

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: SLEEPY HEAD

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This thesis submission contains four chapters of a novel that is set in Fayetteville, North Carolina, and that takes place over the course of one day in the summer of 2001. The story is narrated from a close third-person perspective that details the thoughts and perceptions of the novel's two main characters—Godwin and Sarah—who begin the day as strangers but eventually end up meeting when their friends take them out to a cowboy-themed bar called the Sleepy Saloon.

SLEEPY HEAD

by

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Chapter 1

“Hello?” asked Sarah.

“Sare-bear!” said Eva, causing Sarah to cringe and pull the phone away from her ear for a moment.

“Oh,” she said, eventually bringing the receiver back in close so she could be heard, “Eva... hey... what's up?”

“What took you so long, Sare-bear? I was starting to get worried,” said Eva.

“I—hold on,” said Sarah, darting her eyes back down the box of dresses at her feet, “*sorry*. Let me, um, just—catch my breath. Sorry.” She made like she was catching her breath. “I was just upstairs is all.”

“Upstairs?” asked Eva, as if she'd been referring to some foreign territory.

“What's up with that?”

“Yes, upstairs. Remember?” said Sarah. “Like where my bedroom is?”

“Ohh,” said Eva. “That's right. I forgot. I forgot you were like the last girl on the entire earth without a cell phone. But that's alright. Because at least that makes you about the *coolest* girl on earth without a cell phone.”

“Sure, okay,” said Sarah. With her foot, she nudged the box as far as she could into the corner beside the refrigerator, and let herself wander out into the doorway, pretty sure that the box would remain safe and hidden for the time being, or at least wouldn't wander anywhere without her.

“Sare-Bear? What's wrong?” asked Eva. “You sound *distracted* by something or something.”

“I do?” asked Sarah, keeping an ear out for the sound of her mother's footsteps

upstairs while hovering slightly back and forth between the doorway and the refrigerator.

“Mmm hmm,” said Eva. “So what is it? Something *mysterious*? Something maybe you don't want me to *know* about?”

“Well, no,” said Sarah, “I don't know.” She glanced down the hall towards the landing at the bottom of the stairs. “I mean I *am* kind of in the middle of something right now? So I guess I should maybe make this kind of—*you know*—”

“Short?” asked Eva.

“Yeah,” said Sarah, “short.”

Eva stayed quiet for a moment, allowing Sarah to turn her attention to the tangled black telephone cord that hung down from the receiver. She started to try and unknot it, but then stopped when she realized how pointless it was—she'd never be talking on this phone again—so she just let it drop.

“Well you don't have to get all *innuendo* about it and whatnot,” said Eva, referring to Lord-knew-what. Her voice seemed to have lost its usual high, syrupy overlay, though, making her sound actually half-serious for once. “Just cause you're like, some kind of Amazon person, and I'm just—*not*...” she started to trail off.

“Eva—what are you talking about?” asked Sarah, confused enough to forget everything for a moment. “How am I *Amazon*?” At first she was thinking Eva was actually referring (or attempting to refer) to Sarah's *Amish* background in some way, but just got mixed up. Or even possibly that she was trying to refer to it without really referring to it directly. But then she realized that neither of those possibilities made any sense. Because the thing was, she'd never really told Eva much of anything about her plain folk background one way or another besides maybe just a few offhand comments

that didn't even really have anything to do with anything, nor would have served in any way to cause Eva put two and two together, nor one and one for that matter, she didn't think (Eva wasn't always too great with math at work, though when it came to making connections between things, while Sarah had to admit she herself was much better at the mental kinds, Eva was definitely much better at making the physical ones; namely, linking tongues with boys outside in the parking lot when she was supposed to be inside, working).

“You know,” said Eva. “Like *Amazon Woman? Hear me roar?*”

“Oh,” said Sarah, though she wasn't really sure.

“All I'm saying is,” said Eva, “you don't have to be so mean about it. You could have just said *I'm in a hurry* or something like that. It's not like I don't already know I'm *short*.”

“Eva,” said Sarah, trying to not sound too impatient with her, “I'm only like two inches taller than you.”

“Yeah, well,” said Eva, and that was it.

It occurred to Sarah then what she was fishing for. Over the past year or so since they'd been working at the deli together, and had gotten to be friends even outside of work sometimes, she'd come to find that Eva liked to get deep into jokes. And the thing that was so fun (and so aggravating) about it sometimes, was that she'd almost never just let the joke die once it was started. No matter if Eva was the one who'd actually started it herself, or if it was something somebody else had started, and she was just the one to pick it up and run with it. And even when the joke ended up going in a direction that didn't entirely make sense to Sarah, like the one now. But whatever the case, she seemed

impelled for some reason to keep the thing going until it'd run its course, or reached what she felt was a proper conclusion. And in most cases, that meant that Sarah would be forced to play along.

“Alright,” said Sarah. “Okay. Eva—I'm sorry for calling you short. I'm sure you're actually quite tall at heart.”

“Well thank you,” said Eva. “And you're not really a big ugly warrior princess, either.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. “I'm not?”

“No. You're perfect in every way, and everyone knows it,” said Eva. “Like a perfectly delicate, fully-bloomed flower, who everyone's just afraid to touch because they're afraid they'll mess it up.”

“Oh, um,” said Sarah, feeling herself blush, “thanks.” Then she thought about it for a second. “I guess.” At least it was better than the time at work, when some of the co-workers had been going on and on about what they referred to as Sarah's “superpower” (a reference she didn't quite get until she went with Eva to see the X-Men movie in the fall)—her apparently incredible ability to remain as calm and collected as a “saint,” even when dealing with the most irate of customers (a reference she got right away, but that she knew wasn't true)—that Eva had jumped in, saying that she was like “some kind of sexy Buddha”—a comment that had made her blush for an entire minute.

“You're welcome,” said Eva.

“Okay. Well is there anything else then?” asked Sarah. Although she couldn't tell if the bathroom fan was still on or not, she figured her mother had to have been done in the bathroom by then. She took a few steps into the hall and glanced up at the top of the

stairwell, but still didn't hear any obvious footsteps. "Because I am kind of in a—"

"Okay, okay. I get the hint," said Eva. "Sare-Bear doesn't want to talk to Eva right now—"

"Well it's not that," Sarah said, "it's just—"

"—*even* though," Eva made a throat noise, but kept right on talking, "*she's* the one whose relaxing at home, while *Eeva's* stuck here at work, where things *just happen* to be going like totally incredibly out-of-their-mind crazy at the moment."

"Really?" asked Sarah. "Is it *that bad*?"

"Like totally, outtacontrol, *some-of-us-workers-is-about-to-start-knife-fights-with-some-of-the-customers-if-Sarah-doesn't-hurry-up-and-get-her-little-butt-down-here* kinda crazy," she said.

"Oh," said Sarah. "Sounds pretty bad."

"Um, *yeah*," said Eva. "They're out in like full force this morning. And it's way too early for it too. I mean I just got here, and all of sudden it's just like—," it occurred to Sarah that it was actually almost noon, "*whoosh*—all these people. And I mean like *tens* of them. There must be some kind of convention going on, or *something*. It's like *Jeez-Louise*, Sare-Bear—you know?"

"A convention?" said Sarah. "Like an angry-people convention?"

"Yep," said Eva.

"Like where a bunch of *insanely*-angry people go to just get together and *yell* at each other all day?" she asked.

"Yep, that's what it's like," said Eva.

"I see," said Sarah, as she wandered back into the kitchen. "So how's that any

different than any other day around here?”

“Hmm. Maybe you’re right,” said Eva. “Actually, sounds Thanksgiving at my grandma's house. Or any other typical Forester family get-together for that matter.”

“Yeah—” said Sarah, thinking she was just making some off-hand comment at first, until a far-flung memory of the seemingly endless tension she'd felt leading up to the end of each of her older siblings' Rumspringas started to rush faster and faster towards her until, instantly, her entire body became sponged with all of the heat and resentment she thought she'd managed to shed from her and mother's previous fight—“I *know*,” she said. And it wasn't just the one fight that got to her; it was callousness with which of her mother treated her brother over his marijuana habit. It was the constant, caustic back-and-forth between her and her sister over Meredith's flat-out refusal to participate in the “idiotic” Sunday evening singings with all of the other girls and boys her age. (“I just don't see the point in it,” Meredith had explained to Sarah once, after one of their particularly virulent episodes; “I mean if I want to sing, I'll sing. And if I want to meet a boy, well—,” she said, and looked off in thought. “I'll just flutter my eyelashes at him,” she said, “like this,” her demonstration causing Sarah to fall apart with laughter). This was soon followed by her sister's refusal to even put on a dress and ride with Sarah and their mother to church on Sundays at all anymore, by which time her mother's will to argue seemed to have all but disappeared entirely. (“She wouldn't be acting this way if it was her father doing the arguing,” she said one day as they rode together on the bench in her Cousin Joseph's buggy, on their way out of town). So when Meredith finally did meet a boy from Scranton that she liked when she was seventeen, and announced that she would soon be moving into an *apartment* with him—an apartment that, by the time she

turned *eighteen*, would be hers entirely (she'd dumped the boyfriend, and took over the lease)—all that her mother said was she wished her well. And that was it. Not another word in either direction.

“So yours too?” said Eva.

Sarah made her own throat noise—“mine too,” she said.

She started to turn back towards the hall, but first had to stop and move the receiver from her left to her right hand in order to keep from getting all tangled up in the telephone cord. And when she finally did look up, she wasn't too surprised to see her mother standing at the end of the hall, peering out the little circle-top window in the front door.

“*What?*” asked Eva, sounding annoyed as she moved her mouth away from the phone to answer a comment that was apparently being directed towards her. “Well hey,” she said back into the receiver, “I guess I better let you go. Doug's getting on my case over *something*.” She could almost hear Eva roll her eyes as she said this. “Just *promise* me you'll try to get down here as quick as Sarah-ly possible, MK?”

“MK,” said Sarah, which was their way of saying okay to each other. “I'll try.”

“MK,” said Eva. “Peaches!”

“Oh,” said Sarah, trying to remember what *Peaches!* was supposed to stand for, “ok—” (-*click*-) “—ay. Bye.”

Sarah stood and just listened to the dial tone for a moment. She was afraid to hang up. Because she knew as soon as she did, she'd have to face her mother. It occurred to her that she could sneak out the back door that nobody ever used, which was just past the refrigerator in the little vestibule that they used as their laundry room. But the space

was so compact, she'd basically have to climb overtop the dryer in order to get to the door (which was why nobody ever used it). With the phone still to her ear, she turned and peered into the room, to see if “sneaking” would even be a possibility, but decided (knowing her) she'd probably bang a knee or something on the dryer as she was trying to climb over it. Either that, or she'd fall, or drop the box, or otherwise just cause some sort of commotion to send her mother marching back to check on her. She guessed she'd just put that option on hold for now, and turned back to check on her mother, who was still standing by the front door.

She realized what her mother was doing was looking out for the movers. She thought she remembered seeing a note about it written on the little pad of stationery that hung beneath the telephone cradle on the wall; so she checked, and she was right—it said “*Fidelity Moving,*” and then “*11:30,*” written in her mother's unmistakably perfect script—the sound of the dial tone in her ear only adding to the feeling of finality of it. And the fact that they were ten minutes late amounted to no real reprieve.

She didn't know. There was just something about it—either the words, or the way they were written (or maybe both)—that made her even angrier. Maybe she just had a hard time believing, after all they'd been through together—after losing Sarah's father, losing David, Meredith, being forced to sell off the land, and eventually the farmhouse, until her mother must have just finally given up on trying to have them live anything resembling a plain life ever again—that her mother would still, even after these past few years of just the two of them, insist on holding up the old facade. Did her mother lose her faith in all of this, too? Sarah didn't know for sure. But something told her, if it ever did dip, then it must have had been during the time a couple of years ago—right around the

time they'd first moved down to Fayetteville—that it appeared, even just for a passing moment, that that old facade could be finally coming down for good. Because if there was one thing Sarah felt she knew for sure about what the old religion really must have meant to her mother—what it still and would probably always mean to her—it was that, no matter how easy it might have had seemed for her to slip into another role, no matter how good and right it might have felt to her at times, it still and always would be her duty to be as a mother to her children, not a keeper. To stand before Sarah as a model, not a friend. Even if that meant becoming a stranger to her children.

So what did that make Sarah's role, then? She didn't know. She just found it strange that, although it'd been years since she'd totally bought into the old religion herself (though there was not much of it she totally denied either), she still found herself looking back to it for answers from time to time. It was hard to imagine sometimes, but she guessed the main reason why she kept going back to it was because there *was* actually a time when life being plain meant life being simple. But did that mean there could still be a simple answer to her questions? Or was it too late for that too?

She already knew what her mother would say: her role was to find a man and get married (though she wouldn't say *how*). And she thought she knew what her sister, Meredith, might say: just keep doing what you're doing until you can afford a place of your own. If she eventually found a guy that she liked, then heck—she could just flutter her eyelashes at him. (Though the main problem with that was that she had no idea what the heck she was doing right then). Eva, on the other hand, would probably just tell her to keep on being like her sexy-Buddha-flower self, whatever that really meant. That, and she'd probably tell her to get her butt to work already (though she wouldn't say whether

she wanted her there so bad just so she could see her sexy-Buddha-flower face, or whether she just wanted her there because she knew Sarah would end up doing most of the work for her). She tried to think of what her father might have said if he could, but it was hard to imagine. For one thing, did it mean that he would have had to have become suddenly fixed, and woken up? Or was it taking place in an alternate world where the accident had never happened in the first place? Because if it was the latter, she knew pretty much exactly what he would have said:

“What? Has the world gone nuts? A daughter of *mine* is working in a *supermarket*? That's preposterous!”

But of course not exactly. Or at all. The fact was she couldn't really remember how her father talked. She imagined he might have been a bit soft-spoken, a lot like her brother David. Which would have made sense, seeing as how it was really her mother who was the outspoken one, and who might have had reacted with such alarm had the situation been years ago (and if hindsight had somehow turned her into some kind of fancy Englishman). But if it was the case that her father had just suddenly, despite all the odds the doctors had talked about, gotten better, well then Sarah imagined he might call her up and say “quit that silly job already honey, and come home. Your father wants to see you.” And that would be enough.

Why this notion, out of all the past impressions that had been blazing away inside her all morning, should sting her so immensely, she didn't know. But there it was, like a cold flare sparking deep within her sinuses. It was a feeling that was distinctly familiar, yet so distant—like a long-forgotten sense of grief. No sooner, then, than she put a name to it, did the feeling grow outward, welling up all along her inner core. And when there

was no more core to fill, when it got all-so overwhelming, she felt for sure she was going to cry.

But then something happened. She didn't cry. Instead, it was like the bottom just dropped right out of her—which was strange; all this time, she'd guessed just assumed she'd had no floor.

Instantly, she emptied. She felt limp. Hunched, she held her stomach, feeling crumpled in at the middle like a soda can. Afraid she might fall, she immediately hung the phone back up on its cradle, then turned and let herself settle against the side of the refrigerator, still holding her mid-section. It wasn't like an aching—just a weak, kicked-in feeling. Standing with her head down, and knees slightly bent, she was able to steady herself with her back against the humming, vibrating wall. She continued to stand there for a few moments, eventually lifting her head back against it, and letting her whole body take in the vibrations, until eventually the unit seemed to buzz at least a little bit of energy, of life back into her body (along with whatever other parts of her there were that needed buzzing).

She barely even noticed at first that the box of old dresses was no longer nestled as tightly in the corner as it had been. She must have accidentally kicked it with her foot when she was trying to steady herself against the refrigerator, and now it was sticking out slightly past the edge of the doorway for anyone to see. But it probably didn't matter now anyway, because she knew there was little chance of getting it past her mother without her noticing.

Sarah stood up straight, and let go of her stomach. She stepped forward, but instead of just peeking around the edge of the wall like she felt like doing, she walked

straight into the opening of the doorway, bracing herself for sure confrontation.

Her mother was still at the front door, but after a moment, must have sensed Sarah's presence, because she turned her head to glance back in Sarah's direction.

“Sarah,” she said, her glance becoming a fixed gaze as she turned the whole way around.

Sarah let her own gaze fall to the floor, then up to the pointed edge of the doorway, where the wallpaper had begun peeling. She reached up and rang her finger down it for a second, then turned back to look at her mother.

“Who was that on the phone?” she asked as she started slowly walking down the hall.

“No one,” said Sarah, looking down and nudging the box a little bit with her foot. “Just Eva.”

“Oh?” her mother asked.

“Yeah—,” Sarah looked back up. “She said it's really busy at work, and that I better get down there, so—.”

“Already? I thought you didn't have to go in until one,” she said, coming to a stop a few feet in front of her, right before the entrance to the living room. She leaned against the wall with her arms crossed.

“Well, it sounds like they really need me,” said Sarah. “Besides, it's not like I have anything better to do right now.” Which was a lie. If it wasn't for the fact that she still thought she might be able to find a way to get the box out of there without her mother noticing (which necessarily included making herself scarce as well), she would have had been finding a way to get the rest of her things out of there and into her car. She

didn't know for certain that her mother would have had refused to help if she'd asked her, but she did know that her mother's help was the absolute last thing she wanted right then.

“You mean you've got nothing better to do, besides—what?” she asked, adding her own clause. “Perhaps to stop being so stubborn, and help your mother finish getting things ready for the moving men? Have you thought about that? What about your own things—have you even *started* to do any packing yet?”

Sarah just sighed and shifted her weight up against the edge of the doorway to her right. And although it started off as an unconscious move, she thought maybe she could also use her body to help cover up the box her mother's line of sight.

“I'll take that to mean no, then,” she said, standing up straight, and then folding her hands in front of her. She seemed to be trying to use her own eyes to hypnotize Sarah into holding eye contact with her. “What do you think will happen? That everything is going to just up and magically pack itself while you're clowning around with your friends at work?”

“*No—*,” said Sarah.

“And then what happens? Hmm? Because I thought I made it clear—you cannot come back tonight,” she said, “for *anything*,” and swiped her hands through the air like an umpire in a baseball game, though she knew that comparison would be the farthest thing from her mother's mind. Then she suddenly started moving forward again, which made Sarah flinch—“the realtor's coming by at 8 o'clock for a final walk through,” she said, walking past her to get into the kitchen. “And after that, anything of yours that is *not* on that van—,” she turned and pointed back towards the front door, causing Sarah to freeze over, afraid she'd look down and see the box, “I'm sorry to say—but it will not be

your property any longer. It will belong to the Gingerich's." But she turned away without noticing, and continued on towards the sink in the back, right-hand corner, where there were still a few glasses set out for drinking. She picked one up and started to pour herself a glass of water.

