that open up to two different one-way streets going in opposite directions, and me and Jim are stuck right here in the middle.

Eventually the man and the woman and the boy just stopped showing up. They'd been coming every Thursday for months and then one week they didn't show up. I thought that they might turn up on Friday and then when that didn't happen I thought they would come the following Thursday, but that didn't happen either. It was strange not seeing the red Tacoma pull in just when Jim and I were closing up. Jim didn't take it too well either. He had something with that boy, I could tell. He used to take him back to the corner of the shop where he kept his own personal collection of odds and ends. There was something between those two that I'll never understand and when they stopped showing up, Jim just went quiet. More quiet than he'd already been.

It was about two months after when that red '96 Tacoma showed up out front just as it usually had done. It was sunny and warm out so we had the garage door open and the father came up and knocked on the side of it as he had always done and asked the question he always asked.

"Still taking big loads?"

I waved him in and he brought in the bag that was already in his hand. Jim got his cart ready to take loads over to his station. The father came back with more bags and the mother was behind him but the boy wasn't. They had a full bed's worth of cans and just the two of them brought them in and then sat down in the white plastic chairs like they usually did. I sorted it all out, keeping count in my head. One,

two, three, four twelve-ouncers, five, six bottles, seven, eight, sixteeners. Write down the tally and on to the next bag. I printed out the slip – seventy-four dollars and fifteen cents, and handed it to the father.

“Your boy at school today?”

“No. No, he’s not.”

It was then that we found out why they had stopped showing up. He told me that while they were out collecting he had stopped the Tacoma like he always did while the mother and the boy went knocking on doors. They had had good luck at one house where some guys gave them a full trashcan’s worth of redeemables, no doubt getting a big “thank you” in return. While the mother went to load it into the truck the boy had run across the street to ask the next house if they had anything to give. There was a car driving up the street and had gone into the oncoming lane to get around the idling Tacoma. The driver didn’t see him until it was too late. The ambulance was called but they already knew; the boy was dead straight away. That was the reason for why they suddenly stopped showing up. The man told me all this while I was counting and then I gave him the slip and he and the woman left. A can fell onto the concrete floor behind me. Jim never said a thing; just walked back to the corner and sobbed.



## Weekend Trip

Do you want to tell about it or should I? No? Alright then, I'll start and you can break in whenever you feel like it! Our weekend in Vermont! Where to begin... Well, I guess I'll start off before we left. I did it for her really, my daughter I mean, Allison. My wife and I moved to the New York before our marriage – and before the divorce, too – and we loved it. Still do. So Allison here she grew up in the city and has spent her entire life there. Even decided to go to school there: NYU – quite an accomplishment getting in at that place these days. But the point is that she's never left! And moving from SoHo to Williamsburg doesn't count so don't even try to claim that it does. Then a week or so ago it hit me – I have all of these memories of my dad taking me up to Lake Champlain when I was a kid to go fishing and water skiing and

camping and whatnot, so I decide, “I’m going to take Allison up to Vermont for the weekend!” And two days later we –

Wait. First of all I’ve been outside of Manhattan and Brooklyn. I’ve been to the Bahamas with Mom, I took that ski trip to Park City with Catherine, and I spent an entire semester studying in Rome. You can’t get much further away from New York than Rome. And didn’t you say that your father used to take you to Lake George?

Ah what’s the difference; Lake George, Lake Champlain – they’re right next to each other! And those places you’ve been are just different versions of New York. I wanted to bring you somewhere real – like the trips my dad brought me on. Anyways, where was I? The departure. Two days later we packed up and hit the Taconic – that’s a trick my dad taught me, taking the Taconic instead of the Thruway – and headed up for Vermont.

Where’d we stay at again? Oh! The Hotel Vermont. Nice digs, let me tell you. Elegant and rustic. I think that’s their tagline, maybe not, but either way it’s quite the place. Right between the lake and Church Street, too, which was just amazing. We got in a bit after noontime and hit the town straight off. We walked up Cherry Street to Church and wow what a place that is. The locals were there doing tricks and playing instruments and people were walking all kinds of interesting looking dogs and eating Ben and Jerry’s and drinking coffee outside with the leaves falling on them. I spotted the store we needed to go to right away – the Vermont Flannel

Company. I figured that we could get ourselves some real Vermont clothing! Allison here just refused to pick anything, even with me buying. I tried to tell her it's what everyone wears up here but she just couldn't be convinced, right? Couldn't be convinced?

I really don't think everyone up here wears that stuff.

She couldn't be convinced! But I bought a nice little hat. You know those red and black checker hats with the earflaps? One of them. Then we decided to save the other shops for later and we headed down to the lake – Lake Champlain! Walked down a street called College, I think, and then once we were down there we walked on through that really nice park and on even further past a skateboard park and down a path a ways until there wasn't much going on besides a dog park. We were really getting out in the wilderness right, Allison?

I would hardly call tha-

She's just bitter because she didn't take me up on the Vermont flannel offer and it was blowing down there, really coming in off the water. We got into a small stand of trees and then on the other side was this perfect little beach. Who'd have thought – a beach in Vermont? Boy, we were out there! But my hat kept me warm - I felt like a real outdoorsman wearing that thing. Here's a little bit of wisdom: it's always best to get yourself a souvenir at the beginning of a trip, that's what I think. If

you wait until the end of the trip to buy a souvenir then all you can do with it is bring it home. Buy it at the beginning though, and you get to use it for the whole vacation and really get those vacation memories engrained in it, engrained in its very fabric in my case. You think I'm going to wear this hat at the office or out to dinner in the West Side Village? I don't think so! This is my Vermont wilderness hat and that means I wear it in Vermont and in the wilderness.

Yes, the hat. You love your hat, but why don't you keep it going.

Yes, alright. The walk had stirred up quite a thirst, hadn't it, so we made our way back up to town in search of some drinks before dinner. On our way we passed by a small park that looked quite nice – there were a bunch of people sitting in circles just hanging out and enjoying the afternoon. One of them had his own hat the size of a sweater completely filled with dreadlocks. I wanted to stop and see what they were up to but Allison wasn't having it. Said that they were vagrants and that they were probably drunk. Sure, they looked a little dirty, a little weathered maybe, but what of it? I gave them a tip of the Vermont wilderness hat hello as we passed them by.

So after that we kept on and wound up in a place on the corner where they made an excellent gin and tonic. Made a few of them actually. I asked the server – nice girl, nursing major if I recall – where we could get the *real* Vermont culinary experience and she directed us to a place a ways up that makes burgers using local meat. Imagine! First thing we did when we arrived at the place was wander over to

the beer garden, where there were too many “craft” beers to choose from so we decided to order a few and do a bit of sampling. By the time our name was called for the table, I was, admittedly, a little buzzed!

“A little” might be a bit of an understatement given what happened wouldn’t you say?