"I know that," said Sarah, hurrying to position herself back in front of the box while her mother's back was turned. But then she thought that would only draw more attention to it, so she took a few steps forward towards the kitchen table, where all she could do was just kind of hover, feeling hopeless. "I already have everything I need in the car," she lied, "it's fine," as she lowered her gaze and held onto the chair-back in front of her.

"Hmm," said her mother, tipping her head back and taking a drink. "I seem to find that hard to believe." She kept turned towards the sink, and gazed out the oblong window that was cut above it as she set the glass back down on the counter.

"Speaking of which," she said, immediately turning back to face Sarah. "Do you still imagine that's where you'll be sleeping tonight—" she leaned against the counter "—in your car?"

"I don't know," said Sarah, shrugging her shoulders, and looking away. "Maybe."

"And what about the next night?" asked her mother. "And the night after that? Still in the car? Because I'd like to know where I can reach you."

Sarah felt her jaw muscles tighten. "I'm sure I'll figure something out," she said, mumbling through the corresponding tightness in her throat.

"Oh, well," said her mother, crossing her arms in front of her. "I have no doubt that you will."

Sarah moved only her eyes as she stared up hard at her mother. She'd hoped that the sentiment would land square, but instead felt her brow betray a slight curl of a question.

“I imagine you'll probably end up staying with that girlfriend of yours, no?” she asked. “The party girl?” Her mother had never had too strong of an accent, but that word—*pa-har-tee*—really stuck out, and struck her as intentionally annoying.

“Her name's *Eva*,” said Sarah, though she knew her mother knew that. And while she didn't know for sure if her mother's supposition would turn out correct, asking *Eva* had been in the back of her mind as a possibility.

“Well isn't that what you ultimately want?” she asked. “To be able to break free, and live the *wild* life for a few days before you come crawling back to Jack and I's place? Isn't that what this is really all about?”

Sarah regretted now having characterized *Eva* to her mother that way—as a “party girl.” As if that was all she was. She did like to *talk* about going out drinking, and spending time with guys a lot, but it wasn't like she constantly carried on like that in real life. She didn't think.

“Well, anyway,” said her mother when Sarah didn't respond, “I guess we'll see how good of a friend this *Eva* really is after a few days, won't we?”

“It's not like that,” said Sarah, though in reality, uncertain. “And *Eva* still lives in her parents' house, so it's not like—”

“Oh, I'm sure she does,” said her mother. “I'm sure she does.”

“And *besides*,” said Sarah, ignoring her mother's comment, “I already plan on going out tomorrow to look for an apartment. If I'm lucky, I'll find a place that will let

me move in right away.”

“Whom in this family has ever led you to believe you can rely on luck?” asked her mother, which Sarah guessed was a fair enough point. “That’s what I’d like to know. But don’t worry—luck will have nothing to do with it. Do you even know how much an apartment costs per month?” she asked, standing forward and crowding up Sarah’s periphery. “Not to mention a down payment, and utility bills? And the money it will take to start building up an entire new *life*? How much do you make at that job of yours anyway? How much do you *actually* take home in an average week? Two hundred? Two hundred and fifty?”

Actually it was closer to around \$350. And that was every two weeks.

“That *won’t* be an issue,” said Sarah, confidently, though it was indeed perhaps the biggest issue. Then more quietly, she added, “I can always ask Doug for more hours.”

“Well I guess we’ll soon get to see the size of *Doug’s* heart then, too,” said her mother.

While she couldn’t necessarily speak to the size of her manager’s heart, she did know that he came off as an awful big cheapskate at times. As in most of the time. While he usually gave her praise for her hard work (enough to even promote her to a position of responsibility—a sort of manager-in-training), when one night, recently, she accidentally wrote the wrong date on the bank deposit paperwork (she’d indicated it was the previous year, something she also used to do on her schoolwork from time to time—she didn’t know why), which apparently had led to an overdraft on some store account or other, leading him to warn her quite matter-of-factly that she’d be fired if it were to ever happen again. But he was usually nice in other ways. Whether he would be nice enough

to let her work more hours, though, she didn't know. Probably the only way she knew for sure that he would, was if somebody else quit, which was unlikely at this point. Not that her mother needed to know that.

“No,” said Sarah, “*we* won't see. *I* will.” She half-turned, just waiting for a good enough opportunity to go and grab the box and leave. Although part of her had already begun to doubt whether anything in that box would be enough to get started on, and help her through the rough patches (which now seemed more like one big rough patch laid out in front of her), it was the only answer that had presented itself to her over the past few days that still held up to the crashing waves. Like a single buoy—a beacon—standing in the middle of her mind. It was like she'd just kept floating closer and closer to it until now there was no floating around it. It was the only thing left in the wild blue ocean to hold onto, even if it was kind of cracked in places. And if the waves ended up dragging it under, then oh well. But she'd be damned if she was going to let her mother just come in knock it down, just like everything else.

“I don't *need* you to see anything,” she said, thinking that was it. But then her next words just came right out without warning—“in fact I'd rather you just looked the other way.”

If the words had stung at all, her mother surely didn't seem to let on. At least not that Sarah could tell from her voice, because she was still refusing to look at her.

“Well I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to do that,” said her mother. “Not this time.” Sarah wanted so much to just turn and look her straight in the eye—and no other part of her—and ask her why, then, she seemed to have had such an easy time turning her back on every other member of their family until then? She felt maybe if she

looked hard enough—maybe, just maybe, she'd get to catch a glimpse behind the slightest bit of crumbling. But before she could, her mother cut in again, punctuating her previous assertion—“it's just not worth it,” she said.

And suddenly it was Sarah who felt like crumbling.

“I'm going to work now,” she said, letting the words just fly out as she finished turning, and headed towards the door, literally boiling over.

But after a few steps, she paused, only hesitating because she thought she heard her mother coming after her, and wanted to make sure to wipe her eyes before she caught up with her. She was just glad that she'd never let Eva talk her into start wearing make-up.

“*Wait,*” said her mother, just as Sarah came to a stop.

Here it comes, she thought, as she reached up and swiped below both of her eyes real quick with the back of her wrist, making sure to then grab the brim of her visor and pull it even further down on her forehead, braced now for wind, sun, and maybe rain.

As she stood and stared down at box of “Old Clothes,” she was certain that her mother would see it there (if she hadn't already) next to the refrigerator, now in full view. She was certain that her mother would see it, and afraid now more than ever—especially with the way she'd been acting towards her—that she'd object to her having it. It was same kind of fear, she realized, that that mystical alien person Yoda must have been talking about in the new Star Wars movie she'd seen recently (another one that Eva had taken her to, and more proof that she wasn't always drunk and making out with boys), when he warned the little blonde boy that fear would only lead to anger. Because even though at the time she remembered telling herself that that was not true (while Sarah was

no stranger to fear, she almost never felt a full, true sense of anger), that was exactly what it was doing now—leading her to that rarely-visited land in her heart whose amber waves all pointed the exact same direction—towards Anger.

But as she braced herself for her mother's reaction, all that she said was “I've got something to give to you” as she passed by her on the left, then kept walking towards the hall. At one point, right before she came to a complete stop in the doorway, Sarah thought she might have seen her mother glance down at the box; but if she did, and indeed saw it, nothing about the way she held her body then, as she remained standing with her back to her, seemed to indicate any sense of recognition.

“Well *come on,*” she said, turning just her head—“it's in the living room”—then continued on into the hallway, where she immediately turned left into the living room and disappeared.

Sarah did not care to stick around long enough to see what her mother apparently felt she needed to give her. For her part, Sarah couldn't think of anything she could give her that she could possibly even need; not unless she was capable of magic.

Even as she followed her into the living room, she told herself she was doing so just so she could tell her mother exactly that—that she had all she needed—and then leave. And the good thing was, it wouldn't have even been a total lie, because even if she left for work with her arms virtually empty, one thing she'd learned about herself over the past couple of years in Fayetteville, was that she was perfectly capable of picking things up as she went along. And wasn't that, after all, all that anyone had ever truly needed to get by? That capability? Besides, whatever it was her mother had to offer, Sarah'd already decided she wasn't going to accept it. So why not just cut out and end this further

charade before it had the chance to start?

Sarah stepped just past the threshold into the living room, and then stopped; she was not going to let herself get sucked in any further than she had to. She could speak her piece just fine from right where she was. Off in the far corner, her mother kept a desk, which used to be used to store bills and important documents, and was also where she sat to balance the family budget, and write an occasional letter. But now the desk was bare except for a single cardboard box (it was a bit smaller than the “old clothes” box), which her mother was digging through for something.

“Really mom,” said Sarah, “you don't need to bother.”

Her mother didn't say anything, but just raised a single index finger, indicating for her to wait as she continued to search. Meanwhile, four distinct words kept coming to the tip of Sarah's tongue to say—four distinct words, set with adequate space between them, so that maybe her mother would get the hint that she meant them: *I—don't—need—anything.*

But she couldn't force them past the threshold of her lips. And neither could she force herself to just turn and leave. Something instead was holding her there, keeping her contained. Something apparently stronger than any possible fear, anger, resentment, and subsequent suffering that, at the end of the equation of which—if you listened to the ancient alien Yoda (which you'd better if you were a Jedi knight, thought Sarah)—was the path to the Dark Side. So whatever was holding her there, it must have been stronger than that old reel. A bit of curiosity, perhaps? But didn't the church used to say that just as bad? In this case—definitely, yes. They were right.

“Here it is,” said her mother, pulling a smaller white box out from the bigger one.

Then she turned and started to open it. “Come on,” she said, with her head down, waving Sarah in.

After a moment's hesitation, Sarah made a disgusted sigh (which she knew was meant more for herself than for her mother) as she gave up and walked into the center of the room. “What is it?” she asked, turning away, and looking out past the open partition to her right, off into the sunroom.

Grabbing onto her own right forearm with her left hand, she pulled it up across her mid-section and just held it there, eventually letting her eyes follow suit and fall down to the box in her mother's right hand, seeing if maybe she could judge what was in it any better from just a few feet's distance. But her mother didn't give her much of a chance; it didn't take her long to get the box open, and slide its contents out into her open palm.

At first it looked to Sarah like just another small, flat, black box, wrapped in bubble wrap, and the notion struck her as beyond ridiculous, making her wonder what sort of stupid joke the world must be playing on her.

“Now the battery should already be charged,” said her mother, as she pulled the small black object out of the bubble wrap, and held it out between her thumb and forefinger. “But that doesn't mean you can just throw away the charger, now—,” with her other hand, she held up the white box, and shook it, apparently to let Sarah know that there was still something in it (apparently, the charger). “Because every once in a while—,” she said, “unless you want the battery to run out—,” she jiggled the black object between her thumb and forefinger, “you'll of course have to *re*-charge it. And what *that* consists of is simply plugging it into the charger.” She shook the white box again. “Got it?”

Her mother then extended out the hand with the little black rectangle in it, apparently meaning for Sarah to take it from her. But instead she just looked at it, as if it were a toad, and she was afraid it would give her warts.

“What is it?” she asked.

“Honey, it's a cell phone,” said her mother, with what sounded like maybe a hint of exasperation in her voice. But whatever, thought Sarah, feeling defensive—it sure didn't *look* like any cell phone she'd seen before. At least not the one that Eva had.

“Well thanks but I don't need it,” Sarah mumbled, forgetting to give the words their proper space.

“Go on,” said her mother, thrusting the phone out even further. “Just take it. And I want you to call me whenever you get to—wherever you end up going tonight. Alright? The number to Jack's place is already listed inside—all you have to do is...” and she started to explain to her how the phone worked, but Sarah didn't really follow any of it. Instead, she was too busy wondering what was behind her mother's logic to buy the stupid phone for her in the first place. For instance why should she even care if Sarah called her from—wherever the heck she ended up going tonight? That was what she wanted to know. It wasn't like she ever cared to know where David ended up on the night that he left the house in Susquehanna. But once again, she found she couldn't force the words out on her own. If they were going to come, she guessed they would just do so on their own time.

Her mother sighed, and lowered her head. “Would you please just take it?” she asked. When Sarah didn't answer, she said, “now come on, I have to go back upstairs and finish packing. The men from the moving company will be here any minute.” After a

brief moment, she added, “and don't think you'll *owe* me or anything, because it's not like that.”

“Well what is it like then?” asked Sarah, averting her eyes as she shrugged.

“Because I don't get it—why would you buy me a cell phone if you thought—”

“Well to tell you the truth, Sarah, I *didn't* buy this thinking I was going to give it to you,” she cut in, “but now I am. I just didn't think—,” she said, but then stopped, and must have changed what she was going to say. “I guess I was just hoping you wouldn't actually go through with this.”

Sarah didn't know how to take any of this. Was it that her mother was actually feeling guilty? And *that* was why she was giving her the phone? She supposed if her mother did regret the way she'd handled her older siblings' situations—the way she'd basically just cast them out and wrote them off entirely—then she'd want to make sure that her and Sarah's time together under the same roof didn't end on the same sour whole note. But if that was the case, she'd sure never actually shown it. In fact, since David and Meredith had gone, her mother had never even so much as mentioned their names, and would quickly find a way to change the subject whenever Sarah would bring them up, even in a more happy light. Besides, when it came to her and Sarah, it wasn't like her mother had done much to hold up her *own* end of the familial harmony lately, what with dragging Sarah all the way down to North Carolina with her in the first place, where she was hundreds of miles away from any person, place, or thing she'd ever known or cared about, just to then turn around and basically abandon her here in this restless old house, where she had no one to keep her company but TV friends and old family ghosts, all so she could start running around with some new man. And Sarah didn't know about her

mother, but as far as she was concerned, she didn't feel the need to go around and start creating more ghosts than she already lived with. Because she could deal with the old ones—any more might be overkill.

More than likely what it was, it now occurred to her, was that her mother was probably just now coming to realize that she was about to lose her power over Sarah, and all of her influence over the direction of Sarah's life, and the phone was like her last ditch life-line to try and hold onto it. From what Meredith had told her, her mother had always been the family's principal sculptress—even before their father's accident—and was probably just afraid of the idea of having to start completely over, and from scratch (and every good Jedi knew what *fear* could lead to). And that was exactly what it would be like if Sarah left—not only for Sarah, but for both of them. Because until that moment, they would still be a family, and her mother still the lead sculptress—the only one who held the tools to both smooth things out, and chisel them down to nothing. True, she'd be starting a new sort of family with Jack, but Sarah'd only had to see them interact with each other once to know that theirs was a different dynamic. It was almost as if they fed *off* of one another, not on. In fact, the time she'd gone out to dinner with the two of them, she had to sit there and watch them actually literally feed each other—it was disgusting.

But then this was all conjecture; she didn't know what her mother was thinking. It would always just be conjecture with her mother. And that was the most frustrating part about it.

“Well I am going through with this, mom,” said Sarah, “that's the whole point. And while *you* might not have been around enough to see it, I can actually take pretty decent care of myself these days.”

“And I've no doubt,” said her mother. “But then you also know that part of taking care means taking *caution*. As in not walking into situations with your eyes closed. And what happens when you find an apartment you like, and they ask you to provide a phone number on the rental application? What are you going to do then?”

Sarah shrugged her shoulders. She guessed she'd just wait and figure that out when the time came. If nothing else, she could get a phone of her own.

“Alright,” said her mother, putting to put the phone back in its bubble wrap. “How about this, then? You can either take the phone—,” she held it up now, and away from Sarah's reach, “*or—*,” she closed her hand around it, “you take *nothing*.”

Sarah looked up into her eyes, questioningly. “What do you mean, *nothing*?” she asked.

“Exactly what I said,” she said. “*Nothing*.”

Sarah finally thought she understood when she saw her mother's eyes look past her, back towards the entrance in the corner. Because Sarah knew without even having to look that, from that certain vantage, her mother would be able to see past the hall and into the kitchen, and to whatever might be lying at the foot of the refrigerator.

Had she been holding the box for leverage all this time, Sarah wondered? But she decided it best not to pursue any further inquiry. When her mother held the phone out to her one last time, she took it. Begrudgingly, but she took it. Resisting the immediate urge to just squeeze and pop all of the bubbles at once, she let her hand drop and hang down at her side. Her mother then held out the white box by the top flap, letting it hang in the air for a moment in front of her until Sarah reached up and grabbed it with the other hand, letting it too fall to her side.

“Good,” said her mother. “Now I suppose I can't get you to promise to actually call, but I'd appreciate it if you did. And I understand you want to do this on your own, but if you start to find things aren't working out, say, quite the way you'd hoped—well I'm sure Jack won't mind if we keep a light on for you. And of course we'll keep you in our prayers.”

At this point, Sarah's hope didn't reach much further past the next few hours. After that, her only real hope was that—whatever might happen—she'd avoid ending up just making that sad march up Jack Lasch's well-lit porch steps with her GoodFoods visor in hand and head hung down as far as it would go. She knew that this was what her mother was picturing as well, because whatever her words might have actually indicated, it was obvious that the slight lifts of sincerity in her voice were nothing more than a gloss. She wasn't fooling anyone.

“Well—,” said her mother, as they both just continued to stand there—Sarah with her eyes lowered, the visor's brim blocking out everything above the baggy blue fabric at her mother's knees. Now that things had been more or less settled (at least for the most immediate time-being), she couldn't really tell what her mother had in mind. While it was true that she had gotten to be much closer with her mother at one point than either of her siblings had probably ever been with her, she guessed it wasn't so surprising that their relationship as mother and daughter was landing on that same sour note, going down that same old road (dead end, no turning back). Even if the actuality of it snuck up on Sarah a lot more quickly than she'd ever dared imagine.

Neither Sarah nor her mother had ever been big on displays of affection—public or private. And it wasn't like her mother's goodbyes with her other siblings had been in

any way heartfelt (though she did remember hearing an awful lot of *banging* around from her bedroom those nights). So why did she seem to expect any more from the two of them now? And how, for that matter, did she think something like a proper hug would come off right now, in their still riled states? A bang? A whimper? First bang, then whimper?