None of that now, let me finish. The meal itself was excellent and I won’t bother going into all the details, but I will say that the burger with the pork belly and the maple jalapeño barbeque sauce goes quite nicely with a good lager; I can’t recall which exactly – just ask the server to recommend one – that’s what I did. We skipped out on dessert because I wanted to make sure that Allison got some Ben and Jerry’s in her as soon as possible so we asked for the bill and I made sure to leave a decent tip and then after that was taken care of we were out and back up Church Street once again.

Ben and Jerry’s was packed, line out the door and everything, but we waited because I wanted Allison to have the real authentic Vermont experience. I know that they have shops all over the place, including New York, but there’s something special about going to the one in Vermont, something authentic about it. There was a little misunderstanding of sorts when we got to the counter, remember that? I asked the man if he could recommend a flavor to me and he tried to tell me that Ben and Jerry’s “didn’t serve that.” Who doesn’t have recommendations? I thought maybe he misunderstood, so I politely asked again but once more he seemed

confused and didn't quite know how to react. He asked me if I would like some ice cream instead. Of course I wanted ice cream! Strange man really, I'm not sure what was wrong with him. Allison ended up picking something out for me and then, cones in hand, we went back outside and found a nice bench to sit on to finish the evening.

We must've gone back to the hotel just after that because before we knew it we were waking up in the room and headed downstairs for a little Bloody Mary to get the day going! We were about to head out into the day when I realized that I had forgotten my hat back in the room, so I popped up and absolutely could not find it anywhere. After phoning in to the front desk and alerting them of the situation, I rushed downstairs and grabbed Allison and we headed for the place where we had had dinner. I couldn't remember wearing the hat afterwards and, given that I'm a man who knows his manners and surely had taken it off to eat, figured that I must've left it behind. We had to wait about an hour for the place to open and when they finally did the hostess had nothing but terrible news. It wasn't there.

The whole thing seemed rather strange to me. Now I'm only human and we can all forget a thing here and there but this hat didn't seem like something I could so easily leave lying around on a table. So I began to get a little suspicious. As we walked down the street it was just stewing in me. I knew I wouldn't have left it, absolutely couldn't have left it. I retraced my actions in my head: we had been seated in the outdoor patio section, I had taken the hat off when we sat down and set it on the side of the table to my right, which was closest to the sidewalk. Then it hit me. I was so distracted by the food and the ordering and making sure that I got



the right drink that anybody walking down the sidewalk could have plucked it right off the table and, given that it's such a fine hat, that's what I figured had happened.

Needless to say I was both bemused and a little disappointed with what had happened – up until that moment I had had such a fine opinion of this place and the act of theft tarnished that more than just a little bit. Defeated, overcome, and routed, we turned our sights toward the hotel. I was ready to cut the visit short entirely. Buying a second hat was out of the question – I had already accumulated so many memories wearing the first. It was Allison here – my daughter, my gem – who convinced me that I should at least try to cheer up and enjoy the afternoon.

We were walking down the street when we came upon a strange man in a sort of druidic head mask playing a didgeridoo and stopped for a moment to watch. I was sort of entranced by the strangeness of it all. He blew into the big tube and played a washboard at the same time in an erratic and wild rhythm that seemed at odds with the place. In front of him he was collecting money in a big, velvet-lined suitcase with furs in it. Next to the case there was another piece of weirdness – a marionette in the shape of a cat man, white with black spots, was doing some sort of dance along to the music. It even had its own collection going. The entire thing seemed sort of eerie yet entrancing.

I won't say it cheered me up, but I will admit that this strange feral man took and his music drew my mind away from my misfortune. When the didgeridoo finally faded and I snapped out of it I had to take in the whole scene another time. As I watched that weird little puppet dancing without the music, I realized what it had been collecting money in. Disbelief: that's the only word for it. The little, spotted

thief had taken my hat and was flaunting his prize in public with a pagan dance! I took a quick look around the crowd, which had begun to make off a bit, and at the Druid, who seemed busy rummaging in a bag of his. But the cat man was still dancing right in front of it. It was staring right at me, taunting me with its steps, but I had no choice. I snatched up what was rightfully mine, dumped the money that was in it into the velvet suitcase, and took off as fast as I could down the street.

And that's it then, is it?

I'd say so. Successful trip! Stayed the next day and then went home with my souvenir safely on my head.

What about the ending?

Ending? It's already ended - no need for excess!

Excess? It's not excess. It's the end of the story. I'll take care of it. After you stole a hat from a street performer's dancing puppet you ran off down the street laughing like a mad man and left me standing by myself in front of a masked man with a didgeridoo. After I apologized to him and told him that I'd get his hat back for him, I had to figure out where you had gone, which wasn't hard; all I had to do was go to the same place you'd gone to the night before, after you ditched me the first

time. That's right – not once but *twice* in the same weekend I had to go running after you. You might not know from your version of things though, so here is mine.

After we left the lake you seemed to make it your personal mission to get as drunk as you could. By the time we finished dinner you were totally lit. You held up the line at Ben and Jerry's because you were trying to order drinks instead of ice cream. After I ordered for us, you grabbed both cones and went off by yourself before I had even finished paying. I figured you'd be able to find the hotel on your own and so I headed back there and when you finally showed up more than an hour later you managed to slur your way through telling me you'd been at the park eating ice cream with the man with the dreadlocks. And that's exactly who you were with when I finally made it down there after you robbed a puppet. You were thanking him – thanking him for returning something you'd left on a bench the night before. And so that's how I found you: sitting on a bench with him, slightly confused, with two of the same hat, one in each hand.



## **Knots**

It was late afternoon on a Tuesday that I found the place in the trees and it was lucky that it had been that day and that time because I probably would've been in trouble had it been any other day or any other time. I suppose there's really no way of knowing what would've or could've happened in other circumstances but either way I'm both glad and sorry that things turned out the way that they did.

I was out there working – unofficially working – on a request from Phil Hayes. The reason I say “unofficially” is because of the arrangement that I have with Phil and Robert Barnes. Rob works for the municipality and every so often he'll get a call from someone asking for a favor. Actually, I imagine it happens a lot more than just often. Whenever Rob decides to grant a favor and that favor has to do with

taking care of downed trees, he calls Phil. Phil gives Rob a premium price and sends me out there to take care of whatever the job is. I get to keep the scrap lumber for the woodstove and any good pieces I find I can use for projects – boxes, bowls, furniture, etcetera. I get the wood, Phil gets paid, Rob looks good and maybe picks up a few votes.

Now Phil, he and I go way back. Phil used to work for me when I ran my own tree service company. We did pruning, removal, cabling, fertilizing, that sort of stuff. Residential and commercial. Phil was with us for over fifteen years and he was the best worker I ever had. It's not too difficult a job but he had a method about him and was constantly interested in the management end of things. Jack Holland Tree Service was the name I gave it - not a very original name, I know, but it did pretty well without the fancy title. Phil changed the name to Chittenden County Tree Specialists. I suppose it's got a certain ring to it, a broader scope, but less of a personable appeal if you ask me.

Most people know that when a tree falls down on their property it's their job to take care of it and they get a hold of companies like the Chittenden County Tree Specialists directly. When people don't know who is supposed to take care of stuff like that they usually just let the town know. There are all kinds of paths going through privately owned property that are used frequently by the general public, and Rob is the one who hears about it when they're in bad shape. He either handles it himself or lets the landowner know about the problem so that they can deal with it.

So Rob gets a call from a woman who runs on this trail that goes through the woods from the sidewalk on North Ave. just before the cemetery down to the bike path. She tells him that there's a bunch of trees that are down across the path, "just so that he's aware," but really so that she doesn't have to climb over logs during her morning jog.

When Phil called me about unblocking this path, he knew that I'd be interested because he'd gone down there himself and taken a look. He told me that there was one big log and a few crowns blocking the trail. Newly felled over the winter during some of the storms no doubt, wouldn't take me more than an afternoon to have the place cleared. Then he told me that there was a tree not far from the path that I could cut, a tree with one of the biggest burls he'd seen in a long time. Burls are those swollen growths on trees that look like hives, or goiters. They tend to be pretty common but big ones, ones that can be used for my bowls, aren't.

I went down to the spot as soon as I could. The little trail went off the sidewalk and right through a lawn next to a vegetable garden and into the woods. There weren't any cars in the lot there so I parked the truck there and headed down. He was right, there was one big tree down over the path and some tops that could all be taken care of easily with the STHIL chainsaw I'd brought. I can see why people would want them taken away – the trail's also a track into some pretty serious bike jumps somebody had built.

After checking out the situation I went back to my truck and grabbed the saw. I hadn't noticed it at first but on my way back down to the woods realized that the trail ran right through the lawn of one of the Burlington College student resident

halls. It didn't really look to me as though anybody lived in the building but there were two large vegetable gardens down behind near where the trail runs into the woods that looked like they had been planted last season.

The clearing job only took me a couple hours and a few people did pass by on bikes or running while I was working, nodding or giving a thumbs-up thank you. After I cleared the trail I grabbed the turkey sandwich I'd brought for myself and went on a little walk in the place where Phil said the burl was. There are quite a few paths weaving around through the trees back there and not too far from the trail I found what looked like a camp. There was a lot of garbage, a shopping cart with some bags and a beat up sleeping bag in it, and a tarp strung up between a couple of trees – I didn't think much of it. I walked in further and could see through the trees that there were more than just one of these.

Then I found the burl. It was about six feet up the trunk, and bigger than I could wrap my arms around, like Phil had said. It was a maple, and the entire thing would have to come down. I got my chainsaw and cut diagonally into the tree so that it would come down in a way that didn't block the trail all over again. It fell where it was supposed to, but it didn't totally break away from the trunk. I should've been more careful. It wasn't really an accident that caused the thing to bounce off a rock and onto my foot when it fell away from the next cut I made, it was my own carelessness, human error.

I knew it was broken as soon as it happened. After the x-ray I found out that it was ten breaks exactly, but at the moment it happened all I knew was the shock of pain that went through from all directions. I imagined stepping in a bear trap might

produce a similar sensation. I was embarrassed more than anything else and Phil wasn't happy when I called to tell him I need him to come drag me out of the woods and bring me to the hospital. It was going to create trouble for him and for Rob, too, because of the questionable legality of the whole thing. He couldn't be there for an hour or so.

I was lying on the ground there with my chainsaw when a man came down the path and walked right past me not five yards away. He had a make-do rucksack over his back, and a walking stick in one hand. He set his pack and walking stick down and went to where the shopping cart was and brought it over to the tarp and started loading the cart with bits of trash from the piles that I had seen earlier. It was as if he was tidying up the place.

After he was done with his bit of work and the cart was full he came over to where I was. He stood silently and took a look at the tree I had cut down and after thinking to himself a moment thanked me for clearing the trail before asking me why I had cut down a tree that wasn't blocking it. I pointed to the burl and told him that's what I was after. Then he wanted to know what for.

"I'll tell you if you help me get to a place where I can sit," I said to him. "Just had a little accident here, I think my foot may be broken." I told him what had happened and that my friend was coming to pick me up. I had just been lying there on the ground leaning on my elbows up until this point in time. The pain was no longer sharp but was hitting me in erratic throbbing waves. He grabbed me by the arms and helped me up onto the tree I had just felled and even this small motion was almost enough to make me pass out, which was something I didn't want to do



while alone in the woods with a stranger. “My name’s Jack,” I said, “and if you grab me that bottle of water that’s over with my things I’d be very grateful.”

He walked back to the path where I had left the rest of my stuff and returned with the water. After I finished the last few sips the man gave me a full bottle from his pack. He was sitting across from me now on the other piece of the tree I butchered. He was younger than me by a good ten years and had long gray hair and a five o’clock shadow that covered most of his taut, leathery face. He told me his name was Sammy, then he repeated his question about the tree.

A burl, I told him, is basically just a giant knot. They grow on trees as a result of some stress or injury caused to the plant that results in the deformation. The wood grain inside of a burl doesn’t run in straight, parallel formations like it does in normal wood; it’s twisted and interlocked. This makes the wood harder to work – it’s unpredictable but it’s stronger, good for making bowls on a lathe with if you know how to do it.

“You’re a craftsman?” he asked.

“Sort of,” I told him.

“Sort of? he said.

I took another assessment of this man who was my company while I waited for Phil. He was wearing jeans and a sweatshirt and a decent pair of shoes and didn’t give off the notion of being homeless. Talking seemed to take my mind off the throbbing so I figured to make the best of my situation.

“At one point in my life I wanted to be. I took classes in grade school and got pretty good, even thought about going to school for it or finding an apprenticeship.

My father wanted me to learn business though, so that's what I did. Didn't do me a lot of good; I didn't care about the work and ended up dropping out after a year to work landscaping. I would say I'm more of a hobbyist."

He asked me how much one of those burl bowls could sell for. Hundreds of dollars, sometimes more. "A lot," I said.

He seemed to consider that a moment, looking at the trees around us, probably in search of more burls. "Sometimes we expect things to go one way and they go just the other," he said.

I said that if he didn't mind, I'd like to know how he ended up living in the woods without a home. His mouth cracked through the leather face as he smiled.

"I don't live here, not anymore," he said.

He didn't mind talking about his situation at all. He was from another city in another place and had come to the area only after he'd lost everything. Before that he went to school and even had a job at the family store. He wanted more though, and cut ties with them so that he could forge his own path. He had gone out and tried to make a life for himself on his own separate from the one that he'd had before, but things didn't turn out the way he expected them to. Loneliness, he said, was what made him lose it all.