“Well, good luck then,” said her mother. “I better let you get to work. We wouldn't want you to start off on the wrong foot.” Sarah glanced up in time to see her perform a quick half-bow, half-curtsey that she hadn't done or seen done in years, even though it'd been ingrained in her as a girl as the proper way to wish goodbye in most formal settings. And what could be more formal, she wondered, than a Fisk family goodbye?

Her mother turned and walked straight through the living room and into the sunroom, past the stack of boxes, pausing only as she got to the doorway that led back into the hall.

“Hmm,” she said, “who knows,” looking off as if she was thinking. “Maybe you will get lucky.” Then she turned to face Sarah as she added, “after all, you've always been sort of like our little black sheep, haven't you?” She smiled as she continued on through the doorway, into the hall, and up the stairs.

Sarah didn't know what the heck that was supposed to mean. To her, they'd always been nothing if not just a bunch of different colored sheep. But she decided it wasn't important and not to think about it. Besides, it was time to leave this place behind. If she hurried, she could maybe even get out and on her way before the moving men showed up. She just didn't think she could have stood the sight of a couple of strange

men in coveralls right then, having to watch them come swooping in and taking over their house like a couple of worker bees, just to start carrying everything off and away. She could see her mother—the queen bee—directing them this way and that, telling them what was important to take with them, and what could be banished to the trash heap of memory for the Gingerich's to then, just a couple of days later, come crawling all over (to her, there were like a million of them) and picking through like a swarm of black ants.

That was odd, she thought.

She hadn't even been thinking about what she was going to do with the television until it suddenly blinked on to the right of her periphery. She'd been peering down through the bubble wrap at the little black rectangle in her hand, trying to at least come to some small understanding of how one might use an object such as this as a phone and not just some sort of paperweight (like where were the buttons, for instance?) before she'd given up and just tucked it back into its box, when she'd heard the tiny click, and then pop, and then a series of crackles, snaps and static as the old box set started to warm itself up, before the noises finally stopped, and in a wash she felt the warm, muted glow from its cathode ray against her face and body.

She'd almost forgot it'd do that sometimes—just turn itself on like that; and for a second, it'd surprised her. But not too much. After all, it was an awfully old set, and she'd long gotten used to a lot of its stranger habits of mind. In fact, as she once again considered the logistics of getting the clunker somehow into her car to take with her, and finally decided she was going to have to just leave it there, it finally hit her how much she was going to miss them. It. All of it.

What she hadn't got fully used to yet—as she turned to take in one or two last

moments of viewing pleasure before she'd have to unplug the thing and leave—was some of the things that the set showed *on* its screen sometimes. Like now, for instance, as she looked down at where the box was set, directly on the carpet, and saw through its convex window, an awfully dark-skinned man with short, tight hair and bare shoulders, eyes rolling into the back of his head, as he slowly, steadily proceeded to force what looked to Sarah like a big, thick knitting needle into one cheek and eventually out the other, pushing it *straight* through the deep, dark skin without even flinching. “Oh my *God*,” she said out-loud. The camera pulled back to reveal that the man was practically naked, wearing only a loin cloth and a series of dark tattoos, barely distinguishable across his already dark chest and arms. He just sat there on the ground with his legs crossed, and with his arms extended down to where the hands rested palm-up on his knees like someone meditating, praying.

His head was lowered now, and seemed to be just barely bobbing up and down, as his eyes hovered close to being completely closed, and the needle remained pierced through his face. Sarah was surprised to see that there was absolutely no blood, just a bit of spit hanging from the dark man's lips.

The camera pulled back even further now, as a couple of equally dark and bare-chested women, each wearing huge, dangling earrings, and some kind of deep, red fabric wrapped intricately around their heads, came onto the scene with their own eyes lowered, and knelt before the man, each setting a plain-looking clay pot down at his feet before standing back up and walking away.

“Huh,” Sarah said to herself, and stood there for a moment longer; she'd never seen anything quite so wild as this. She figured it must have been PBS.

She stepped forward, turning the knob on the TV until it clicked, and the picture shrunk down, squeezed almost instantly by the extinguishing advance of the vertical and horizontal dark into a tiny white circle of light in the exact center of the screen. Within the blink of an eye, the circle disappeared. But instead of unplugging the set like she'd planned, Sarah thought she might leave the Gingerich's with a bit of surprise instead. Who knew—maybe they'd see the thing blink on one day by itself and come to the conclusion that the place was haunted, and leave. It would serve them right; if Sarah couldn't live there any longer, then maybe no one should. She went into the kitchen and gathered up her other box and left.

At work, Sarah spent most of the first few hours basically numb, and going through the motions. Business seemed to have dropped somewhat by the time she got there, but there were still enough customers to keep her busy, enough to help keep her mind, if not off of things, then at least at a safe distance. At one point, Eva must have had noticed that she wasn't seeming her usual “Zen” self, and so for the second time that day, asked her what was wrong. Sarah—who happened to be busy trying to reach a scoop of potato salad way at the front of the serve and display case when she asked her—initially said “nothing.” But of course she didn't mean it; once she'd finally secured the scoopful of salad, and was able to tap it all into the little plastic container she'd set on the counter, and then seal it, she turned to Eva with the container in hand, about to go ring up the customer, and said they should wait until their next break—then they could talk.

“Fumigation?” asked Eva, pulling off a strip of cheese from the block she'd

confiscated from the deli right before they'd slipped into the break room. "That's what's making Sare-Bear so sad?"

"Yeah, well," said Sarah, slumping down at the end of the cafeteria-style table bench. "It'll all going on at least another day I think. Or maybe two. And absolutely no one's allowed to enter the house until then—not even just to slip in and grab something, is what they said. They said whoever did that would get poisoned right along with the ants."

"I'm sorry," said Eva, chewing on of the bit of cheese for a moment before making a yuck face and spitting it out into the big industrial-sized trash can beside her. "So what are you going to do?" she asked, then looked at the remainder of the block in her hand before she decided to just toss that as well.

"Well my mom said I could stay with her at her boyfriend's place if I wanted," said Sarah, glancing down at her feet. "But that's the thing—," she looked back up at Eva, "I *really* don't think I want to."

"Oh," said Eva, "believe me—I understand exactly what you mean," then she started reaching into the pocket of her jeans for something (Eva wore jeans because claimed to be allergic to khaki, and had even handed Doug a signed doctor's that said as much on her first day of work). "Me and my stepmom used to get into *so* many fights when her and my dad first started dating—." She pulled her hand out of her pocket, but there was nothing in it. "Do you think I could borrow a dollar maybe?" she asked. "For the vending machine?"

"Sure, if I have one," said Sarah, reaching into her khakis' cargo pocket. Actually, she knew for a fact that she had just under a thousand dollars in there, though most of it

was in twenties. She figured that the ones would probably be at the top of the stack, so she ended up just guessing at which end was the top of the stack, and grabbing one of the bills from it. “Here you go,” she said, holding it out to Eva—a crisp new one dollar bill.

“Ooh,” said Eva, widening her eyes as she took the bill. “Thanks Sare-Bear—,” she kissed at the air a few inches in front of Sarah's face, “you're the best.” Then she turned and walked over to the vending machine, and started humming something Sarah didn't recognize as she tried to decide what she wanted.

“So,” said Sarah, a little confused by Eva's previous statement, “you live with your dad *and* your stepmom, then?” She'd always just assumed the lady she lived with was just her *mom* mom.

“Of course,” said Eva, as she bent down to look at the snacks near the bottom. “*Silly*—I told you that.” Maybe she had, now that Sarah thought about it. But then again, Eva usually covered a ton of subjects over the course of a working day, and it was hard sometimes to keep up.

“You said you used to fight a lot,” said Sarah, “but I mean—you get along fine now, right? I mean she isn't like really mean and vengeful like some kind of fairy tale stepmother, is she?”

“No,” said Eva, finally standing up, about to insert the dollar into the machine; but then she must have changed her mind. “Not really. I mean we still have our disagreements over things. But all in all we're pretty much peaches.” After a couple more seconds of scanning, she said “*ooh*,” and slipped the dollar into the bill acceptor slot. “Skittles!” After bending down to collect the bag of candy from the dispenser, she turned around and offered some to Sarah.

“No thanks,” said Sarah as Eva popped a few pieces into her own mouth.

“Wow,” said Eva, leaning back against the machine, now with a mouthful of the colorful candy. “You really are depressed, aren't you? I mean who would turn down a Skittle?” She smiled as she finished chewing and swallowing the first bunch, then tipped her head back and poured some straight from the bag into her mouth.

Sarah, for her part, tried to make herself look a bit more upbeat. But it was hard. She could smile all she wanted, but she got the feeling it was fooling no one. And every time she tried consciously to hold her shoulders up, after a while, she'd lose track, and they'd just keep falling back into a slump.

After three or four mouthfuls, Eva finished off the bag of Skittles, and turned and dropped the empty wrapper into the trash.

“So,” she said, leaning back against the vending machine. “I hear where there's a pretty nice homeless shelter downtown. I mean I'm sure it fills up pretty quick with some of them old vets, but I bet if you called down now, they'd hold a bed for you.”

Sarah was pretty sure she was joking, but it seemed like an awful mean joke if she was. When she looked back up at her, she must have been frowning, because that was when Eva always seemed to smile biggest—when others were not.

“Jeeze, would you just relax already?” asked Eva, reaching out and tapping the tip of Sarah's visor real quick. “Of course I'm not going to let you stay at a homeless shelter, crazy person. You can sleep over at *my* house. All you had to do was ask.”

Sarah thanked Eva and accepted her offer, but for some reason couldn't seem to fully “just relax” until their break together was over, and she started to get back into the usual flow of work. And for a while at least, as they soon fell into the pre-dinner rush,

she started to feel better than she had in days. Almost like a person who had enough money in their pocket to spend on all the Skittles in the world if they wanted to; instead of just a person who knew they'd have to save that money so they could spend it soon on a down payment for a stupid apartment. If they were lucky *soon*, that was.

But soon the rush died down. Doug asked Sarah to start setting up the industrial slicer because there was some prep work that had to get done for the next morning's shift, then went back to his office. About a minute later, he came back out with his tan jacket on and a prep list in his hand and said he had to go. That was right, it was Friday, she thought—the weekend. Then he left, leaving Sarah in charge of the deli for the night, along with the prep list.

And it wasn't until then that Eva decided to walk over and mention “oh, by the way, I set us up with some dates tonight. It's with a couple of guys I met from base once. Some place called the Sleepy Head Saloon or something like that—I don't know—somewhere out by the airport. But not too far I don't think. Brad said we can meet them there.”

Sarah pulled on a lever that locked the slicer's blade into place, then set her hands down, and looked over to Eva with just the start of a question on her lips—*wh*—and that was it; she wasn't sure which.

“But don't worry,” said Eva, “it'll be completely casual. In fact, you don't even have to talk to the guy if you don't want to though I think you should—it's mainly just to get us in. After that, we can pretty much just do our own thing.”

And what would that be, Sarah wondered? She didn't even think she *had* a thing. How could she—she'd never even drank before, let alone gone out to a bar (at least not

one without a restaurant attached to it). Let alone gone out on a date to one.

“Well hey,” said Eva, “I gotta go back to the washroom to fix my hair so I can do my face. Let me know if you need anything, MK?”

Eva had already turned and was on her way to the back corner of the worker's area where the restroom was before Sarah decided “oh” and then (at least for the time being she guessed it was) “MK.” But what made things seem not so MK, then, was when Sarah quickly realized she'd have literally *nothing* to wear out to a bar that night—absolute *zero*. Except, of course, for her work clothes, but that was it.

She decided just not to worry about it for now, and to get started on the prep list. The reality of what Eva had done had yet to fully sink in yet anyhow, and in truth, she didn't think she wanted to let it. Instead she'd let the most mindless part of her deli day take over, and let come what may. But when she unfolded the sheet of paper and blinked, seeing for the first time what was actually on the list, that was when (she blinked again) things started to seem less than MK yet again.

“Company picnic?” she read, which was followed by a dash, which was followed by *5 pounds ham, 10 pounds roast beef*. When combined with the typical workload, she quickly realized, it would come out to be something like four times the amount of prep work she usual had to do on a Friday night. It was ridiculous; why hadn't Doug told her sooner? That way, she could have at least gotten a jump on it earlier, instead of having wasted time taking her second break.

But whatever, she thought, as she went over to the cooler to collect three halves of ham and two full roast beefs. With the extra work, she'd at least get a few extra dollars in her pay check, she supposed. And the longer she took to finish the job, the more she

could delay their stupid “date.” By the time she dropped the last of the hunks of meat down on the counter by the slicer, and reached down to the shelf beneath it to grab a fresh tray, it occurred to her that it was the principal that mattered most, though—what if she actually wanted to go out on this stupid date?

And over the next couple of hours of doing nothing but slicing slice after slice of ham, after slice after slice of roast beef, it was that very matter of principal that continued to matter most to her. It continued to matter most to her all the way up until about the time, as Sarah was concentrating on cutting down to the narrow end of the very last ham half (she still had a roast beef to go though), that Eva came out of nowhere, almost, popping immediately into Sarah's periphery and asking “hey, how do I look?”

Sarah turned and said “Jeeze, Eva,” letting the ham drop, and releasing the power switch, as the slicer buzzed to a stop. “You're not supposed to do that—you scared me.”

“Oh,” said Eva, twisting her lips. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to.” While she was still wearing her work clothes, for some reason, she had tied her short, wavy, dark brown hair up into pigtails, and had made up her face to look like she was both tired, and had freckles. Sarah's face, meanwhile, grew both smiled and confused at the sight.

“Oh, did I forget to mention?” asked Eva, as she started twisting at one of her pigtails. “The place we're going to is like a cowboy bar. Like with line dancing, and twangy-sounding guitar music.” She shrugged. “So I don't know—I guess I just thought it'd be fun to look the part.”

“I see,” said Sarah, glancing down briefly. “But then—what's the part?”

Eva dropped the pigtail, and seemed to frown a bit. “You mean you can't tell?” she asked.

“Is it a—*cowgirl* maybe?” asked Sarah.

“Well it'll probably be more obvious once we stop back at my place to change clothes,” said Eva. “But what it's *supposed* to be is an ugly—well—slightly ugly but still sexy hillbilly farmgirl.”

“Okay,” said Sarah, though she didn't look like any farmgirl she'd ever seen. Though now that she thought about it, she blushed as she remembered getting poked fun at by her siblings for actually having a bit of freckles when she was younger, back when her hair used to also be closer to red than her current blond. Luckily, she'd grown out of the freckles, though sometimes in the summer, the skin on her cheeks would still grow patchy and rough. Maybe she just didn't make the connection at first because Eva's pretend freckles were more like just a few random black dots. “So. You say you're a hillbilly *and* a farmgirl?” she asked, not necessarily drawing an obvious association between the two like Eva apparently had.

“Yeah, well—same difference,” said Eva.

“Okay,” said Sarah, “I *guess*. But then what's with the dark circles? I mean I can see how the freckles would kind of make sense, but the eye shadow just makes it look like you're sad and need a nap.”

“Oh,” said Eva, “that's just cause farmgirls tend to look all tired all the time for some reason.”

“They do?” asked Sarah.

“And, you know—how they're usually kind of ugly?”

“Well,” said Sarah, feeling slightly defensive, “*no*. I mean not really. I'm sure there's plenty of farm girls out there who are actually very pretty.”

“Well yeah, of course,” said Eva, “I’m sure there is. Just like not all of ‘em’s always tired and got big ugly freckles all over their face. I just said they *tend* to be, that’s all.”

“Okay,” said Sarah, begrudging a slight smile (but only slightly). “I understand. And it looks fine, it really does—but I should probably get back to work on this list?” She held up the list.

“Okay,” said Eva, perking up, “well thanks. And don’t forget to let me know if you need anything.”

Sarah was kind of thinking that the list might have let her know that. But apparently it didn’t. Because instead of sticking around to help, Eva just turned and went back to the restroom in the corner again. And it wasn’t like Sarah was really mad at her or anything for not helping. Nor for insinuating that girls who grew up on farms were all inherently ugly. After all, Eva was, well—*Eva*. And besides, Sarah felt she should be thankful that she was letting her stay with her tonight, which was after all a very nice thing for a friend to do. A friendly thing to do. Not to mention she guessed it had also probably been a pretty nice thing to do to have set her up on a date like she did, even if, at the moment, the actual prospect of it felt more like something of a nightmare scenario. (Could Eva be the devil the priests had always warned them about, she wondered, the question coming to her quick and fully formed? The one that tells you just to jump, child—the angels will come to break your fall? But she immediately tossed that notion out; nobody could know Sarah’s turns of heart that well—not even herself).

But nevertheless, as she turned the slicer back on, and got back cutting the rest of the roast beef, it was that very same matter of principal that once again started to creep

slowly back into her nerves, slipping in through their very apertures, until it eventually snuck into her blood, *becoming* the blood, just as Kool-Aid mixes with water to become one, or whatever of himself Christ was able to sneak with slight-of-hand magic into those barrels of wedding water. Perhaps it was this that caused her to rush, the initial principal no longer mattering quite as much as the mind's fear of being unloved by anyone, no longer mattering quite as much as the body's lonely anger over this, no longer mattering quite as much as the quickening the blood, which drove around and around in her until she must have just thrust too hard with her hand against push-grip, causing the meat to momentarily jam against the blade, and then—just like a passenger in a car crash, immediately upon impact—the hand to pitch forward, and the pinky to catch the blade, so that the thing in the blood might escape.

“*Fuck—*,” Sarah immediately jumped back, and grabbed the sliced right hand with the untouched left. She was probably trying to save herself from the sight of the cut as much as, if not more than she was actually trying to inhibit the flow of blood. And she continued to save herself from the sight until Eva rushed over from the corner to see what was up.

“Crap,” was all that Sarah could say, her eyes filled with tears as she looked up at Eva. She didn't show her right away, but instead held the hand down and away from her, and continued to squeeze, as the tears in her eyes, too, refused to drop. “Crap,” she said again, looking back up after having briefly attempted to lift the left hand away from the cut, but to no avail.

“Oh my God, what happened?” asked Eva, walking around to Sarah's right side to see what she was hiding there.

“I cut myself,” said Sarah, breathing through her teeth as she lowered her eyes, and lifted the married hands just slightly away from her midsection.

“Well how'd you do that? Is it bad?” asked Eva, bending down to try and get a better look—“can I see it?” But Sarah retracted.

Eva stood back up straight and looked briefly around herself, before turning to look at the slicer behind her.

“Well it can't be too bad,” she said, lifting to her tiptoes in order to get a fuller view of the contraption, “I don't see any blood.” She then dropped to her feet, squinting her eyes at the countertop. “Oh,” she said, losing the squint as she seemed to be following with her eyes the same line of blood that ran from the tray of roast beef, down along the stainless steel counter, and over the edge to the floor as Sarah was. “There's some.”

The blood had apparently stopped dripping when Sarah had covered the cut with her hand, but it must have started back up again, because she could now feel it running down her wrist. She looked down just in time to see a huge drop fall and land right on the toe of her old, but still nice (as in still fairly clean until now) white Reeboks. So she quickly moved the hands further out in front of her, where the blood would just hit the floor when it dripped.

“Sarah,” said Eva, having focused her attention back on Sarah's hands, “have you even looked at it yet?”

“Not exactly,” she said, the liquid in her sinuses making her sound like she had a cold.

“Well don't you think you should?” asked Eva.

“I suppose,” said Sarah, sniffing and blinking away some of the tears from her eyes.

“Well here, then,” said Eva, leaning in closer, “why don't you just let *me* look at it? That way you don't have to.”

“Mmmm...” said Sarah, considering Eva's proposal for a moment. Then, “no,” she said, pulling the hand back a little bit, “I don't think so,” slightly shaking her head at her.

“Well we've got to do something,” said Eva, standing back up, “and soon—,” she nodded down at Sarah's shoes. “Otherwise you're going to have yourself a pair of ruby red slippers before too long.”

“Hmm,” said Sarah, sniffing again as she looked back down at her feet. “Maybe not. Maybe if I wait long enough, I can just click them together and it'll go away.”

“Well—would you rather I went and got a manager, then?” asked Eva. “How about Pat? She's nice. She won't let you die.”

“No,” said Sarah, shaking her head a bit more forcefully. “No manager.”

“Then what should we do?” asked Eva. “Do you want me to drive you to the emergency room? I mean I know I don't have a license or anything, but I'm actually not a bad driver. I promise I won't wreck us.”

“Um, no,” said Sarah. “Could you please just go back in Doug's office and get the first aid kit off his desk? I just wanna get a bandage ready. Then we'll look—together.” She looked up at Eva, “MK?”

“MK,” said Eva, and smiled as she turned and headed back to Doug's office. When she was gone, Sarah remembered she was supposed to elevate the wound if she

wanted it to ever stop bleeding, so she raised up her hands and held them just below her chin, and soon enough, it did stop bleeding.

The fright of course ended up being worse than the cut. Instead of cutting into the pinky towards the bone, the blade had swiped it sideways, making an elliptical-shaped cut of about a centimeter's width. Once they wiped away the blood, though, Sarah started giggling when she saw that the little flap of skin actually looked just like a shark's closed bottom lip. When Eva then called it "kind of cute," Sarah couldn't help but giggle even more, even though it hurt her stomach muscles, and made her have to ask Eva for another tissue to wipe her eyes and nose.

"Jeeze, I can't believe I'm such a baby," she said, dabbing the Kleenex at the corners of her eyes.

Eva suggested they could still go by the hospital if she thought she needed stitches, but Sarah was pretty sure a regular Band-Aid would do the trick. And in fact, once she put it on, the little square white pad on the Band-Aid covered both the length and the width of the cut perfectly. After that, while Eva had gone back to the office to put away the First-Aid kit, Sarah thought she was feeling good enough to finish her work, but when she stood up from the overturned bucket she was using to sit down on (Doug didn't allow chairs in the workspace), she started to feel lightheaded, and had to hold herself up with her left arm against the countertop.

"Sarah, what are you doing?" asked Eva when she got back and saw her standing there. When Sarah explained what she'd been trying to do, Eva said "are you crazy?"

It was eventually decided that Eva would finish up the slicing using the manual slicer, and then finish cleaning up while Sarah went into the office and prepared the

royalty and deposit paperwork for the night. The lightheadedness quickly passed, and while Sarah sat bobbing up and down in Doug's hydraulic swivel chair as she counted the store's money, she actually started to feel really good—almost excited—feeling about something (though what, exactly, she couldn't put her finger on). All that she knew was that she wanted to hurry up and get done so Eva would have enough time to have the fun tonight that she wanted. She still wasn't really too keen on the idea of going to a bar with a couple of strangers herself, but knew that Eva was probably still looking forward to it, and figured she owed her as much, seeing as how Sarah had probably already made them way late. Plus, if it hadn't been for Eva, Sarah probably would have ended up actually fainting or something at some point—especially if she would have had to have confronted the injury all by herself (she probably wouldn't have even gotten to the part where she had to clean off all the blood). And then the work would have definitely never gotten done.

Chapter 2

Godwin felt a flutter at the back of his neck, and slapped down harder than he'd intended. He checked his hand, and along with some little black legs, there was a spot of blood, which wasn't a surprise. It was dusk now, and soon there'd be more mosquitoes, along with plenty of other bugs he'd yet to catch the names of since he'd moved down from Pennsylvania earlier in the summer. Although he was technically about a fifteen miles from base at the moment, he got the feeling that things were the same no matter where you went in North Carolina. With nothing else handy, he wiped the blood on the side his uncle's old BDU jacket he'd gotten in the habit of wearing pretty much everywhere he went these days (which was usually just around base), supposing that the smear of matter wouldn't stick out too much amid the greens and grays and old dried house-paint.

He was on the first day of a three day pass, standing with his former girlfriend Courtney on her parent's back deck outside Fayetteville, watching as she circled past him, moving from post to post with a torch lighter, lighting one by one each of the six Citronella lanterns that stood sentinel against the sure-fire mosquitoes and collecting darkness, with one bat, and then another swooping down and across the yard in a concentrated flash of even darker darkness.

But maybe "with her" was overstating things just a bit. There had been a time when they were closer than any two things not inside each other could be, not only as partners in hand-holding for that brief period in middle school, but as good friends and neighbors, all the way up until the end of her freshman year (Godwin's sophomore), which marked her family's departure down south to be closer to Courtney's older

brother's military post. But for over an hour now, since he'd arrived just at the winding down her high school graduation party, she'd been nothing but distant, having sat him down next to the buffet table, but spending most of the dwindling hour with a group of friends he'd never met before, speaking in southern tongues, and laughing their heads off for a while before passing out see ya's and goodbyes.

Had he done something particularly wrong, he wondered? He didn't know. They'd only seen each other once in the past three years, and she'd seemed happy enough to see him when he first showed up. Surprised a little, maybe; while his mother had called him to tell him about the invitation she'd sent to the Pennsylvania house, he'd purposely made no contact to let her know he was coming. Nor had he remembered to bring her a gift, which was an oversight he was now mentally kicking himself over. But after the initial excitement, as she'd stepped back from their brief hug, and finally seemed to be taking him in, the look she'd gave him then seemed predicated on something other than just the sight of his empty arms. Whatever it was, her reaction to it seemed to go much deeper than simple disappointment, to something almost even closer to disgust.

He'd wanted to tell her, right then, what he'd done for her—how he'd joined the army, and how it wasn't just about him following her around like a little lost puppy, or trying to impress her. He conceded that part of him might have hoped she'd come to see him as having become more of a man—a real adult person—as opposed to what he'd been when she'd left (and if he put any stock into that look she'd given him, how she still apparently saw him)—as a kid. Or just a kid. A couple of kid-hearted kids.

But truth was, he'd been afraid as heck for her. She was so young, yet even at fifteen had already made plans to give herself over to something much bigger than

herself—to forgo work and college, a life of meaningless transaction, in order to actually make something of herself, and of that seemingly ruined world that lay beyond the shores of their country. Yet for a while, he'd actually tried to talk her out of it. Then shortly before her family left for North Carolina, she got mad and told him she was sick of hearing it from him. And although she later apologized, all of their conversations thereafter seemed somehow deflated. They'd eventually have a few good ones over the phone, long-distance, but after a while, for whatever reason, their calls back and forth became fewer and farther between, until they ultimately just stopped. It was the most inexplicable thing in this life for some time.

While his worry dwindled in strength over time, it still remained like a stone in the goo of his mind—sometimes it'd fall to the base, and others it'd float to the front, but mostly remained buoying about the middle. All thoughts concerning Courtney would either drop downcast towards a slender nostalgia, or else cast about blindly, reaching for anxieties he couldn't always name. But then after he ran into her last fall when she unexpectedly showed up at the homecoming football game against Saint Mary's with a few of her girlfriends, along with a newly evolved sense of style—hair cropped short, combat boots, camouflage tank-top—his worries suddenly flashed back on, full-screen, and in vivid color.

For months, it'd literally killed him at night—resting on the couch after a long day of work with his uncle, the TV on mute as he stared at the blank wall, a waft of sheer curtain, the screen projecting a peripheral splash of sports and news over everything—imagining what it would be like for her to be alone out in that larger world, apart from anything she'd ever known and loved, where creatures of war would be hunched and

waiting with glowing eyes just beyond every tree line. Until one night, that was, when he worked himself up into a certain understanding with himself (if not the world), and decided he was going to join her. Even if he ended up being merely a reminder of those things she'd known and loved—he would be there for her. And that was what he'd hopped on the bus across town to tell her. To present himself to her not as the same old sea-sick love-fool he'd always been, but as a fellow soldier. To offer out his hand as she now took her own first steps into the world he himself had only just entered, so that together, they might work their way through the busy lobby toward the theater, and the ultimate screening.

Somehow, it just seemed easier that way—just to be there for her. Because it would have never been enough to say he *wished* he could have been there for her. And now that they were finally alone together, it was clear to him from her demeanor that words alone would not break the barrier of interlocking states and time that had settled down between them. If he was going to reach her, and convince her of how much she still meant to him, he would have to let his actions do the talking—now that they he felt they even had a voice. (A voice that, admittedly, may have still been prone to mumbling).

“I don't know,” said Godwin, immediately reverting to the old habit of checking out his shoes while talking. “I wanted to let you know—I just think it's really good,” (he was able to quickly reprove himself, though), “what you're doing, I mean. I don't think I ever told you that.”

“Oh?” she asked, just then breezing past him on her way towards the sliding glass door at the back of the house. After sliding it open, she briefly stepped into the kitchen

and set the torch lighter down on the counter, before grabbing a garbage bag out of the drawer, then turning and stepping right back out onto the deck—“what do you mean?” She turned and slid the screen shut behind her.

“I don't know. I guess it seems like not enough people really appreciate the sacrifice it takes and everything,” he said, watching her take the bag a little ways to the corner of the deck, where there were still some plastic plates and cups left out on a circular glass-top table. “It's almost like, when people hear peacetime, they just figure the Army's in *nap-time* mode or whatever.” But he dropped his smile when she turned, and flashed a cross look at him. “But it's not,” he quickly rebutted himself.

“Okay,” said Courtney as she proceeded to flap the bag in front of her a couple of times until it opened. “And that makes me good *how*?”

“Well, *you* know,” said Godwin. “It's like you used to say. Even if we aren't at actual *war* with anyone, that doesn't mean there's not still some good to be done out there. Like when your brother Tim got based in Yemen, you said, and helped put up some schools and things. Remember when you used to talk about the plight of Arabian women all the time, and I'd pretend to just kind of gloss over and fall asleep, and you'd pretend to slap me? Well believe it or not, a lot of that stuff you said actually *did* end up sinking into me. Cause people just think we only ever wait til *after* we blow the country up to start helping their people out of jams and all that. But it's not always like that.”

She didn't say anything, but seemed to be thinking things over as she collected the plates and cups and throw them down into the bag.

“And it makes perfect sense if you think about it,” he said, having been thinking these things over himself lately quite a bit. “Because if you make a good impression one

place, all those other places that used to really hate you, or just think you must not be all what you're cracked up to be—*they* see how good the impression is you're making other places and start to think, well, hey, maybe they're not so bad after all. And then once word spreads like that—I mean your pretty much golden. It's kind of like what my uncle told me once when I suggested why doesn't he ever take an ad out in town for his house-painting business? He said people tend to believe their neighbors far more than they'll ever believe some A-hole car salesman who's just trying to sell 'em grandma's old sloppy jalopy on TV.”

“Godwin?” she asked, as he looked up from his shoes. She must have stopped picking up garbage at some point, because now she was staring at him from across the deck, the bag hanging limply down at her feet. “What's with that jacket you're wearing?”

“Oh, this?” said Godwin, picking up and dropping the sides of the jacket. “My uncle gave it to me—,” he looked back up at her. “Why?”

“No reason,” she said, as she got back to cleaning up. “I was just confused about something for a second there, was all.”

“Oh?” he asked, stepping forward, afraid she might not be hearing him well enough. “Well, what you mean, exactly?”

She looked up from her cleaning in order to make a circular, sweeping motion with her hand in his direction—“*that...* whole thing,” she said, before bringing her hand back down to grab an ash tray off the table.

“You mean my jacket?” asked Godwin, looking down to see what he might be missing.

“Just—all of it,” she said, pausing before dumping the contents of the ash tray

into the garbage bag.

Godwin just stood and blinked at her for a moment as she then moved over to the deck's wooden railing, where some of the party-goers had apparently set their pop and beer cans when they were done with them.

“I mean for one thing, I'm not even *joining* the Army any more,” she said while her back was turned to him. “So you can like—get that whole business out of your head right now.” She waved the whole business away with one quick flick of the wrist before getting back to the empty cans.

“You're not?” asked Godwin, unconsciously taking another step forward. “I mean—*what?* Did you decide Air Force would be a better fit or something? Or *Navy* even?”

“No,” she said, as she picked up a soda can and forcefully shook its remnants over the side of the deck. “I didn't decide on *anything*.” She tossed the can in the bag, shrugging as if no big deal. “It was decided for me.”

“What are talking about?” he said, following her with his eyes as she proceeded to move along the edge of the deck. “I mean how's that even possible? I thought you'd be like, perfect for Army.”

“Well apparently not perfect enough,” she said, eyeing him briefly as she moved past to get to the last couple of cans on the length of railing that ran behind him.

Godwin continued to turn to keep up, but felt slightly dizzy, and had to look down at the deck while he rested his hand against his forehead. His mind was beginning to feel a bit like stretched putty.

Eventually, things steadied out enough for him to be able to hold a thought—a

thought which caused him to look up. He made sure to watch Courtney closely as she went about dumping the contents from the remaining pop cans over the edge of the deck. She looked and was dressed in basically the same odd manner as the time he'd seen her briefly at the homecoming game back in Brookville—same un-laced combat boots, short hair slightly shorter, long, cut-off jean shorts instead of regular jeans, and a plain, white tank-top instead of the grey “Army” shirt he'd seen her in before.

However, he did notice something strange about her skin. It'd first jumped out at him earlier, as he'd been sitting in a lawn chair in the yard, working on his second beef on weck sandwich of the hour, when he looked up from the plate on his lap to see Courtney standing and talking with a group of friends, her back to him like it was now. For a moment, he sat down the sandwich and just sat back, quietly admiring her bare arms and shoulders, which were covered with nothing but two thin white straps. He'd never seen so much of her skin before, and it struck him as perfect; tan but not too tan, smooth-looking but strong. He didn't quite get the full picture, though, until someone in the yard suddenly stood up and moved their big bald head out of his line of sight. And now that the view was clear, he could see that there was an odd discoloration on her back—a dark, asymmetrical shape that covered almost half of her left-hand shoulder blade. It took him a while, but after a few more furtive glances in her direction, and then a couple of casual passes back and forth behind her on his way to the buffet table, he was able to recognize the figure as a tattoo.

From his current distance, he felt he was finally able to get a good read on the image. It appeared to be the single wing of a butterfly after having broken out, and unfurled from the side of its cocoon, while the rest of its body—along with the opposite

wing—must have been still wrapped up inside of it. Which, it occurred to him, wasn't really right at all. Because in nature, he knew that butterflies would climb out head first, from the bottom of the cocoon. He'd seen it happen before somewhere—he didn't know where. Science class probably. No, PBS.

But other than that one aberration, nothing appeared to be wrong with Courtney in the physical sense. She looked as thin and fit as ever, which was why none of this was making any sense.

“So, what? Did you have trouble with the physical or something?” he asked, softly, hoping he wasn't broaching too sore a subject if that was the case.

“No—it didn't even get that far,” she said, as she started to tie the the sides of bag closed.

“I thought everyone got a physical,” said Godwin. “I mean, unless there's something that's obviously wrong, but—.”

For a moment, she stopped doing anything, and gave him a look like the one she'd given him earlier. He held his tongue, but figured he probably didn't have much more to say on that particular subject anyway.

“*God* you can be so oblivious sometimes Godwin,” she said. “I freaking swear.”

“Oblivious about what?” he asked, his narrowed eyes quickly retreating to the deck.

“Oblivious to anything. *Everything*,” she said. He looked back up just as she started to walk towards the back door. But after a couple of steps, she stopped, half-turned: “I mean, don't you get it? Sure there's all that equal rights crap anyone ever talks about. But it's hard enough *still* for girls to even *get* into some branches, let alone ones

they think might be trouble for 'em. Let alone when you don't fit spot-on their stupid little mold. And then when you have to worry about some dickhead recruiting officer deciding you're 'not the right material,' which you know is just cause someone you know's been running their mouth off to 'im when you *thought* they'd have your back. It's all a buncha bull-shit, is what it is. And totally *opposite* of in-any-way fair.”

Godwin blinked at the deck, unable to digest all of what she just said. “Well I don't know,” he said, speaking to a particular knot in the wood now. “I guess I really must not get it, then. Because I just don't see how they could *possibly* let someone like me in, and not you. I mean to not even let you take a *physical*?”

Courtney had reached for the door, but let go when she heard this. She let the bag of garbage drop from her hand, and then turned to him with her eyes narrowed.

“What do you mean—,” she asked, slowly bringing up her arms and folding them beneath her chest, “*someone like you?*”

Godwin wished now he'd have put an actual foot in his mouth rather than just a metaphorical one. Because this definitely wasn't the way he'd imagined telling her; it wasn't the right moment or anything. He thought about trying to think up a way to slip out from under it somehow, but felt suddenly just too tired to even think at all. Maybe it was time to just spit it out already, he thought, and get it over with.

“Well, you know—,” he said to the knot. “Like I said—someone like me.”