"And remembering is what brought me back," he said. And that's why he was in the woods on that particular afternoon. He told me he came back to this place where he was forced to live so that he wouldn't forget about it, so that he'd appreciate where he was currently.

After listening to this history I looked over at the tarp and the piles of bottles and containers and bits of rope and pieces of plywood that made up the camp. It was like we were two opposing halves of the same possibility of a life that hadn't quite worked out for either of us but both of us trudged on through it regardless. I couldn't help but think about my old man and how little we spoke after I decided to leave school. Starting a successful company was something that I was able to rub in his face after that, at least until the housing market went under and I defaulted on my mortgages. Luckily when I was forced to sell the company it went to someone who I knew and trusted.

I asked Sammy how come he didn't find a place at one of the shelters in town, why he lived in the woods when he had been on his own. He told me he didn't mind the woods, liked them actually. "Besides," he said, "I don't feel so bad out here. The only time I felt like I was 'homeless' was when I went through one of their doors and signed their waivers and their release forms that told me that that's what I was."

We kept talking for a while longer, about wood and other things. I found out that he lived in public housing and worked as a clerk at Price Chopper. It wasn't the sort of life he wanted, but he had already made his decisions and now was trying to deal with their results. He had his regrets, but didn't seem to be brought down by them. He also had a lot of questions about what I might make with the burl and how I would do it. I invited him to come check out my workshop.

Phil showed up and the two of them helped me to the truck. Sammy insisted that we finish harvesting the burl so Phil made the next cut and Sammy helped him carry it up while I waited in the passenger seat.

On the drive to the hospital I thought about what was going to happen to that guy. Phil wasn't afraid to say it. The insurance company would have to get involved and Rob would have to legitimize the labor and pull a contract with Phil. A full crew would go down and clear out the woods and that would be the end of Sammy's old camp. They'd probably even get rid of the bike jumps if they were deemed a safety risk. More kids would probably come back in and build more, but Sammy would lose that little piece of the past.

Before Phil showed up I asked Sammy if he'd fully forgiven himself for leaving his studies and his family when he was younger, and he asked me if the pain in my foot had gotten any better. I hadn't even thought about it for most of our conversation but it all came back.

"Not really, now that you mention it," I told him.

"It will eventually. If it's a bad break it might give you some trouble here and there but it'll never hurt worse than it does now," he said. "Hopefully you'll make a fine piece with that wood though and it'll all have been worth it.

True, I thought. Despite the broken foot, there was still the burl and whatever came out of it.

"Do you ever think about trying to start over again?" I asked.

"Do you?"



## Smut

We had to pull over twice on our way into town because Willy got carsick. Full bites of Eggo waffles were visible the first time around but the second time there was nothing left but fluids. You'd think that at ten years old he'd know better. The only other person I've seen wolf down an entire plate of food like that is our black lab, Benny.

By the time we'd got into town we were half an hour late, and Willy was both embarrassed about throwing up and mad that his older brother had picked on him about it the rest of the trip. Matt's older by three years and he's always harassing Willy but that's just boys. We parked the car in the lot by the side of the building and I shuffled the kids around to the front of the building where Dad was waiting.

He was smiling as he always is when we come to visit and said something like, "Normally I'd be ticked at having to wait so long but it's so nice out today," something with just a hint of passive aggressiveness. He was happy to have us though.

"Nice to see you, too, Dad," I told him and we hugged and kissed and the boys said their hellos and then we walked inside and got in the elevator to go up to his apartment. The rooms aren't much but they're nice enough and Dad's always been able to get along well enough with what little he's got. He always said he'd rather die alone in his own home than be put in a residence and he's still in pretty good shape but there are some things starting to go. He can be forgetful about things. After the fire happened last year he no longer had a home to die alone in though so we tried to convince him to go to The Lodge down in Shelburne but he wouldn't have it. Decker Towers was the compromise.

The four of us sat down in the living room area with a plate of cheese and crackers and cookies that he'd made up. Willy still wasn't feeling too great so Dad gave him a Coke to cheer him up a bit, which seemed to work. I started to ask him how he was doing, if everything was ok, if he was healthy, you know – the sort of stuff that I already knew all the answers to but asked anyways so that he knew I was thinking of him. Willy picked up a magazine that was on the table and started flipping through it.

Dad had been to a show at the Flynn the other night and I asked him how it was. He told me it was an amazing performance – "unlike anything I've ever seen, you should have come," he said. It was a play called "Venus in Fur."

“You know I couldn’t make it – Bill’s away on business and I had to watch the kids,” I told him, as I had when he first invited me. “What was it about?”

“I’ve got no idea,” he said, “Couldn’t hear a damn thing!” Matt snorted and almost choked on an Oreo and I gave him the look. Dad’s hearing has been going for about a year now. He seemed not to notice being laughed at, or just didn’t care. He was looking over at Willy.

“Hey you! You like to read?” he asked. Willy didn’t notice so I told him to answer his grandfather and he managed to give us a little “mhm” without taking his face out of the magazine.

Dad asked me how things were going with Bill. When we were first married Bill and Dad spent a lot of time together. They’d talk about baseball and fishing and the stock market and all sorts of things. I think that Bill really wanted to get in good with him, let him know his daughter was in good hands. After Bill’s company was bought up he started having to travel more and more and missed a lot of the family time. Bill helped us move Dad into the new apartment but he rarely came with us on our weekly visits. He went in his own time every once in a while and they talked on the phone at least once a week.

I was about to answer – tell him, “things are fine,” – but Matt had gotten up and looked at what Willy was reading and grabbed it out of his hands and started yelling: “Willy’s got a woody! Willy’s got a woody!”

He threw the magazine at me and continued to run around the room yelling and Willy had gotten up and started to chase him and Dad had a big grin on his face

the whole time and didn't try to stop any of it, and now I looked down to see the latest issue of *Penthouse* sitting open in my lap.

I didn't even bother yelling or trying to wrangle the two of them and it didn't matter because within a matter of minutes Willy was out the door and off down the hallway somewhere.

"Matthew, go find your brother and apologize." The little brat had a huge smirk on his face but he listened, at least, and then he was gone, too. Once the door slammed behind him Dad started to laugh out loud. It was just like when I was a kid and Mom would yell at me for something while dad just chuckled behind her at whatever my crime had been. After she passed away when I was thirteen I filled the parenting gap more than he did.

"You can't keep pornography on your coffee table!" I had missed my chance to yell at the boys but I could still yell at the seventy-nine year old child who was still in the room. "Why do you even *buy* these?" I took the magazine and threw it at him.