As he looked back up at her, he felt in his features a certain earnestness that he'd yet to properly get across to her all night. But then when he saw the sharpness with which she was still standing, glaring at him, he couldn't help it—in an unconscious effort to maybe diffuse some of the confrontational energy coming from her side of the world,

he felt a smile form. “Or, you know—*me*,” he shrugged, letting the smile just take over, so as not to appear meek.

But none of this seemed to register with her. While she didn't say anything right away, her arms remained crossed, and her jaw became hard as she scanned him over. Godwin let the smile fade, but tried as hard as he could to remain still, and not let his eyes stray too far away from her neck and head area. Her upper body was framed by the glass door now, and he thought he saw a faint aura around her—an aura that he soon just realized was being created a distortion in the glass.

As he then focused back on her still, brown eyes, he realized that they could have cared less whether he was moving or not. Because they weren't actually looking at him, they were looking *into* him. *Deep* into him. Straight to the very dark of him, it felt like. But that was not at all what Godwin wanted, or even needed right now. Because what he *needed* was for her to see his actions for what they were—and for that to happen, he needed her to actually look at him. Why couldn't she just open her eyes and look at him already, he wondered, as she stepped in even closer.

“You know, you're not making any bit of sense right now,” she said. “You do realize that, don't you?”

“I, uh,” he said, and cleared his throat. “No.”

“I don't believe you,” she said, as she seemed to hover closer, deeper, darker.

“Well, uh—here,” he said, looking down as he reached into the right, front pocket of his jeans to search for his Military I.D. “Let me show—”

But before he could get it out of his pocket to show her, Courtney made him stop. She reached down and grabbed onto his arm, squeezing it hard just below the elbow.

He'd yet to squarely comprehend the intention behind what she was doing to him, and it'd even crossed his mind that it still might be some kind of twisted affection driving her to grab him like that. But then he then felt the dig of her fingernails as they broke into his skin.

His mouth fell open, and he took in a sharp breath. But before he could tell her to stop, she finally let go when she shoved the arm as hard as she could away from her, apparently trying to send it flying backwards, if not to separate it from his body entirely. Luckily, though, his hand was dug deep enough in pocket to be able to hold the arm in place.

“You’re a fucking dickhead, you know that Godwin?” She immediately turned and reached for the back door.

“I can’t believe you’d do that to me,” she said, pausing briefly at the threshold in order to kick the garbage bag aside with her foot, and then slammed open the door, finally stepping into the kitchen.

He didn't understand how she could possibly be so angry with him. But it was over too suddenly for him to really even grasp what had happened. As he tried to look back and make sense of it, her most immediate actions appeared like a disjointed, slow-motion playback, ultimately leaving a scrambled sort of gap inside his head. He could hear her words, but they too hadn't totally sunk in. They seemed just too disconnected from anything having to do with the actual context of who and where he was right then, and what he thought he was doing there. Invisible fingers proceeded to work his mind like silly putty, until everything it touched just seemed so absurd; the back door—absurd. The folded-up lawn chair—absurd. The dead-looking garbage bag—absurd. The bug

zapper.

In fact, the only thing that felt like it made some bit of sense to him right then was the knot in the wood, on the deck by his feet, which was what now held his attention. But it didn't strike him as a particularly natural deformity—it appeared more like a kind of wicked, twisted face, trapped down inside the wood. Like a talking head on television caught between frames, confused about which next emotion it was supposed to portray.

Before long, he heard a smacking sound against the glass of the door, and looked up. Nothing in the scene seemed to move at first, though, until he saw a tiny writhing at the bottom of his periphery. He lowered his eyes, and at the foot of the door, on the deck, was a large, thick June beetle scrambling around and around on its back, trying to get up. And Godwin didn't even have to think about it—there was hate. He loathed June beetles especially, and just as he always did when he'd find them rendered defenseless like that, he took a few steps forward and crushed down on the bug with the soft tread of his old, worn Vans, shuttering slightly at the forgotten feel of that brittle crunch. Which was about the time that another distinct, yet mainly visceral impression finally caught up with him—the fact of Courtney's absence. Not just that he was alone there, on the dark and quiet deck, but that he'd been left.

He half-spun toward the left edge of the deck, where a set of stairs led down to the yard, and took a step. But he was unaware of where he was going, or why, until he stopped. And then it sunk. *She* was the one being the dickhead, he thought. He turned back to his right, and looked into the warm-colored kitchen, its various red-to-gold surfaces stitched together in a single frame, and glowing like fire.

It felt like she had taken something from him—almost as if, in leaving him there,

she had stole half his share of breath. But it was even more than that. Because he'd been prepared to give her his share all along—or at least to share his share with her—to offer up his sacrifice of enlistment as an ultimate graduation gift to her. But then what did she do? She tasted it and called it crap. She spit it out at his feet, and left. And there it still laid, indistinguishable from the garbled mess of a June beetle lying dead on the deck.

Sure, he could just take the hit and go back to base. Maybe over time he'd be able to regain some of the wasted breath. Or he could go in and see what part of it might still be salvaged. He thought he saw a sign, perhaps, in the involuntary twitching of one of the June beetles unsevered legs. Or possibly antenna.

He looked up at the screen half of the door, which she must have shut behind her. The glass door, however, had been left open, which he quickly construed as an invitation (or, at least, the absence of an impediment) for him to go in after her. He didn't know at first that that was definitely what he was going to do, but he did. He had to have her understand him somehow—to truly understand that what he did, he'd done as a tribute to her above all else. Because even if she'd no longer be joining the Army along with him, that didn't make his reasons any less true. He just knew he couldn't leave without trying to get her to see that. Whatever he did now (actions, words), it would have to work towards making that picture clear to her. So he collected himself before stepping forward, and sliding open the screen. And once he was in, he closed it softly behind him.

“Courtney?” he said, blinking as he called to her from just inside the doorway.

He couldn't see her anywhere; but then he couldn't really see anything. The shift in light from the deck to the kitchen had created a blind spot in the center of his vision, and for a moment, all that he could see was the soft, gold glow of the linoleum at his feet,

along with the deeper mahogany of the cabinets that more or less circled the room around the thinned-out periphery. He went to step in further, but remembered there was a table there when his knee hit one of the chairs.

“Crap,” he muttered under his breath, reaching down to rub the knee. After a moment, he added, “you know, it's not like I meant anything bad by it,” hoping she was somewhere listening. The blind spot was steadily breaking itself down into smaller amoebas by that point, and when he stood back up, he had to curb his urge to chop at them, and make them scatter like a machete through jungle.

“Besides, you're like, way better than me at these things,” he said. “I didn't think in a million years they wouldn't let you in. I only wanted to be, like, you know—encouraging?”

“And why the heck would you want to do that for?” Courtney asked him as she stepped forward into his line of sight, her sour face finally cutting through the junk and appearing directly across the table from him.

“I don't know,” he said, and shrugged. “I guess it just felt like the right thing to do—.”

“Bullshit,” she said with both her lips and eyes, then grabbed something off of the table, and turned away.

As she crossed the floor with the object, he saw that it was a carton of eggs. She stopped and set it down on top of a small counter-top island that stood in front of the sink at the far end of the kitchen. Then she slid open one of the drawers that were built into the island, and started searching for something inside.

“You did this because somewhere in that totally *screwed* little head of yours you

thought it would make me respect you or something,” she said, slamming shut the drawer. “But it doesn't.” She turned to face him, leaning against the island. “And do you know why? Because that's just more proof that you're like the most self-centered person I've ever met. I mean you expect people to change—it's called human evolution. But I can just tell you haven't grown a flippin' bit. It's like you're incapable of it, or something. You're like the only person I know you could go through, what, three months of training? Six months? And still not change?”

She kept her head down, avoiding his eyes as she started to walk towards the line of cupboards against the wall to his right.

“Cause the thing is, you use people Godwin—you always have—and you don't even realize it,” she said, reaching up above the counter to open one of them. “And I mean not just people, but *things*. Just like you're using Army now. You use whatever you can get your hands on, and never think of the wider implications of what you're doing. Because if you did—,” she took down a box of some kind of baking mix, and held it in her hand as she turned back to face him again, “—you'd know that there's absolutely *no* place for you in the United States Army. There's no possible role for you there but to be a buncha *freaking* dead weight around everyone else's necks.”

Godwin saw a small poof of powder escape from a slit in the top of the box as she cut across the floor back towards the island.

“Because I got news for you Godwin—it ain't gonna be like Key Club was back in high school,” she said, reminding him of the other time he'd joined something because of her, “where you can just dawdle around, twiddling your thumbs and whatnot, pretending like you're actually doing something halfway useful when in reality everyone else is

doing all the work. It's serious business—not the kind of thing you take lightly, which, I'm sad to say, is just about the only way you know how to take things.” Leaving the baking mix on the counter, she bent down to open one of the island's larger cupboards. “Which is bullshit, by the way—,” she briefly looked back at him before turning back to the cupboard. “I mean in case you didn't know it.” Then she bent down on her haunches to look for something on one of its lower shelves. “This whole thing just confirms it.”

What did he ever take lightly, he wanted to know. He took just about everything there was to take like a ton of freaking bricks. There were so many different angles to her wrongness, that he didn't even know where to *begin* to argue in his head with her. In fact, for the time being, he felt he couldn't even speak to her. It'd be too much like two people speaking in completely different languages, and he knew he'd be wasting what little energy he had left if he did. So instead, he just continued to watch as she took a mixing bowl out of the cupboard, and stood back up, setting it down hard on top of the counter.

After pouring some of the baking mix into the bowl without even measuring it, she then set it aside, and slid over the carton of eggs. She flipped open the top, and started to hastily break a few of them into the bowl, setting the empty shells back in the carton when she was done with them. He noticed she didn't even stop to dig out any of the pieces of shell, though. He didn't necessarily see any fall in, but she was going so quickly, he figured there had to be some. But then the whole question of why she would be making a cake (apparently) on the day of her own graduation party seemed to lack in sense to him to begin with.

“Half the time you're in the halls, you're acting all dreamboats, like the world's just one big cloud you're on and no one else gets to be,” she continued as if she hadn't

stopped talking, “and then the other half it's like you're out to seem all tragic, with your head down, moping about the place, hoping that someone will notice you, and feel bad for you or something—heck, I don't know.” She stopped and slid open the same drawer she'd opened earlier, but hadn't found anything in. “But the point is, people don't *like* to feel bad for people Godwin.” After a moment, she slid it shut and opened the one right beside it. “I mean *Newsflash*—that's why it's called feeling *bad* for them.”

Godwin didn't *mope*. When did he ever *mope*?

“You know what—?” she slid shut the drawer, then turned and looked at him, suddenly with a whisk in her hand. For a moment, he thought she might actually wing it at him.

“You're like that guy,” she said, turning back around with the whisk, and then beginning to beat the eggs with it, “who just walks right on through the scene of everything, lost in whatever kind of music's in your head all the time, while meanwhile you're tripping off all of this *mayhem*, like, all around you.” She eyed him briefly, while continuing to whisk. “But there you go, walking on by, lost in your own little world again, not even realizing what's happening. All of this *harm*, and all of this disaster—cars exploding, buildings on fire, workers falling off ladders—and there you are, completely blind to any of it, not even realizing *you're* the one causing it.” She stopped stirring and tapped the whisk a few times on the edge of the bowl. “But the worst part about it?” she said, then raised the whisk as high as she could reach above the counter. “That whole time?” She watched as the excess egg dripped slowly down into the bowl. “None of it even *touches* you.”

After a moment, she lowered the whisk and gave it a few more taps on the side of

the bowl before setting it aside.

“But guess what *G-man*?” she said, then cut back to the right side of the room where the stainless steel refrigerator was, and opened it, “none of that makes you *any* less responsible. Not in my book. In fact that makes you even *more* responsible, because you should know better.” She grabbed a carton of milk, then turned with it while swinging closed the door with her foot. “Want a *hint*?” He heard some bottles clank as door shut, and she continued back towards the island. “The next time you find yourself out, prancing around in those tired old Vans of yours, and realize that nothing’s come to hurt you in like, a *really* long time?” She opened the carton and took a swig out of it before turning, and wiping her lip as she set it down behind her on the counter. “Well the first thing I want you to do is to stop—,” she said, “and take a look around you. I mean really look hard. And if you don’t find anything wrong with anything, then chances are—you know what? It’s *you* there’s something wrong with. *You’re* the one there’s something wrong with, and you’re gonna *feel* exactly what’s wrong with you. Because that’s when all the wrong around you—all the wrong in the world—is gonna to start slowly seeping into you, bit by bit, until for once you can finally see it, and *feel* it—all of the shit you’ve been shrugging off for just about the entire, goddamn—”

There was a noise, out back, behind him. He turned towards the screen just in time to see the vague outline of a girl with dark hair, wearing a light-colored tank-top just like Courtney's, before she reached for the handle to slide it open, and stepped inside. For a split second, he could have sworn he was looking at Courtney's double until he noticed that her hair was actually much longer, just tied back into a pony tail. She was a little bit taller, and less filled-out than Courtney, but her arms—one of which was holding

a brown paper grocery bag—had the same tone look to them. She was wearing some kind of short, red gym-shorts with a circular emblem on the front, and the next thing that came to Godwin's mind (after the word *doppelganger*) was that it looked like she had just gotten back from a track meet.

“Is it over?” asked Courtney, now standing just a couple of feet to Godwin's left, between the table and counter. “Did you guys win?”

He guessed his second impression was apparently correct, then, oddly enough.

“Of course we won,” said the visitor, smiling.

(Which seemed to be about in line with his former Little League average—one for about a thousand-and-one).

“And *you*?” asked Courtney.

“Two firsts and a third,” said the girl as she rose up to the balls of her feet for a second, and then dropped back down.

“Well here—let me take that,” said Courtney, stepping towards the door while the visitor-girl happily released the grocery bag to her. As she then turned, and started walking back over to the counter-top island with it, the girl called after her, saying “thanks,” while rising to the balls of her feet again.

Courtney set the bag down with a small thud.

“You made sure to get the gluten-free frosting, right?” she asked, as she started to dig through the bag. The girl turned to Godwin and smiled, before walking past the table on her way toward the island—“Chocolate Rich and Creamy,” she announced.

Godwin stayed where he was, safe behind the table, and watched as the girl walked up beside Courtney at the counter. Courtney, meanwhile, was taking some things

out of the bag, trying to find enough free space on the now crowded countertop to set them. The girl appeared to be watching these moves with much interest.

“So?” she finally asked. “How was the party?”

“Good,” said Courtney.

“Just good?” she asked. For the first time since she walked through the door, just about, she didn't have a smile on her face. In fact, she seemed genuinely concerned.

“Well it would have been better if you were here,” said Courtney.

This seemed to make the girl cheer back up enough, though. Was she blushing, he thought? She looked at Courtney for a moment with bright eyes, before turning to see what was in the mixing bowl.

“Is this my cake?” she asked.

“Mmm hmm,” said Courtney.

“You didn't get very far, did you?” she said. There was a pause, then they looked at each other and laughed.

“Yeah, well—,” said Courtney, glancing a dulled smile back at Godwin, before turning back to the counter. “I got a little sidetracked.”

The way they mirrored each other's expressions, and overall countenance as they stood and spoke rekindled his earlier impression that they could have been twins, just with different heights (and shorts) and haircuts. Like they could have been separated at birth, and only recently had found each other, so that their disparate upbringings had time to mold them and stretch them in slightly different ways. He noticed that the girl's ears, for instance, appeared to stick out slightly further than Courtney's did, which seemed to fit her perkier attitude. As did her square, and upright shoulders, her perfect posture. In

fact, when compared to the track-star, Courtney's shoulders appeared almost *slumped*. And for the first time, she looked like someone much older to him than the Freshman girl he'd had locked up in his head all this time, the one who'd endlessly wandered—along with her pens and notebooks and backpack of memory—those immortal high school halls. Also of memory.

He was surprised to see that the girl at the counter also appeared to have a tattoo on her back, just like Courtney did. And also just like Courtney's, hers was of a butterfly in the process of coming out of its cocoon. The only difference was that, whereas Courtney's tattoo was on her left-hand shoulder blade, the visitor girl's was on her right. Like mirror images almost. Almost as if it had been planned it that way.

The whole the thing struck him as just too strange to be real—too much like some kind of made-for-TV movie on Lifetime, complete with long-lost siblings and matching birthmarks. While he realized that they were physically too dissimilar to actually be twins, everything else about them seemed to draw too intimate a portrait for him to accept that they weren't in some way related. He supposed that they could have been sisters, who were just close in age; but then he knew for a fact that Courtney'd never had a sister. A secret sister, maybe (which he guessed would have explained the secret-sisterly tattoos). But somehow, he doubted it.

In fact, as he watched them lean in even closer now, and continue to speak to each other in soft, excited breaths, it struck him that they were actually acting even *closer* than sisters—or at least the ones that he knew. Back in high school, whenever there were two that were especially close in age like that, if they weren't flat-out competitive with each other, then they at least seemed to give each other their own space.

And they definitely didn't *hug* like sisters, he thought, as they then embraced.

In fact (as he felt his brow grow furrowed), they hugged in a way that he'd never seen two girls of *any* kind hug before then, that he could think of. At least not in real life before then. In a way that made his face turn red, his eyes draw down, and the back of his neck itch. In a way that seemed to make things fall awfully quiet all of a sudden—quiet enough for him to hear the sound of lips touching lips of two girls who were definitely not sisters.

When a few moments had passed, the sound stopped. “Godwin,” called Courtney, causing him to look up from the table (but not the back of his neck to stop itching). They had since disembraced, and were standing together, facing him now. “This is Rachel,” she said, as their hands came together in the narrow gap between their bodies, below their waists.

“Well hello, Godwin,” said Rachel, smiling as she waved. “Are you going to stay for cay—” she started to lift to the balls of her feet again, but stopped when Courtney cut in.

“Um, no, sorry,” she said, turning to face the girl, “he can't actually.” Then she turned back to Godwin. “I mean he actually has to be somewhere soon, I think.” She checked the grandfather clock to her left. “Like any minute soon.”

“Oh,” said the girl, and frowned. “Really?”

“Uh, yeah,” Godwin coughed.

“Well that's too bad,” she said, still frowning (as if his presence had been so heartening). “But it was sure nice to meet you,” she added, and beamed, the word “meet” seeming to hold in it some kind of magic, uplifting power. A power that Godwin did not

have access to.

“Nice to uh, meet you,” he said, and cleared the rasp from his throat.

Not wanting to look at either of their faces, his eyes fell on the space in-between them, where he saw Courtney’s thumb lightly massaging the soft spot between the other girl’s thumb and forefinger. He remembered now, it’d been a favorite thing of his for her to do, when they were young and holding hands, and it was years ago; on the playground, when it’d been hours, and they were still in desire, experimenting with ways to do things.

There was a fluttering then, down in his own thumb’s soft spot. And his first instinct was to crush it. He ducked his hands beneath the table, and squeezed the flutter down until it stopped. As soon as he released it, though, the flutter started right back up. He rubbed the skin with his thumb and realized there was nothing there. Whatever it was, it was beneath the skin now, and it wasn’t about to let up.

He let go of the hand as he muttered goodbye and left. But as soon as he was back on the street again, he grabbed the hand back up, and squeezed. Because whatever the bug, he just needed to stop it. To kill it, crush it, squash its guts. Snuff it like a dirty moth—to dust and not let go.

He felt like he could have kept walking those darkened streets forever. And if someone would have been there to at least tell him which direction, he would have definitely walked the whole way back to base. It wasn’t like he had anything better to do for the next two days now. But instead, he’d kept walking with his head down, his hands in his jacket pockets, turning down quiet neighborhood streets he didn’t know until he happened to come upon the main road—the well-lit one with all the stores and bus stops.

Bragg Boulevard.

If he only knew which direction to go, he'd keep going. But instead, he came to the first stop with a bench and sat down. The fluttering had died out on its own a while back, but not before he'd made his hand feel really sore. It was embarrassing; he didn't want to look at it. He sat back with his feet on the curb, his hands dug in his pockets, and waited.

Cars sped by in both directions—vans, trucks. There was some sort of shopping plaza out across the wide, four-lane drag from him, but starting from the peak of the road at the midway divider, outward, everything began to slowly at first, and then speedily dive down along a slope towards the parking lot, so that all Godwin could see of the structure from where he was sitting was a great glowing light shining up from the depression.

Chapter 3

The aluminum door fell shut behind them, cutting Sarah off from the cool night air completely. It felt like she'd been suddenly sucked into vacuum-sealed atmosphere of pure, heavy sludge, making everything seem muddled—the hollow, twangy music fighting for air with a hundred different conversations, the steady, roving faces intertwined with lurching bodies by curls of pale blue smoke, giving the whole thing an impression of scrambled television.

The floor, the walls, the bar, the chairs, the tables, the ceiling—all of it was bathed in a strange blue light whose chief purpose seemed to be not necessarily to make anything particularly more visible in the room, but to make everything that was light appear much lighter, and everything dark much darker—almost to the point of black matter. But for Sarah, at first grope, it might as well have been there just to make everything seem odd and discomfiting to her. All of those pale blue faces stopping, turning, looking, and ultimately, glancing past her towards something or somebody else.

They were supposed to be looking for this guy Brad and his friends—there were three of them now (apparently they'd picked up another one along the way). When Sarah'd asked jokingly who got the third one, then, while in the car on their way there, Eva said frankly she'd take him, and that was it.

The only problem now (amongst a million others) was that Sarah had no idea what either of these guys were supposed to look like. She knew that they were in the Army, but that was it. If she knew they'd be dressed in their uniforms, that might've helped, but Eva made it clear not to expect it. Once her eyes started to adjust, and she was able to make out individual figures within the crowds, she thought that half of the

guys in the place could have been in Army, the way their chests were, and heads looked, and arms. And it quickly became clear also why Eva had referred to the place as a cowboy bar earlier; the other half of them looked like they could have had rode in from old westerns.

One such cowboy stood out to her in particular, standing to her right, leaning with his back against the bar. With a bottle of beer in one hand, he tipped his hat at her and winked, but then proceeded to scan his eyes across the crowd. Considering the plain, black t-shirt he was wearing, rolled high to reveal a muscular display of arms, she wondered if he maybe could have been a cross between a cowboy *and* a soldier. (The word “cross-dresser” came to mind at first, but then she thought it might be wrong; he was more likely just a soldier with a cowboy hat on). Every time he brought the beer up to his lips, he did so slowly, and his entire upper arm would flex, causing the hem of the shirt to ride ever further up on his arm. When he did it again, she zeroed in on the rising hem, and watched as it revealed, first, a pointed tongue, and then a head and neck, and then a set of feet and legs, along with half a slender body, all of which apparently belonged to a downward-crawling lizard creature that was tattooed on his skin. The thought of which (more than the actual sight) made her shiver *ick*.

Once she got over the prickly sensation of a whole bunch of big buzzing needles digging into her skin all at once, though, she considered what those good arms of his could be put to use for. And what came immediately to mind was an image of him in the living room of her and her mother's old house, wrapping each one of them (first one arm, and then the other) around her thick wooden shell of a TV set—that cranky old square-ful of tubes and wires, yet still with such heart-shaped supplies of smiles inside (and frowns,

and twitching veins, and furrowed eyebrows)—so that said box in said arms might be picked up from the thick beige carpet into which it'd been steadily sinking for two years now, to be then carried out and down the porch steps to freedom whilst sparkling in the somewhat sun.

But it was too late for any of that now. The sparkling sun had gone down. It was way after 8:00, and the realtor lady would have already come by and changed the locks. So unless the cowboy-soldier was also adept at picking locks, she guessed she was just out of luck.

It wasn't even like the guy was paying the slightest bit of attention to her anyway. Nor were any of the guys in the room. Not like they were paying attention to Eva, who herself appeared oblivious to them. All she was doing was standing there staring down at the green-glowing screen of her cell phone, as whole sweeps of eyes, it seemed—from one group of guys to the next—kept crashing down past Sarah to get to her. Not that Sarah was doing anything to warrant their attention either. She felt silly now in her mother's old dress, which was at least two sizes too big for her, and almost touched the ground.

At first, she'd wanted to choose one of the darker-colored pinafore aprons to wear overtop of the plain, white dress, but instead went with the light blue one because Eva had said it reminded her more of Laura Ingalls from “Little House on the Prairie.” In fact, she'd got so excited when she saw Sarah in the dress, that she guessed it just didn't cross her mind to ask her why she'd been driving around with a box of old frontier dresses in her car. And it didn't even have to make sense that it wasn't quite cowboy-related, she'd claimed—people would get it, and she'd fit in perfectly.

Well obviously, they didn't quite get it. She wished now she would have just worn her work clothes. They may have had blood on them and smelled like deli meat, but oh well. At least they wouldn't have made her look so literally *glowing*.

“Come on,” said Eva, waving for Sarah to follow her as she looked up from the cell phone. Sarah'd almost forgot about the phone her mother had given her, which was still sitting in its box inside the bigger box in her trunk, along with all the other dresses.

She bravely followed Eva to the edge of the crowd, and then in, as they then slowly made their way in and out of the people-cramped spaces between tables. The tables themselves appeared to poke up randomly from the ground, and were spread across the floor like a batch of square, blue wildflowers. Many of their chairs weren't pushed in, so her and Eva had to watch out for those too, along with a couple of dull-eyed waitresses, some drunk girls in cutoffs, and guy after guy wearing tight jeans, t-shirts, cowboy hats, western plaid, oceans of body spray—Sea Breeze, Irish Mist (“to cover up the smell of bull-shit on 'em,” Eva called back to her, smiling). People talking, tipping back drinks, pushing out chairs, and bursting out laughing, blowing out clouds of blue smoke into the air.

As she moved through the crowd, she felt it was important to keep herself alert—to try at once to both avoid running into things, and to avoid having things run into her—including whatever numbers of intermingling lines-of-sight there were in the bar that night that might have become stuck on her for moments longer than consciously desired (for longer than *one*). But she also had to make sure to stick close to Eva, to neither lose her, nor let her own heat off of her, just in case her friend might stray, or get sight-snagged on something or other herself before they'd made it safely, soundly, to wherever

she was taking her. Like a couple of weird-colored worker bees, they probably looked like, zooming around, looking for an unattended flower to land on.

Yet at the same time, she found herself turning and scanning the far corners—past the bar, and past the dance floor—to the left, and to the right of her. But for what? She wasn't sure. A way out, perhaps. A bold red exit.

They were already late. Eva had apparently talked to one of the guys earlier, and he told her they could just meet inside the bar somewhere, explaining that there wouldn't be anyone checking I.D.s at the door tonight. Luckily, he ended being right, but that hadn't stopped Sarah from getting extremely anxious as they'd approached the door, afraid they might get in trouble. How embarrassing would that have been, she thought, seeing as how she was probably the only underage person in the place who had no specific designs on obtaining alcohol.

Eva definitely had designs, though. And that was why she said they needed to find the Army guys so bad. The owner was a former Army person himself, apparently, and he accepted any and all forms of Military I.D. as proof of drinking age, no questions asked. The same went for special guests of military personnel as well, but as Eva had made sure to stress, that didn't mean they had to be outwardly special with them if they didn't want to. They could be special in name only, and that would be just fine. Now that they were there, though, Sarah was having trouble understanding exactly how they were expected to find these people who were supposed to be so nominally special to them. She just hoped Eva knew what she was doing, and wasn't as lost as she was.

Eva still had her eyes glued to the cellphone, like it was a map. She must have been reading something on the screen, though Sarah had no idea what. Every once in a

while she'd stop and tap on some buttons before looking up and around, which was actually what she was doing now. Sarah wished she wouldn't keep stopping like that, though, because every time she did, Sarah didn't know what to do but just stand there, and try not to look foolish. Because in these moments especially, the blue light seemed to shine on her like a spotlight, leaving her feeling unclothed, exposed. Like it was just her, standing alone up on a tiny stage, surrounded on all sides by crowds of utterly flapping away faces.

Eva pulled her off by the arm, and said “come on—I think I found us.”

And here, all this time, Sarah thought they'd been looking for the guys, not themselves. Oddly enough, she looked up through a part in the crowd, and saw a reflection of herself being dragged along by Eva in a mirror that seemed to extend like a thick stripe along the entire length of the wall they were headed towards.

They stopped when they got to the table that was set at the very far corner of the dining floor (which was what she supposed you would have called it, even though nobody was doing any dining that she could see). On one side of the table was the mirrored wall, which actually continued on past the dining floor towards the far end of the room. But extending out perpendicularly from the wall on her left was a long, wooden banister, which was what created the sense of a corner, and separated the dining floor from the dance floor that took up the back third of the bar, making it seem like two separate rooms instead of just one big rectangle. The dance floor was currently unoccupied, though, as was the DJ booth, set up on a riser in the far corner.

As was the table in front of them, Sarah now realized, as she took in their more immediate surroundings. In fact, their entire little corner was conspicuously empty of

people at the moment. She turned back towards the other side of the room and saw that, besides the mass of people still milling about the dining floor, most of the action was tending towards the bar that ran along the opposite wall—away from them in their little corner—which was good. At least for now. Although she was a little confused by the absence of the Army guys—whom she had expected to be there waiting for them whenever they got to where they were going—it felt good to have all of those eyes finally off her, some space move around in, and air to breathe. And when she started to turn back towards the table, she smiled when she noticed the bales of hay that were stacked along the foot of the wooden banister for decoration. There were also some horses' bridles that were hanging down from the top rail by some individual lengths of rope, though obviously empty of horses.

Sarah wished there'd been horses.

She opened her mouth to point the bridles out to Eva and ask her where they must have run off to, but Eva wrongly guessed that she was more concerned about the guys.

“Oh,” said Eva. “Right. Brad's in the bathroom, and I think Chance must be somewhere over by the bar. I don't know about the other guy, though—I've never met him before. I guess he must have gotten lost or something. But don't worry, Brad already told the bartender we were coming, so we should be good to go. We can just sit, and order our drinks, and do whatever.”

Sarah looked around for a second, wondering what exactly Eva might have meant by “whatever.” As far as she could tell, sitting and drinking looked to be about the extent of their current options.

“Sit. Relax,” said Eva, motioning down towards the table with her hands like she

was a game-show model showing off prizes. “Here—have some popcorn,” she said, smiling as she lifted from the table an oval-shaped basket of heavily buttered popcorn that had the appearance, in the bar's blue light, of being covered in mold. Sarah noticed that there were some stray pieces scattered across the table as well, some of which were soggy and looked melted to the surface like little wicked-green witches.

“*You* have some popcorn—,” said Sarah, picking up one of the drier pieces and throwing it at Eva’s leg. They both looked down as it bounced off of her bare knee, and fell to the floor.

“What a little bitch you’re being,” said Eva, feigning a shocked look. “I can’t believe you’d do that.” She dropped the oval basket back down on the table, and started wiping her hand back and forth across the knee, well below the frayed hem of her jean shorts.

“Sorry,” said Sarah, and just stood there with her head down and her hands folded in front of her.

“Meanwhile, I gotta go to the bathroom to wash the AIDS off my knee now, thanks to you,” said Eva, giving her knee a few last swipes.

Sarah swore that Eva probably spent more time in bathrooms than any other living human in the history of human bathrooms. Except for maybe when it came to some of the newer-model bathrooms that she'd seen on a show about famous peoples’ houses once on MTV. One of the bathrooms she’d seen had an actual big screen TV in it that was completely flat and hung from the wall like a painting, which—if she were ever rich or famous enough to have a TV like that in her bathroom—she guessed she’d never leave it either.

But oh well, Sarah sighed, and turned to work her way around the side of the table so she could get to the chair that was set up in the corner, with its back to the wall. Once she got there, she sat down, and nudged the chair forward a couple of inches closer to the table. Eva hadn't left yet, but was instead looking down at her phone again and pressing some buttons. Sarah decided to just close her eyes, though, and settle into her spot. She started thinking about what a perfect spot it was, especially if she was one of those movie mobsters who always had to worry about someone having a hit out on them, and whether or not, at any moment, some sketchy character could come waltzing through the front door to shoot her. But she opened her eyes, and though she was a little surprised that she could actually see all the way back to the front door without too many people being in the way, it didn't strike her as odd at all that there would be a random guy in a green camouflage jacket walking in right at the moment she had thought that. In fact, it seemed so normal that she closed her eyes back up, and forgot completely about whatever other number nameless, faceless, dangers might be out there, waiting. And instead, she let her mind hook onto the soft and slow country music that was playing, the massaging buzz of the downhearted strings warming up the base, the lazy slide of the steel guitar pulling its edges soft like cherry taffy.

But then it stopped—the music just suddenly cut off, and in the middle of something promising for once. For a moment, there was relative silence, and Sarah opened her eyes in time to see Eva lift her head and start to look around the room.

Without warning, a quick shock of high-pitched feedback pierced their ears, seeming to come from nowhere, followed immediately by a loud, canned-sounding drum roll, which thrummed from the speakers that were seemingly everywhere. Many annoyed

faces shot towards the far corner of the dance floor, where a man stood holding a microphone.

“*And now—*,” the MC’s voice rang out overtop of the drumroll, “*—all the way from Houston, Texas—*,” the announcer paused here, perhaps to indicate something, Sarah wasn't sure what, while the drumroll just kept crescendoing and decrescendoing, “*—back for a special second round—*,” Sarah was waiting for him to get on with it already, but the announcer seemed oblivious to the fact that the overwhelming volume negated any bit of suspense or excitement he may have thought he was building in them, “*—and here to tan yer hides with music... Sleepy's own... shade of blue.*”

The drumroll cut out suddenly, followed an ascending three-note bass walk up into a loud, medium-tempo country song that Sarah didn't know the name of.

“*It's Deejay... Deejay...*,” said the announcer, “*Charro... Charro...*,” letting the echo ring out as the music then continued on its own, its tinny guitar-twang unabated.

Eva was making a grossed-out face toward the corner of the dance floor, which, despite all of the other angry faces from just a moment earlier, was slowly starting to fill back up with people.

“Well hey,” she said, changing her face as she then turned back to Sarah. “Wait right here. I'll be back in a minute. MK?”

Sarah wished the other music was still playing; she'd liked it much better. She folded her arms down on the table in front of her, then leaned in and rested her chin on the X that her two wrists made, one on top of the other, like a cat might lay.

“Sarah?” asked Eva, leaning in closer. “Is everything alright? How's your pinky?”

“Fine,” she said without lifting her head. In fact, she'd nearly forgot about the cut entirely for a while there.

“Well you're not going to, like, up and leave me here while I'm gone, are you?” asked Eva. She set her own elbows down on the back of the chair in front of her, folding one hand overtop of the other so she could rest her chin on the fold, looking as if she was actually planning on settling in for a while.

It occurred to Sarah to say *no, where the heck else is there for me to go?* But she knew she wasn't really mad at Eva for anything. Eva was just being Eva, which in this case just meant leaving Sarah while she went to do something apparently secretive in the restroom without her. Not that she wanted to see what Eva was planning on doing in the restroom that was so secretive. If she was going to be angry with anyone, it should be her mother, who after all had been the one to put her in this situation to begin with. Sarah would have been happy to last the length of their entire friendship without ever having to see first-hand the way Eva acted in bars, or at parties, or while hanging out with guys who were older than her, or anything else like that. She could listen to the stories of her wild behavior at work and think nothing much of them, because the tone was always joking, and made them feel just like any other fiction to her. But she never thought the day would come when she'd have to actually become involved in one of those fictions. Quite frankly, the notion scared her, and left her with a vague feeling that whatever she might come to witness tonight might end up altering forever the way she viewed her friend.

Looking back, it seemed her mother must have known this.

Sarah adjusted her elbow out of a wet spot on the table, but without lifting her

head up from the back of her wrists. “I promise you I'll be here when you get back,” she said, and looked up from the table. “MK?”

Eva kept her own head down for a moment, seeming to mimic Sarah's dour mood. But while Sarah was able to hold hers, a smile steadily started to form on Eva's face.

“MK,” she said, now with a small, bright smile.

She stood back up and turned away from the table, and with an exaggerated sway, walked off along the banister, past the dance floor, towards the bathroom.

Oh well, thought Sarah, rolling her eyes. Sometimes, if she rolled her eyes wide enough at something, she felt she could almost erase the tape of it—whatever inconsequential thing would be busying up her mind.

And for a while, it seemed to work, as she continued to sit with her head on the table, and nothing much on her mind. With Eva out of the picture, she felt herself almost immediately become unglued from the scene around her. She didn't know any of these people, and they didn't know her. Which meant either of them could have disappeared as quickly as any flickering TV screen image, and nothing in the bar would have seemed to have changed.