"Relax," he says to me, "take it easy," he says. That was his response to everything. He had tears coming down his face from laughing so hard. There were never any arguments. He brushes everything off, never taking himself too seriously. He put the magazine back down on the coffee table and grabbed a couple Oreos.

"How's things with Bill?" he asked me again.

Some transition. I told him things were going fine, that we were both very happy. Then he told me to cut the bullshit. I looked at him and considered things for a moment. His apartment was sparse and I tried to imagine living in a place where



everyone's got the same furniture. I repeated what I had already said even though we both knew it was untrue.

"Things are going great."

A moment passed and I looked out the window of the room, which was on one of the highest floors, at the tops of the other buildings in town. All the brick and roof always had a draw for me - we live out in the sticks near Bristol so I don't see a lot of that anymore.

Then he spoke again, more to himself than to me: "What was the name of that woman again..."

"Dad, don't." I said.

"You know," he goes, "your friend - the one who Bill was having the affair with."

"Fuck you," I said. Then I grabbed my purse and left.

Outside, I walked onto the lawn in the little gardens behind the bus stop and lit a cigarette. One of the staff was outside just finishing up a cigarette and he let me borrow his lighter. No smoking in any part of the building, not even in the apartments - not since a few years ago when one of the older, less capable, tenants had left a lit cigarette lying around and the sprinklers went off and caused somewhere around \$100,000 worth of damage.

I don't know how long Bill had been having the affair. I was numb to it for a while. There were hints at what was happening - last minute changes in plans, extended business trips, unexplained phone calls. I didn't want to admit it was happening until some sort of undeniable proof turned up. I didn't want to put the

kids through that. The proof I was looking for came to me when I decided to pay Molly an impromptu visit when Bill was supposed to be out of town and found the two of them in the shower together.

At times I think Dad wanted things to be fixed more than I did. He truly liked Bill and I think he felt as though he had been hurt as much as I had been. Part of it also had to do with me of course. He never remarried after Mom; there were relationships but it was never the same for him. To him, what Bill had been doing was a dumb reason to break up a family. Rubbing it in my face was his way of trying to get me to deal with it.

I stayed at my sister's for a day to give him time to pack and then Bill was out of the house – “on a long business trip.” During that time we spoke, infrequently yes, but we spoke. He called as often as he normally would to speak to the kids but our conversations were short. He apologized a lot. “It was just sex,” he told me, “emotions had nothing to do with it.” I was numb to feeling anything more than pity at how pathetic he sounded. Just sex. Eventually I agreed to meet him and we talked for a few hours. Our marriage wasn't perfect, and we had our issues. I knew he wasn't solely at fault for what happened. After a couple of these meetings I let him come home and things have carried on normally for the most part since then. I haven't forgiven him and I don't know if I ever will be able to. I know he'll never do it again and that's enough for me.

After I finished my cigarette I turned away from the street to go back inside. I remember looking at the building with its sky blue façade and wondering how it was possible that this was the tallest building in the state. And a retirement community,

too. I dropped the cigarette in the garbage and walked through the entrance. The staff member who let me borrow the lighter was in the lobby and I returned it to him.

As I began to walk toward the elevator he stopped me for a second and asked me if my father was Mr. Barrow.

“Yes, he is,” I said.

He told me that earlier when he was waiting for us to arrive he offered to bring him a chair from inside so that he could sit and enjoy the sun while he waited.

“You know how he responded?” he said.

I asked how.

“Told me to shove the chair up my ass, he could stand and wait just fine.”

I just shook my head and tried to apologize to him and that I hoped he wasn’t so rude to the staff all the time.

“Not at all,” he said. He thought it was hilarious, that it was great that my father still had a sense of humor. He told me that my dad was one of the most pleasurable tenants they had.

I rode the elevator up to Dad’s apartment but when I walked in the room nobody was there. I checked the library and then the dining hall but there was no trace of Dad, Willy, or Matthew in either of those places. I went and looked in the room on the top floor where you can look at the view of Lake Champlain. Not there either. I stayed for a moment though, just looking at the lake and the mountains on the other side.

“There are worse things in life,” I thought.

I went back to the room and found all three of them there. Apparently I was walking in on the tail end of some elderly wisdom – I caught something like, “And every Tuesday they put us all on a bus to Price Chopper where your Uncle Stew from next door and I go to meet beautiful women.” I didn’t ask.

The bulk of the day’s action was done after that. We went back down to the dining area and ate lunch and then watched a movie on television and then we left in the late afternoon. Dad walked us down to the parking lot and said goodbye to the kids. I could tell he was about to apologize to me but I stopped him.

“Don’t worry about it. It was nice to see you,” I said.

He just nodded, understanding what I meant, then waved as we pulled out of the lot and headed back to Bristol. Twenty or so minutes into the drive I looked into the rear view mirror. Matt was fast asleep but Willy was up looking very intently at something he had in his hands: a page torn out of a magazine.



## **The Bottom**

My head had been pounding from the night before but it was cold so I took a long pull off the flask before letting myself fall backward off the side of the boat and into the dark water. Mark tossed me the dive flag and waved before starting up the motor and heading off to drop the anchor back around the point towards North Beach. The water around me was green and cold and I wished I had taken a second pull of that flask as I began to deflate my BCD and sink into the lake.

It didn't take long to reach the bottom. It's around twenty to thirty feet just near Lone Rock, which isn't a bad depth to go hunting for lost things. You'd be amazed at how often people drop things into the lake and never find them again. People always come out here from the beach on kayaks and paddle boards and lose

their stuff; Mark and I had been combing the bottom a few times a summer and then more each fall to find that stuff. Most of the time it's just things like sunglasses and sandals but once in a while you find a wallet with a couple soggy bills still in it. We even found a gold watch on one trip.

This particular trip started off uneventful. After descending, I inflated my BCD enough to keep just above the bottom as I scanned the murk through my mask lens. There was an odd shape covered with silt but when I sifted it out it turned out just to be an empty bottle of Natural Ice and I was reminded of the pounding in my head again. Nearby a rock bass was hovering above a rock, examining me with its big red eye, opening and closing its mouth over and over. Reminded me of Terry.

“You look like you could use a drink, too,” I thought.

There wasn't much around the Lone Rock so I began to make my way back toward the beach, combing through the muck as I went along. I found a Titleist golf ball and a few rusted cans but not much else. Terry always thought these little expeditions were a waste of time and money; said I was just “a drunk who dreamt of finding a chest of gold in the lake.” She was only half wrong – I never thought we'd find Spanish doubloons or anything like that.

I did hope to find more than trash though.

I hadn't found anything else and at this point I was getting close to where Mark anchored the boat but I still had a good 1300 psi left in my tank so I decided to do a simple zigzag search pattern away from the shore to where things started to get deeper. Underwater the colors of everything are dulled. Rocks and dead wood are all greenish-brown under a coating of muck and algae. The ground had been

continuously sloping out beneath me and pretty soon the water shimmered and waved like a blurred photo and I knew that I had reached the thermocline.

I stuck my hand into the layer of hazy water just to feel the immediate temperature drop on my bare skin. My depth gauge read 34 feet. I only had a 3 mm wetsuit on so I decided to hover just above that icy layer and continue on until I got low on air or lost sight of the bottom. A small school of yellow perch passed by underneath me and their golden stripes flashed in the beams of light coming down through the surface. I took a look up to make sure the flag that I was towing behind me like a kite was still with me and then looked straight ahead so that all I could see in my field of vision was green and blue.

I spaced out for a few minutes as I drifted there. When I snapped out of it I could barely see the bottom anymore. The needle on my pressure gauge was getting close to the red area so I decided to head back to find Mark and the boat, empty handed besides the golf ball, when I noticed a glint beneath me. It was faint and I couldn't quite make out what it was but it looked metallic against the greeny-brown, which usually meant something that didn't belong. I went a little deeper past the thermocline to get a better look. I descended to close to fifty feet and was absolutely frigid surrounded by all that cold water but I was drawn to whatever it was I was looking at below me so I kept going, not to reach whatever it was because it was too deep and I was low on air, but just to identify it. I was just about as deep as I felt comfortable being when I looked down through the water and saw something that seemed to shine for a second then disappear. In my head I knew it was probably garbage, or nothing, but I went a little further down anyways, until I was able to

make out that the shiny metallic was actually letters painted on the side of a boat's hull, a name: *Satin*.

I didn't have enough air to make my way back to Mark underwater so I inflated my BCD and slowly ascended to the surface. Once there I could see where he was and I reeled in the red flag and started waving it, hoping to catch his attention but our boat didn't move. I made a mental note of exactly where I was using the shore and then flipped over onto my back and began to swim through the chop. That boat must've been lying around seventy or eighty feet. I hadn't been able to get as close as I would've liked but I could tell that that portion of it that would've been above the surface had it been floating didn't yet have a dirty film on it. That meant the wreck was new and since it was still there, it probably hadn't been reported yet.

When I made it back to the boat, I found Mark passed out on the bench. I sprayed some water on him to wake him up and get him to help me with my tank.

"There's a boat down there," I said to him.

"Yep. Seen it," he says.

Of course he didn't catch on. He thought I was talking about the old horse ferry that's been at the bottom of Burlington Bay since some time in the 1800s.

"No you haven't. Not this one."

I told him about what I had seen when that beam of light came through and the two of us, well, we were both on the same page. Mark's had his difficulties in the past but he's an honest guy. It was his idea that we call in and report the wreck just after we'd had a look ourselves. I'd never seen or heard of anything like this before, but I figured that if the thing was as new as I thought it was we might be able to get a



nice little take off it. It looked big, like one of those huge yachts rich Quebecois drive down here sometimes. There'd be equipment we could salvage and sell and maybe some trinkets that had a little value, too. For all we knew there was a hundred, maybe even a couple thousand dollars worth of stuff in that thing. Mark could find us a fence and it'd be done nice and clean and then we'd call it in and the authorities could take care of their end.

We made all the plans on the way back to the boat launch. After we had our sixteen-foot ski boat back up on the trailer we drank a couple of Bud Lights in the parking lot and then headed our separate ways. Mark was going to refill the tanks using the air compressor at the auto shop and while I went to organize the gear for tomorrow morning's dive. Once I got home I drank a six-pack of PBR pounders and ate a turkey sandwich before heading to bed. Mark and I wanted to be back on the water in the early dark and in it just as it was starting to get light. When I woke up the next morning I didn't remember that I had also called Terry.

We had the boat in the water by 5:15 am and were on our way to the spot above where I had remembered the boat to be. I kept thinking of that dark shape sitting down there with its metallic and whatever else we were about to find inside, and I was hoping two things: one, that we'd actually make a decent amount of money and two, that whoever wrecked that boat wasn't still in it. This was going to be a two man job so we had one of the guys from Mark's auto shop with us to keep the boat floating nearby while Mark and I both went down. After getting out of Malletts Bay and past the causeway we turned off the lights and kept a low wake as we headed south.

We stayed close to the shore and as we came around Appletree Point, Lone Rock was visible just beyond. You could see the cliffs and the line on the rock from where the water used to be when it was higher back in the spring. Mark and I started to suit up and get the tanks ready. We had 7 mm wetsuits and booties and hoods for the cold but even so I wanted to spend as little time as possible at the depth we were going to. There was something kind of eerie about it; the thought of entering that boat that nobody knew about down there in the dark, cold water. We had the flask like always and we both took pulls as we pulled the neoprene onto our legs and over our shoulders. It was quiet and glassy on the surface of the lake at that time of day but it'd be absolutely silent down there. We attached our regulators to the tanks and turned on our air before coming around the corner of Lone Rock.

“Damn.”

That's the only thing I thought as we came around and had a view of the bay. Just, “Damn.” There were boat lights from two different boats right in the area we needed to be and they weren't moving. Mark and I put the tanks down on the deck and had his guy steer us close enough to them to make out that they were both police boats. It was over just as it was starting. I remember Mark just shaking his head over and over. They weren't exactly over where I thought I had ascended the day before but they were close enough for me to know that they'd either already found it with their radar or else they were about to. We kept going on past before doubling back and heading to Malletts Bay. Damn.

I stood on top of the cliff later that day with binoculars and watched as they sent salvage teams down into the wreck. I remember looking down at the

geographical survey marker and wondering what kind of metal it was made out of. \$250 *FINE FOR DISTURBING THIS MARK*. The thing wouldn't even sell for that much even if it were possible to get it out. I watched the guys out over the wreck work for about an hour and while I was standing there thinking about what we might've found inside that broken hull some kids showed up and started jumping off into the lake.

When I got home there was a message from Terry. It went on for a couple of minutes about how I was "stuck in a false reality I'd created for myself" and how I needed to renew my instructor's certification and go back to working at the diving center and stop drinking. How I was wasting my time and needed to motivate myself like I had been before our relationship went all wrong.

I didn't find out that it had actually been her that called the police until the article about the wreck had come out a few days later and she had been mentioned. It was then that I remembered calling her the night before.

The article had more of the details and even a picture of the boat after they got the thing out of the water. Turns out it wasn't a big Canadian yacht after all – just some old junker that had been left sitting in disrepair on a trailer in the Shelburne Shipyard. Some kids vandalized and spray painted it – stuff like "666" and "S.S. Cock" – then managed to get it into the water and sail it all the way across the bay before crashing it into Lone Rock. They all made it away unharmed; they'd abandoned it to drift and sink to where it was the next day when I saw it down on the bottom. None of it had been real. There never was anything inside that hull except garbage and everything Terry had said to me was right. Those kids must've had some skill to get

it as far as they did, I'll give 'em that, but they sure as hell couldn't spell. Didn't even know how to spell "Satan."