Feeling a little lopsided around the head area, she reached up to adjust her green GoodFoods visor, only to realize she was no longer wearing it. She was glad that she'd opted against wearing one of the bonnets as well; both her and Eva had agreed on that point. Though all they really had time to do to make her hair presentable was fix her ponytail. Luckily, they hadn't found any egregious blood amongst the strands, because the last thing she would have wanted was to have to wear her hair down. Whenever she let it down after work, it tended to just flop down over her shoulders like a couple of

unwashed, blond beaver pelts.

Sarah finally lifted her head up from the table when she noticed an older-looking waitress working her way through the crowd, headed in her general direction. The waitress was just about the only person within her entire purview whose face she could plainly see; all of the others were either wrapped up in their drinks, in getting new drinks, or staring crane-necked at the muted sports games on one of the three evenly-spaced television sets above the bar. And from her seat in the corner, the dance floor wasn't much more than just another glowing, flashing screen at the edge of her periphery. But judging from the lyrics of the lazy love song that was playing (“Every time our eyes meet, this feeling inside me is almost more than I can take” sang a man in low tenor) Sarah was fairly certain that the dancers' faces, too, were turned off, sunken into shoulders, or channel-locked into each others' eyes.

Yet here came this waitress—eyes, nose, lips, chin and all—effectively throwing Sarah back into the scene of things, whether she liked it or not. Without saying a word, she walked directly up to Sarah's table, and set down a tall, dark drink at the far edge, across from her.

“Oh hey, I didn't see you there,” the waitress finally said, looking up and wiping a few strawberry, sweat-laced strands of hair from her face. She, too, was wearing a ponytail, only her hair had that thin, dead look of an older-person's hair, and so did her face kind of. Like not quite old, but maybe 40. Sarah thought her voice made her sound like she was a nice person, though. She had a low, slight southern accent, which Sarah always thought sounded nice whenever she heard it. Unless, of course, it was being used by a customer at the deli to ream her out.

“No offense or anything,” she added, “I just mean it's dark in here. And heck—I just got in, so I don't got my night eyes screwed on tight yet.” She sighed, and tried to blow some more hair out of face. “It's been a long friggin' day, you know?”

Sarah just widened her eyes and smiled.

“Well hey—,” said the waitress, sliding the tall, dark drink over towards Sarah's side of the table. “Undoubted this was meant for you.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, just staring at the drink at first, taken a little off guard. “Well no thanks—,” she looked up and smiled, “I'm okay.”

“No, honey. I mean it,” said the waitress, inching the drink a little bit further towards her. “Somebody bought this drink for *you*.”

“Who did?” asked Sarah.

“Well whoever it was, I'm sure he's a perfect gentleman,” said the waitress, keeping her face straight for a moment before she smiled. “No, I'm just kiddin',” she said, and gestured briefly back towards the bar. “It was Brad.”

Sarah leaned slightly over to try and see past the waitress, but still had no idea what this guy even looked like.

“Really?” she asked, sitting back.

“Yeah,” said the waitress. “He just said ‘hey, now you send this on over to that little farmgirl over in corneh—would you dear?’” She appeared thinking for a second before she added, “oh, and he said to say you looked *hot*.” She shrugged her shoulders. “His words—not mine.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, “I see. You must mean my friend Eva, then. She's the one dressed up like a farmgirl.”

“You sure about that?” asked the waitress, squinting. “Cause if you ask me, I don't see the big difference. I mean farmgirl, pilgrim. It's all about the same thing isn't it? Let's just say you're her, and I'll go ahead 'n tell Brad I gave that hot little number over there that drink y'all ordehed.”

Sarah blushed. “I don't even *know* Brad,” she said, trying not to smile.

“You sure?” she asked. “He's a guy about 6' 2”? Shaved head? Always wears a baseball cap? He's a staff sergeant over at Bragg I believe?—*as well as some other things.*”

“Well, yeah,” said Sarah, “sort of,” afraid she might have said something wrong. She just realized she was supposed to be pretending to be somebody's girlfriend—though she wasn't sure who. She was pretty sure it wasn't supposed to be this Brad guy, but if by some chance it was, then she might have just screwed everything up for everyone. “I mean not real well. I guess I know *people* who know him more than actually him. Is what it is.”

“What? D'you mean that other *li'l* farmgirl you came in here with?” she asked.

The way she accented *li'l* seemed significant. As if she was on to them. Eva was actually a bit shorter than Sarah, and besides that, people sometimes said they thought she looked like she was only 12 years old or something real young like that, instead of an actual 18 year old woman. And she did look young, though not *that* young. Anyone who ever talked to her probably knew right away that she was who she was age-wise; 12-year-olds didn't tend to talk about the hotness of guys' asses and things like that as much as Eva did, that she knew of. Though what it meant to be 12 to people around here, she realized, might have had been a lot different than whatever 12 had been to her, Sarah,

back when she and her mother and sister were still splitting about half of their year in Scranton, and half of their year on the farm. Because when she was 12, an ass was still, in fact, just an ass.

“Who? Eva?” asked Sarah, not able to think of anything else to say. “I wouldn’t really say she’s little. Just small for her age—which is older than me actually.”

“That right?” asked the waitress.

“Yeah,” said Sarah. “By a couple of months actually.”

The waitress smiled, then reached down and leaned out over the table, holding herself up with her fingers splayed, palm down flat.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “You don’t have to get your panties all up in a bunch. Like I said—I know Brad. Meaning I know what Brad’s game is. Just tell your friend she might wanna watch out, though, cause until the day these fellas get shipped out to wherever the heck they decide to send 'em, hell or high water he’ll be here with some other honey on his arm every chance he can get.”

“*Really?*” asked Sarah, leaning in closer.

“Mmm hmm,” the waitress nodded. “That’s how it generally works around here. Cause half these guys?” she said, pointing back towards the bar with her thumb. “Ain’t the type that like to dip their toes down into the same river twice. If you catch my drift.”

Sarah leaned back and watched the waitress as she took a quick look around the room, then returned her focus back down to the drink on the table.

“You sure you don’t want a drink, then?” she said, nodding down at the glass. “Cause I can bring ya another little puppy just like this. Slap it down on Brad’s little tab over there, so when your friend gets back she wouldn’t even know the difference.”

Sarah hiccupped a laugh at the phrase “little tab,” then covered her mouth. “But wouldn't Brad get mad?” she asked, letting her hand down.

“Believe me,” said the waitress, standing up straight from the table, “by the end of the night? He won't even notice.”

“Hmm,” said Sarah, looking at the drink. “Couldn't I just get a Coke, then. I mean I can pay for it.” It just occurred to her she did have a twenty dollar bill tucked under the laces of her Reeboks. The rest of her money, she'd decided to just keep locked in the trunk, figuring there wouldn't be enough places to stuff it all.

“You mean just a Coke?” asked the waitress. “And nothing else?”

“Mmm hmm,” said Sarah.

“Well heck—I can just *get* you a Coke then. It's the liquor my boss gets all persnickety 'bout,” she said. “Sound good?”

“Yeah,” said Sarah, “thanks.”

The waitress nodded, then turned and started to work her way back towards the bar. As Sarah sat and waited for the drink, that word *good* occurred to her, like an echo. And after a few seconds, it occurred to her again. Then it continued to do so, occurring to her briefly once every few seconds, before she'd send it back out like the light from an orbiting beacon.

A Coke would be good, she thought. Maybe even hit the right spot. In fact, she found herself enjoying Coke immensely at times, though at others not as much. It was much better than any sort of alcoholic beverage that she knew of in any case, with its smells, so full of secrets. At least she knew, with Coke, it would allow her to at most merely slip into shallow-little fits of impishness, instead of—well who knew what Eva's

drink might do to her? Fall completely and utterly apart as a threadbare sweater.

The others made it look so easy—throwing back drinks like they were breathing air. But to Sarah, even just deciding to drink an alcoholic beverage seemed like something that would have to take a certain amount guts: more than she thought she probably even had in her body at any one time.

She watched the waitress disappear behind the crowded bar, where people were practically climbing over each other's backs to get the lone, male bar tender's attention. It reminded her all too much of work at deli—when she'd be stuck with an unexpected rush of customers, and have to do all the cutting, spooning, weighing, and ringing up, checking out, all by herself. Watching the guy work, she wasn't sure whether she wanted to go back and help, or else turn away completely from it. Turn away to either face the kissy-faces on the dance floor, or else her own moon-kissed face in the mirror behind her. But neither sounded promising.

Her throat was dry, so she reached out and took a sip of Eva's drink, and shuddered. It tasted like Coke mixed with black licorice—one of her favorites mixed with one of her absolute leasts. But worst yet, it didn't even seem to make her throat any less dry.

She wondered what was taking the waitress so long, then saw that she was helping out the bar tender. She watched her open a new bottle of something and set it down in front of a guy at one end of the bar, then grab a couple of empty bottles off the counter as she turned and walked the full way down to the other end, where she heard her more than saw her toss the empty bottles into a trash bin with a loud crash. For a moment, she disappeared completely under the bar, before suddenly reappearing, taking a swig of

something, then tossing it in the bin behind her, finally making her way back down the length of the bar from whence she'd come, only stopping briefly to grab something off of the counter, which—as she came out from behind the bar, and cut diagonally across the dining floor—Sarah could see was the tray with her drink on it.

At first, the waitress appeared to be coming directly towards her, which would have made sense. She was, after all, coming towards her. Or so Sarah thought. But then she saw her get swept up by the crowd, and when she reappeared, she had cut a slightly different angle. She was still headed in Sarah's general direction, but seemed to veered more towards the left. Sarah remembered seeing another table over there, several feet from theirs and set against the same mirrored wall, though the last she'd checked it'd been empty of any living being. But now when she looked she saw that there was indeed somebody there, sitting all by himself, with his hands folded on the table, facing away from the bar towards the back wall, and appearing to be studying intently the mirror in front of him.

When the pattern of the green camouflage on his jacket worked its way out of the busy dark, she realized that the guy who was sitting there was the same as the guy she'd seen walk through the front door and into the Sleepy Saloon a few minutes beforehand. The waitress stopped and considered the back of the guy's head for a moment, before stepping up beside him, and briskly taking a can of Coke down from the tray she was holding, setting it on the table in front of him. He just then seemed to notice that the waitress was even there, but by the time he craned his neck to look up at her, she was already on her way to Sarah's table.

“Don't worry, I didn't forget about you,” said the waitress as she stepped up to the

table.

She stopped and set the tray down, which Sarah now saw did have another can of Coke on it. With her hands on her hips, she blew at another pesky lock of hair, which just fell back down in front of her face.

“A girl's gotta be crazy to work weekends at a place like this,” she said, glancing around the bar real quick before brushing the hair back behind her ears. “So I guess that's me.”

“Why do it, then?” asked Sarah.

“Well. I guess just the same reason anyone else does anything crazy—,” said the waitress, “—the *money*,” and rubbed her fingers together. “Come two A.M. Sund'y morning, I'll have my rent paid for the month, plus car insurance if I'm lucky.”

The words “rent” and “car insurance” were what definitely stuck out most to Sarah in that statement. And “money.” She doubted if she made the kind of money the waitress was talking about in a month at the deli, let alone in just a weekend.

“Well that does it,” said the waitress. “I got work to do. Tips to accrue. Let me know if you need anything.”

She lifted Sarah's Coke from the tray and then set it back down on the table as she pulled the tray off of it. Sarah's eyes felt drawn to the bright red can like light, and she had to curb her desire to down about half of it right there and then. But instead, she looked back up and said “sure, thanks,” and watched as the waitress just smiled and held a wave as she walked away.

Her eyes fell almost immediately back down to the can. She reached out and spun it around on the table so that the mouth was now facing her, and cracked it open. She

would have normally have drunk it through a straw—something that her mother had ingrained in her to do once she'd finally loosened up to taking Sarah and her sister out to eat in public places, which had been at a time when working *and* cooking *and* chores had gotten to be just too much for her. But she didn't have a straw, so oh well, thought Sarah, as she whooshed her mother out of the picture and brought the can up to her lips. She tilted it back, and felt a nice, cool, titillating fizz against her tongue—something you normally didn't get with just a straw.

With the drink still to her lips, she suddenly caught another bright flash of red out of the corner of her eye, causing her to swallow a little bit before her throat had been totally ready for it. She set down the can and finished swallowing, just as her eyes almost immediately took to the flash to her left, like dogs to a mechanical rabbit.

Godwin set down his Coke with a *thud*.

“Oops,” he said, meeting the eyes of blue-green-haired girl at the corner table for a second before immediately taking them right back. “Sorry.” He supposed it might not have been really green, though—the light had been playing some pretty mean tricks on him ever since he got there.

He hadn't meant to set the can down so hard like that. It probably made him seem like he was an overly aggressive person all the time or something, though he wasn't. Or thought he probably wasn't, but who could really tell anymore these days? Not him. Not since those bombs Courtney'd plurally dropped on him. Before he knew it, he was watching himself slowly twirl the can around in circles on the table.

“I'd say I owed you a Coke,” he said, speaking the words just as they occurred to

him. “But it looks like you already got one.”

Chance had told him the CIA or something was working on a “Gay Bomb,” he called it, which apparently made people on the battlefield just want to kiss for miles and miles. He wondered if this girl was like that too—it would only figure. Who was it that said everyone was at least a little. He peeked back over at her, but she just appeared confused.

“You know—,” he said, shrugging as he looked away, trying to explain something that he realized only made about half-sense now that he thought about it. “It's like that thing people do sometimes?”

But she still just looked confused.

“Like when they make a *jinx*?” he said.

They probably looked like a couple of Kit Kat Clocks the way their eyes kept going back and forth like they were.

“I mean when they both accidentally say the same thing at the same time?” he said, “and so the one tells the other one they own them a Coke?”

“Oh,” said the girl, looking back down at the table. “Well no thanks.”

Nothing occurred to him right away; but after a short interval, his brain struck instantly into flight mode.

He let go of the can, and brought his hand back. She probably thought that he was offering to buy her a *real* drink. Which for one thing, he didn't even have any money. But he knew he definitely wasn't hitting on her. Not for lack of wanting to, necessarily; just for the simple lack of it occurring to him to do any hitting on anyone at any point that night, or in the future nights of his life here on earth.

He tried to explain. “Oh, I, um—,” he said, “or, yeah. *Never mind.*”

It was no use. The night was already a disaster. Though he hadn't exactly expected a grand showing after what had happened to him over at Courtney's. He hadn't been banking on anything, really, except perhaps a low-key demonstration of the general suckiness that'd become him (and more and more, the world around him). Because lately, even the good things in life—all those tiny little good things—seemed to have a way of rounding back, in time, to suck.

And so much for his hope that things would be low-key—the next song that came through the speakers featured a honky-tonk guitar so severe, that instead of music to his ears, it was more like jagged-edged vibrations being shot at him like lightning bolts. In fact, the only thing in the bar that remained quiet this entire time was the girl by herself in the corner. Her eyes in particular had appeared serene and subdued. He wanted to say they were blue, but then that wouldn't have been saying much. Everything in the bar, just about, was some shade of blue or another. So to say that something was blue in this light was meaningless. You had to go further than that, and actually describe the kind of blue. Were they blue like the sky, or blue like the ocean? Like the Arctic, or the Pacific? Like the sky over your home town on a cloudless, windless summer day? Or like the troubled blue before storms, and impending disasters?

He realized if he wanted to establish their true shade, he'd have to delve in deeper. But he'd have to do so stealthily, so that she wouldn't turn away, or consider him some kind of stalker, an ogler. So what he did was, he picked up his can of Coke, and lifted it to his lips. Tipping his head back slightly, he proceeded to drink. And in that act of drinking, he found he was able to let his eyes fall towards the corner without necessarily

appearing like he was looking at anything in particular. To her, he imagined, he probably just looked like he was letting his eyes fall to the side to escape going cross-eyed. But in reality, in doing so, he could see it all—her face, her nose, her lips, her eyes.

They were definitely blue, though. Not hazel, or brown. He could see that now, despite the overbearing face of everything. Yes—he peeked—definitely blue. Like blue drops of blood in an ocean, thinning softly out. And they were also soothing to look at. But only somewhat. Because soothing in spurts like that didn't quite fit the definition of being truly soothing—not to Godwin's mind. He preferred his in long, even bouts of drowning.

But Godwin noticed other parts of the girl too. How could he not have? Everything about her just seemed so intuitively connected to those eyes. The quiet face, the subtle neck, the modest shoulders. And below that, the shapely lifting of the dress.

She was pretty, too. Yes, very pretty. While he set down the drink, he was almost immediately drawn to venture another look. Just a peek. To be sure. He lifted up his drink, and while drinking, turned, feigning seeing something off towards the dance floor that immediately desired his attention so he could get a better look in passing.

Yep, he thought. Definitely pretty. He brought the can to his knee, and just watched the dancers on the dance floor for a while.

He didn't know what it was, exactly, that drew him to her. Sure, she was pretty, but then weren't a lot of people? And here he was thinking he was going to stop all this nonsense, and try just being his own man for a while. He'd been single for pretty much ever, but ever since leaving Courtney's, he'd been preparing himself to become a bachelor of the mind as well. Like Jetson Larsen—a loner, a soldier. To rid himself of those

mythical creatures who served no other purpose but to haunt his mind.

But this one was all too real. As were all of the other ones, he realized—they had to be. Because how else could they just instantly break him like that, without question? Even the ones he'd pass briefly in the street.

Usually the girls he was attracted to had dark hair, and dark eyes, who were also pretty, and otherwise good to look at. Girls that looked more or less like Winona Ryder. Girls like Courtney. Yet here was this person who looked nothing like that—this bright, inviting-eyed human being—the only girl in the place who didn't happen to be decked out like some sort of slutty-looking cowgirl—and he couldn't seem to get over her. But everyone else just seemed average compared to her. Average and inaccurately dressed.

He finished off the Coke as he turned back towards the wall, then sat back, stretching his legs out beneath the table. It was all enough to drive a person designated to drive to drink, he thought, as he set down the now empty can. So he tried not to think. Not that he really felt all that much like drinking anyway. In fact, ever since his uncle had gotten sent away down state, he just didn't seem to find the prospect appealing anymore. He'd only drank a couple times in high school, but for a while after graduation, his uncle had got in the habit of forgetting and just driving straight to the bar after work on Fridays, instead of dropping Godwin off at his mother's. But Godwin didn't mind. Sitting and having a few beers with his uncle was much more fun than sitting and listening to his mother harp on him about “life”-related matters—such as what he was going to do with his. In fact, only the first couple of times was it an actual accident. But it wasn't until Godwin told him he'd enlisted, that the habit somehow seemed to have turned from just stopping out for a few, to dropping everything.