## **Undone at the Whiskey Room**

It's not much of a story, probably not even worth the telling, but here goes. I guess the beginning would have to be in the liquor store when Ruben walked over from one of the far aisles with a giant jug of red wine in his hands. The thing was like two liters. There was no way, I told him, but he did that thing where he raises his eyebrows and gives you that fake apology smile and just nods at you until you say, "ok," and that was that. Next thing I knew we're in the parking lot out back digging the cork out of the thing with my keys.

Then again, maybe the beginning happened a few hours before that, when we first arrived. It was freezing and drizzling out when Ruben and I got into town late on Tuesday night and I don't know why but we wanted to go out. Matt couldn't come

with us because he had a test early the next morning about war in contemporary times. We had already eaten fast food on the drive up so Matt showed us where the liquor store was and a couple of places worth checking out and that set us on the course that would project us through the rest of the night.

Either way, nothing too crazy happened to us. In the parking lot we must've looked like the biggest pair of idiots trying to get a cork out of a bottle of red wine. Ruben hadn't thought about an opener when he picked it out so we had to force it. The entire night seemed forced right from this delayed beginning, given the rain and the day of the week, but we pushed through all that. We used my car keys to dig chunks out of the cork until we got to the point where the key couldn't reach the last bit that was still lodged in the bottleneck. There was no way we were gonna get to the next part of the night without that wine so I broke a branch off a tree and we just jammed the rest of the cork down the neck into the wine.

We passed the bottle back and forth a couple times and we both took huge sips so that we could catch a quick buzz, ya know, but man, that shit was so gross. We probably drank a third of it before we just said fuck it and went to find a place where we could buy some beers. Matt had told us what direction to walk in and the wine propelled us down Pearl Street until we found a couple of dive bars on the corner. Ruben took the bottle and put it down under some cars parked on the street so that we could grab it on the way out.

What happened at this place isn't very important but it might as well be included to flesh things out, for the sake of detail. The place was definitely a local's bar. There was barely anyone in there except for a couple of guys with beards at the

bar and a group of college kids at one of the tables. They had three-dollar mini pitchers of PBR so we each got our own and stood at the bar with the beards. Behind the bar the wall is covered with foreign money from all over the place and they also had a popcorn machine. It was a dive for sure but the details made it seem almost surreal, like the set of a TV sitcom. I went over and tried to talk to the group at the tables – what I said isn't relevant – but they were too involved in their own drama to let me in on it. We finished off the pitchers and got out of there.

Outside we were both a little amazed that the wine was still tucked safely under the car so we knew we had to keep the night going. Our detour gave it a nice chance to breathe and it now had a slightly enhanced bouquet from whatever had dripped off the car's undercarriage into the open bottle. There were a few people smoking cigarettes outside the bar and Ruben asked them where a good place to go was. They told us to walk down the same street as before until we found the pedestrian street, take that, and then just look for a crowd, so we grabbed our bottle and did exactly that.

On the way we stopped in an alley and passed the wine back and forth a few more times. There was this huge mural that was painted across an entire side of the alley with pictures of some of the buildings that we had just walked past and all kinds of people like Elvis and the guys from Phish along with waiters and hotel bellmen. It wasn't a bad place to try and drink the rest of the wine and we checked out the mural pretty closely as we drank, trying to figure out what exactly was going on. I'm still curious about all those people in it, what their stories are, ya know? Obviously I know why Ben and Jerry are in there but what about the random people

painted in that just seem like people you'd see on the street? We finished off the wine in that alley and Ruben set the empty bottle on the ground beneath a Dalmatian that seemed to be looking up at Abe Lincoln.

We must've been in that alley for half an hour at least and back out on the main drag it was still dead despite the fact that everything was all lit up like something was waiting to happen. We walked a little ways past some shops and then off on one of the side streets saw some people standing outside of a bar. We came into the middle of a conversation – three guys were standing there listening to another talk and everyone seemed really into it. Right as we got there the three listeners started laughing and nodding at whatever they had just heard. Then there was a call for more drinks and they all filed into the building. It seemed like a classy establishment with its marble exterior, like the sort of place we shouldn't be but exactly where we were meant to be because of that. One of the guys who had been listening held the door for the rest of them and right as we got there he waved us in as well, so we followed.

The place turned out to be about as nice as I thought from the outside. The walls were covered in wooden cabinets and filled with bottles of whiskey there was no way we could afford. It felt like we were in a pub in colonial Boston. The only contradiction to the nostalgia was the shitty Top 40 music that was blasting through the speakers. The guy who held the door open for us came in and put his arms around us, sweeping us up to the bar and ordering an additional two of whatever had already been ordered. I was feeling that wine already but when two whiskeys



were shoved into our hands and we were brought in for a toast there was no saying no.

“To a good story!” was the toast, and we all cheered and drank. I have a hunch it wasn’t from one of the bottles in the wooden cabinets, but what do I know about the refinements of good whiskey. It tasted like shit and it burned going down. Ruben started coughing uncontrollably. One of the guys, the one who brought us in and who now had bought us drinks, declared that he would tell us all a story. Apparently that was the activity – to get drunk and tell stories to each other about stuff that had happened.

Before this man could begin, one of the others butted in and said he had one that he “absolutely had to tell.” This guy was a lot older than the rest – my guess is that he was in his sixties – and he was kind of short and skinny and balding. He was wearing pleated pants and a tie beneath a tweed coat and felt as though this meant that he had to tell a good one. This is the guy, the character, who made it all interesting. The guy who brought us in seemed a little pissed at the cut in but he then just clapped the older guy’s back and went, “It better be a good one!”

After we joined this new crowd the six of us headed back outside with our drinks. The stories had to happen outside even though it was freezing; this was crucial because the music was too loud inside. We stood in a little circle and the old guy starts telling us this story and he goes:

“A long time ago I was at this restaurant for dinner with a woman who was, at the time, my fiancé, and her parents. I was trying to put on a show, ya know, so I took them to this fancy place – white tablecloths, waiters all wore black vests and

bowties, hundred dollar plates, the works. So we get there and I go up to the host and give him my name for the reservation and the guy starts looking through his book as if he can't find the name."

I can't remember who but someone cut him off right here and asked where the restaurant was. He thought for a second and then lifted his hand in the air and it was like he couldn't remember but then he told us it was in New York.

"So I was at this restaurant in New York City for dinner with my fiancé and her parents. This wasn't just any restaurant; this place was very fancy, very high-scale. Famous, too. The kind of place where you have to dress nice and you have to make a reservation weeks in advance. I had a reservation of course, but when we got up to the host and he started to look through his book..."

Then friggin' Ruben interrupts him for the second time and asks what it was called. He told us it was "Jean-Renier's," or "Jean-Claude's," or something like that – the name didn't matter beyond the fact that it sounded like the name of a place that was as fancy as he had described. It made sense. The man started in telling us the same thing all over again using a few different words and details.

"About twenty-five years ago I was at Jean-whatever's for dinner with my future in-laws and my fiancé. I remember how fancy the place was because I had broken out my tux and I really wanted to impress everyone. The place was absolutely gorgeous. All the tables had crisp white tablecloths and the lighting fixtures were made out of this incredible ironwork. Our table right in the center of the room, it was just excellent. Probably the best table in the house – you could see everything going on."

So for the third time the stage was set. At this point I think everyone was a little bit skeptical. I was expecting something to happen with the reservation being lost or declined or for a different date, but it never happened. We just let him keep going so that he wouldn't start all over for the fourth time.

He started telling us about what they ordered, how he "really wanted to impress them so I bought one of the more expensive bottles of white on the menu. Then check this out." I swear that's what he said. "Then check this out. When our waiter brought over the bottle for me to sample, I sent it back and ordered a different one."

Ruben asked him if this was "to put on a show," and the old guy said, "Yes, of course it was! I ordered a bottle and then sent it back so that I could order another one – all to put on a show! Our waiter wasn't thrilled because now he had an open bottle of expensive wine that he couldn't sell, but I wanted them all to think that I was an aficionado so I had it sent back."

He went on to tell us about how he ordered steak tartare as an appetizer for the table without knowing that it was raw meat. Then he started back in by saying, "After the meal..." which of course didn't work for us because he'd given us all these details that now we wanted to know the whole thing. He gave us the beginning but we wanted the middle before the end. He looked around at us all and then down at his glass, which he had finished while talking to us and then told us that he needed another drink. We'd all finished our own drinks by this point so we agreed that an intermission was called for and went inside. Ruben and I went for beer this time, and after the rest had theirs we went back outside.

One of the other three asked what they ate for dinner to get this guy started without having to go back to the beginning. He told us that he had the salmon but that he couldn't remember what the others got. He assured us though, that it was seasoned and cooked perfectly – made sure to mention that detail two or three times. He said that the meal wasn't really important to the point of the story, that it was what came after that was supposed to get our attention. I felt a little ripped off – even if the meal wasn't important it could still present interesting material – but he started back in during the coffee and dessert.

He goes, “We were eating our dessert, which was phenomenal” – that's the word he used – “and drinking our coffee. I had vanilla ice cream and it came with a little cookie straw thing that was out of this world. Everything about this restaurant was high society. I'm not sure if I mentioned it but the waiters all wore black vests. Anyways, while I'm in the middle of taking a bite of ice cream and laughing at something my future father-in-law had said, I feel this tap on my shoulder. The meal had been excellent; I was really impressing my fiancé and her parents, I could tell. But then I get this tap on my shoulder and I turn around and this guy is standing behind me. I look up at him and he looks down at me right in the eyes. ‘Do you know who I am?’ the guy says. Everything had been going just perfectly and I was making a really good impression, and then this. I looked around at my fiancé, my future mother-in-law, and my future father-in-law, and then turned back to the guy and said, ‘I have no idea who you are.’”

He told us this last part slow and looked at us all individually in the eyes. Finally, I remember thinking, the plot twist, the climax we had all been waiting two

drinks time for. The next part was, "And do you know what he said back to me? He said, 'You and I have got a problem.'"

He told us again how he didn't know the guy, and told us how this guy was big. Like a wrestler, I think he said. Or maybe a boxer. Anyway, this guy was supposedly a pretty big dude and he had a problem with our old friend and something was about to happen.

He continued, "Apparently this man and I have a problem. I was scared, though. I've never seen the guy before in my life and I don't know what I did, but he knew me. I could tell by the way he was looking at me. I turned around, looked him straight in the eye, didn't get up from my chair, and say, 'Oh yeah? What's your problem?' And you know happened next?"

We didn't know what happened next, and we all really wanted to know what happened next but the old bastard had finished his drink again and said that if someone bought him another he'd finish the story. Here we are, at the climax of a story we'd heard begin four times yet never heard the middle and the guy cuts it off to get another drink he definitely didn't need. Me and Ruben were already pretty well-oiled and neither of us had finished our beers so we stayed outside with one of the others and waited while the rest went in and got drinks. We were probably out there for a good ten to fifteen minutes. The other guy decided to wander off, guess he'd had enough, and then we went back inside.

The old man was sitting down at a table and the other two were standing and talking near the bar. We went over and asked them what the deal was, if the guy had finished the story and it was like they both had totally forgot about it. Us asking

about it snapped them back to and the four of us went over and sat down and demanded the end of the story.

Sure enough, this old guy, he goes, “Ok. So after the meal, we’re eating dessert. I’m drinking a coffee, my fiancé is drinking a coffee, everyone is drinking a coffee. That’s how it started. It’s a really fancy restaurant and you need a reservation to get in, like two months in advance. Then I feel a tap on my shoulder, and when I turn around there’s this massive guy and he says to me, ‘You know who I am?’ He says to me, he says, ‘You and I have a problem.’ Then I said, ‘What’s your problem?’ and you know what happened next?”

He was looking right at Ruben when he said it.

“You know what happened next?” the second time he was looking at one of the other guys. We were all around him and he was starting to look kind of nervous as his eyes went from one of us to the other, asking us each in turn, “You know what happened next?” It was how I imagined him looking at the fancy restaurant where the waiters wear vests when the guy tapped him on the shoulder. The four of us were the big man, and we demanded a climax.

We didn’t get it. “I’m going to the bathroom, get me another drink!” he says and gets up and goes to the bathroom. Ridiculous! I imagined this man sitting at the table he had reserved weeks in advance in order to impress his in-laws and when the moment to impress finally comes, the moment to make himself a hero, he stumbles away drunk to the bathroom. The other two guys were drunk and they lost interest again and wandered back off to the bar. Me and Ruben are drunk, too, but

we wanted the end to that story so we waited for the guy to come back and we split the drink he had left on the table in the meantime.

When the old man finally showed up he stumbled right past us and out the door into the street. I don't remember if we said anything to him but if we did I don't remember what it was. We followed suit shortly after and headed back up the street toward Matt's. One hell of a night, right? That guy never had any story at all, probably made the whole thing up on the spot. He had all of our attention with all that wonderful build up and repetition but there was never any story to begin with.

So there we were, drunk on a Tuesday night in a town we didn't know, wandering the streets. We found ourselves by the mural again and Ruben picked up the empty bottle that was still there from earlier. It all started with the bottle, it only seemed fitting that it should all end with the bottle. "To wrap it all up," Ruben said. We smashed it in the street and then ran up the sidewalk laughing. Nothing had really happened to us at either place but it didn't seem to matter.