He picked up the can of Coke, and started to lift it to his lips before remembering it was empty. As he went to set it down, he shifted up in chair a little bit, but got startled by a sudden movement in front of him. It was the mirror, he quickly realized, and felt ridiculous.

He half-expected someone to say “heads up” to him, like they did on base sometimes. In fact, the guys in his squad had kind of made a joke out of it. But the thing about the “heads up” joke was that it didn't really bother him—not as a joke anyway. Instead, it was the lack of sense that the joke made in most instances that really bothered him. Sometimes, he wondered if it was even really a joke at all, and not something that just kind of resembled being a joke. Because whatever it was, it never led to laughter. What the “heads up” joke consisted of, in most cases, was one of the other squad members saying “heads up” to Godwin, followed by the squad member then throwing something towards him, or doing something close to him that put him in no real danger of actually being hit by anything. What confused him most, though, was the times when someone made the joke when nothing really even seemed to be going on around him that would warrant such a warning. Like the time when he and Dale Jenkins were sitting diagonal from each other in the cafeteria, and Dale said “heads up” to Godwin even though the only thing he was doing at the time that Godwin could tell was buttering his toast.

The whole dumb habit must have came about, Godwin had deduced, from a time during drills one day when a tennis ball meant to signify some sort of incendiary device (he couldn't remember which) had landed near him while he was standing near the foot of a little slope, causing him to feel and then probably look confused as to what to do. He

was supposed to be stealthily headed towards a dugout that was hid behind the slope, but he ultimately just stood there for a few moments before continuing on his way down into the dugout, generally unharmed. The guys who were already kneeling in it hadn't seen what had happened, but the remainder of the squad, who were themselves moving stealthily across the field at the time, had seen the whole thing. While nobody said anything at the time, it was pretty clearly unanimous among the squad members later on that Godwin should have thought more quickly, and done some sort of little dive, or dive-and-roll down into the dugout, a few of them even going so far as to demonstrate to the others what they would have done had they been the target of the incendiary tennis ball. While Godwin realized that his own personal move might not have been optimal, he didn't see the purpose of all that diving and rolling either. He didn't say as much, but if he would have, he would have also cited the brief introductory speech that had been given to them by the sergeant previous to the drill, during which he'd held up one of the several tennis balls he'd had stockpiled in a big mesh bag for the demonstration, and said something along the lines of "and if you see this puppy land in front of ya, then all I gotta say is it was nice to fuckin' know ya. You can consider yerself amongst the dead." So in the end, he figured he was really just following the sergeant's orders.

He sat up in the chair, and leaned forward, putting his elbows up on the table. His was the only face in the mirror that he could see. Everyone else was just a mass of moving shadows behind him. He thought for a moment he looked dead; but then shifted his head to a slightly different angle, and decided he didn't look so bad. He was just glad his hair had grown back in some, he thought, as he ran his hand over the half-inch bristles. If it was still as short as it'd been a couple weeks ago, he figured he probably

would have looked like someone in the Blue Man Group right now. He'd told the barber he went to in town that he wanted it "shaved short," which for some reason he must have taken as "shaved it down to nothing."

But he was sick of looking at himself. He decided to try and see if he could see the corner girl at all in the mirror, but when he checked, he realized it would be impossible to do so without also look directly at her. And with the lack of any sort of drink to drink, he couldn't really pull off his old peeking-while-drinking trick anymore.

Godwin suddenly felt self-conscious as to why he was still sitting facing the wall like he was in the first place. Brad and Chance had been sitting there with him when they first got there, but then once he went out to Chance's car to dig for change, by the time he came back in, they'd already left the table. Meaning he could have just went ahead and sat in a different chair, one that was more sensible to human ordination.

He figured he couldn't really sit anywhere else anyway, though. The most sensible option would have been the chair across from him, but that was squished too tight between the table and the wall. And if he were to have sat in the chair to his left, he wouldn't have been able to see the girl in the corner at all. But the worst possible option was probably the chair to the right of him. Because from there, while he'd be able to see the girl more clearly, he'd probably just look like a creepazoid sitting there, seeing her more clearly. So all-in-all, the chair he was in was probably the optimal place for him to be sitting right then, if he still wanted to just catch glimpses.

Forget it, he thought. He wasn't moving. He would continue to stick with the status quo of things for a while. And that would be that. Whatever nature of odd it might cause the corner girl to think of him. In fact, it might have even been odder-seeming of

him to all-of-a-sudden get up to change positions now that he'd already been sitting. All he had to do now was try as hard as he could not to come off as just some guy sitting there, staring at himself in the mirror.

But wasn't that what he really was, he wondered? Someone staring in a mirror? Someone who was too concerned with his own little predicaments to even notice when he caused predicaments in others? Was he really capable of driving someone to such despair?

Though maybe despair wasn't the word for it. In fact, at that moment, Godwin couldn't even really imagine what despair really was. But maybe that just meant it wasn't his to imagine. Maybe his lack of being able to imagine despair was just more evidence for him having been causing it in people all his life without knowing it. He wasn't even really sure where his mind had latched on to that particular word for it—whatever Courtney'd said he'd been causing in people all these years. Though now that it had latched, it wouldn't leave him. That word. Despair.

He supposed it didn't matter. What he really wanted to know was what the heck he had done to make her so deeply and consistently angry with him in the first place. Because while he'd been able to narrow it down to a few distinct possibilities—a handful of moments in time that he could remember having acted in such a way so as to have potentially, looking back, have engendered a negative reaction in someone—he couldn't begin to understand how those things might have festered.

One was of course the one that had been lingering in him even before Courtney had confronted him. He wasn't quite sure why it had lingered for so long—the memory of him having acted in a potentially selfish way on the third and final day of their sixth-

grade class's trip to Conservation Camp—seeing as how it only ever truly started to come across to him as having been selfish at some point after she had ultimately revealed to him her qualms. But it'd lingered nonetheless. Not so much as something he regretted, but more as a question hanging over him. And not like a constant deck roof of a question that had continuously hung over him as he'd gone about his day-to-day life either. More like just an atmosphere of tiny floating question molecules that would float their way up from time-to-time, and continue to hang about him for a while.

And while the question of the act's actual selfishness was still up in the air (there amid the thick, rolling fog of blue-tinged cigarette smoke), there was still another, more important question that was bothering him.

Why?

As in *why had he acted that way?*

He knew, for instance, that the long weekend they'd spent with their sixth grade class at the Elk Lick Scout Reserve amid the foothills of the Allegheny National Forest had been a time of major uncertainty in their relationship (though Godwin remembered having been quite certain as to what he'd wanted from their relationship—for Courtney to stop being so uncertain). Meaning if there had been a back-and-forth meter that represented the back-and-forth nature of their relationship during that endless sixth-grade Fall-into-Winter-into-Spring, the needle would have had been pointing all the way over to the “Spring” side, which would have also had a big “F” label over it to represent the just-being “Friends” period of their relationship.

Come to think of it—Godwin just realized—the needle would have actually been hovering over the little “F” for almost their entire relationship. It was Courtney who was

always going back and forth between wanting to be considered Godwin's girlfriend (and thus to hold hands openly with him both in and out of school), and wanting to be just Godwin's friend like they'd been for just about forever (and thus to only hold hands with him occasionally, whenever the feeling happened to come up in them to do so, which was usually in secret, and in hidden secret places, like the big orange piece of plastic tubing in the playground, and down by the creek behind their houses). Because it wasn't the meter doing all these things. In fact, come to think of it, it was Courtney's meter that had always acted as their relationship meter. And it definitely wasn't like Godwin's own personal meter had anything to do whatsoever with the play of their overall “relationship” meter. If it would have had anything to do with it, then the needle would have had been all the way over to the right, floored to the max, straining past the Big “G” for “Girlfriend” and *then* some (the two of them, out in the open, holding hands 24-7-365).

He also knew that he'd been thrown off-guard at some point during the anticipatory week leading up to Camp, in which everyone was talking, making plans on who to tent with, gossiping about the exploits of some of their older brothers' and sisters' camping classes of the past, gossiping about which of their older brothers and sisters whom would be counselors that year would turn out to be the coolest, and thus let them get away with their own hijinks.

But what had gotten Godwin going that week wasn't the promise of hijinks; it was the promise of *romance*—of a whole entire long-weekend spent not only amid the foothills of the Allegheny National Forest, but a whole entire long-weekend spent while also on complete and utter cloud nine. In other words, a whole entire long-weekend spent amid the foothills of the Allegheny National Forest with a *girl*. And not only a girl,

but a girl who'd been known in certain circles in the sixth grade to be an unabashed hand-holder. They'd said other things about this other girl as well, but it was the promise of hand-holding that led to Godwin's seeing mostly red (for "Romance") in the week leading up to the long-weekend, and nothing else.

It was a friend of this girl, Tammy (the girl, not the friend; he couldn't remember the friend's name), who had called him one night after school to inform him of Tammy's secret feelings towards him, which, come to find, bordered on "I" (for "like," not "Love"). And while he couldn't have said with 100% certainty (at the time, nor now) whether he'd technically "liked" the girl back, he did agree to the friend to be Tammy's boyfriend, starting from the moment he got off the phone with the friend, and continuing on at least until the end of the long-weekend (they were going to see how things "went," he seemed to remember was the plan).

While he remembered there being a traditional passing of notes during class that week, as well as a getting-to-know-you phone call or two, things hadn't technically been made official in Godwin and Tammy's short relationship until the moment they'd come across each other on the path to the mess hall on that third day of camp. Illusions (for both the hijinks crowd, and for Godwin) had already been shattered by then by the sheer force of time being regimented into fifteen minute-blocks for Hygiene in the mornings, followed by forty-five minute breakfasts, followed by 90-minute sessions of mandatory canoeing, nature-walking, planting, archery, marksmanship, wall-climbing, and craft-time/journaling, respectively, with a short lunch and long dinner in-between, not to mention and the totally ossifying-quality of the constant hawk-like oversight of the older-sibling-counselors, whose singing-voices in terms of more-or-less willingness to let

things slide had changed in metaphorical tone, apparently, once they'd been notified as a group that those whose appointed camps eventually came out the other end of the weekend with no higher than a certain number of reported or reportable incidents that were no higher than “level two” in nature would be receiving added compensation.

He could have kicked himself, later, when he eventually found out that “hand-holding” and other shows of affection not involving direct genital contact were among the “foreseeable” or “reasonably admissible” low-level actions that counselors were taught to not harp on all that much. Because making things official with Tammy on the path to the mess hall had not, in fact, involved, (*well*), anything at all really other than them saying “hi” and acting all smiley-eyed toward each other as they walked each other to the mess hall and went in and sat down beside each other at a table along with a handful of Tammy's friends. In fact, it was Godwin's trepidation at holding hands with Tammy (for simple fear of getting caught by one of the counselors, though, not for any sort of fear of shows of hand-to-hand affection) that had led to their ultimate breakup by the hands of Tammy's same friend calling him two days later to inform him that Tammy didn't think things were working out between them, such to the point that (according to the friend speaking on behalf of Tammy)—to ensure that no one get “hurt”—the best thing for them to do at that point would be to just go ahead and start seeing other people. This was if he really felt he had continued feelings for Tammy at all as a person, that was, and thus wanted what was best for her, and so forth, which of course meant not holding her back, and knowing when—if he truly did *like* like her—it was time to set her free, and etc. And while he still hadn't been sure at the time exactly where his feelings had lied (or perhaps lain) on the meter, he nonetheless agreed to the friend to in effect set Tammy free by not

holding her back, since he did (despite his unidentifiable feelings for her) want what was best for her after all, or at least for her to not get hurt, if what was best for her was indeed to also not get hurt by him. And while he couldn't say for yes-or-no certainty whether things at the time were working out between them, he agreed as well to go ahead and start seeing other people anyway, though he never really would—ever. So he guessed he kind of lied on that one.

But lying was not the selfish thing he'd done in the mess hall on the third day of Conservation Camp. This he knew for sure. Nor had it been seeing other people. Rather, what it was that was the most-likely thing that he could think of that had been so rotten, was to walk into the mess hall with Tammy, sit down, and while sitting down, see Courtney out of the corner of his eye and ignore her. And then continue to ignore her. Though he still didn't know why he'd done it. Not then, at the lunch table in the mess hall (when the question had first come hanging down about him like spiders), nor now. He knew for a fact that he hadn't been mad at her. And he knew it'd have been dumb of him to think he could try and avoid some sort of conflict by pretending like he could make her disappear. Because what he'd wanted in that moment was the same thing he'd wanted earlier tonight, while he was standing in Courtney's kitchen waiting for her to stop yelling at him—not to *make* disappear, but to *himself* disappear. But either way, he guessed he could see how that could be construed as being selfish of him—what he'd done, all those years ago.

Godwin swiped at his nose with the sleeve of his uncle's jacket. Not because the nose was running. It had just started itching for a moment there, and was getting annoying. He didn't think he was really all that tired, but a yawn came over him anyway.

He reached for his drink before again remembering it was empty. Just to be sure (or because he was really bored), he shook the can anyway. And it was empty.

And yet, the worst and most horrible thing Godwin had probably done as a person didn't even have anything to do with Courtney. The breadth and depth of despair he might have caused in Courtney was most likely peanuts when compared to the breadth and depth of despair that he must have caused, all those years later, in his uncle. Because the worst, most horrible, most likely definitely selfish thing Godwin had ever done since he was born was what he had done while standing at his uncle's table by the main stage at the Pink Kitty Princess in Salamanca that one night, about a week before he'd left for basic, that had ultimately led to his uncle's accident. Nobody had gotten hurt much, but when the cops happened by, they deemed his uncle drunk enough and stubborn enough to arrest him for the accident. Godwin, for his part, was taken home in the back of a police cruiser.

But it was Godwin's actions that had actually led to the accident. He remembered quite clearly shaking his uncle awake at the table. He remembered quite clearly wanting to get the heck out of there. He might not have wanted to disappear—nor have had wanted any of the swarm of lady-dancers about the place to have disappeared either, for that matter. But he did remember, quite clearly, wanting to be out of there, and back in his warm bed at home, all curled-up beneath the covers, falling deeper and deeper into lovely-yummy sleep, ASAP.

It was all Godwin had wanted, and all he'd been thinking about. At all-costs he'd wanted it. Or *thought* he'd wanted it. Because he certainly wouldn't have had wanted it at the cost he'd actually ended up getting it at had he actually known that that was going

to be the cost. Which was the cost of knowing that, in acting in pure self-interest, with no real sustained regard for others, he had completely and utterly helped screw up his uncle's life for him, his uncle whom had given him a job and had let him learn to drive using his truck and had given him advice all the time and had otherwise been like a part-time father to him in place of his lack of a real father—part-time or otherwise—by helping him get sent to jail for a whole entire year for getting that dreaded third D.U.I (for Driving Under the Influence) that guys around town had always talked about as being the real bad one since it meant that the Judge wasn't going to be giving you no more third chances this time—he was going to send you down-state for a year, and he was going to lock you up, and he was going to throw away the key for a year—no more classes, no more rehab, no more ankle bracelets, no more work release, no more Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition Program *period*. This time you were in it for the long-haul, no matter what, even if you were a *really* good and helpful in-mate and things in the jail started to get *really* crowded with the African American drug dealers from Buffalo who'd been coming down in droves lately, more or less, bent on (according to one guy who'd worked for his uncle on occasion) hooking all of them school-kids on the Crack Cocaine, and then knocking up half the county's population of fat white woman, (“ain't it matter, young 'r old”), while they were at it, which was what they all did before they'd ultimately get caught and arrested and sent down-state by the judge to serve their time in Pennsylvania along with all of the “truly god-damned drunks” and “fuckin' squirrely fuckin' Chesters,” apparently. While meanwhile Godwin got *nothing*. While meanwhile Godwin got to sit there in that nice (if admittedly kind of “fruity”) bar drinking name-brand cola and eyeballing women. Those very same women whom he was apparently horrible with and

thus made fall into despair enough to apparently help screw-up their sexual identities for them.

So maybe he *was* what Courtney'd said he was after all. Maybe he *was* “the most self-centered guy [the world'd] ever known.

The hard part was even thinking of a way to not be self-centered. It wasn't like he could just jump into another person's center and just *live* there for a while. Just hang around being someone-else-centered for a little while. Because that would be impossible. In fact, it seemed ridiculous to even think of, so he stopped thinking of it.

Instead, he tried to think back to what it'd been he'd been thinking about just a few minutes earlier, before he'd started getting on that kick about his being self-centered. About his possibly having been born a walking self-centered disaster. He saw the empty can of Coke sitting there in front of him, and had to seriously stop himself from trying to reach out and grab it again.

He looked up from the can, and started to turn in his chair back towards the bar, hoping to catch the waitress. But he'd forgot, and accidentally started to turn himself towards his right this time, towards the dance floor, and of course the corner girl.

He was able to stop himself before turning the whole way around, but not before glimpsing that the corner girl was no longer there. Or at least she hadn't *looked* there—he hadn't been able to totally tell. Because instead—(he pretended to take a draw from the empty can)—where the corner girl had been—there was now another sort of girl standing there in the corner girl's general previous vicinity.

In fact, she was right in the way of her general previous vicinity.

She was standing hunched over the back of the chair that was closest to Godwin's

table with her back him.

Or at least to his general direction.

It was hard to tell because—while she did appear to be standing pretty sluttily—he couldn't have been sure whether she was standing that way on purpose (like for *him* in particular), or whether it was that she just always happened to stand that way. Which was generally sluttily.

The new girl looked like one of those typical sexy-cowgirl-dressed girls, like half of the other girls in the bar that night. Or at least that was what she'd looked like she'd been trying to look like. Because in actuality, she'd appeared to be dressed more like Daisy from the original Dukes of Hazzard TV show, with the tied-tight, much-too-short-for-her flannel (unless it'd been a really thick, flesh-colored belt she'd been wearing high around her waist, and not actually part of her lower back that he'd seen), and then the short cut-off jean shorts that revealed almost all of her legs (her skin seemed to have had a blue quality). The only difference was that this girl's hair was a bit shorter, and was up in those high-on-her-head kind of pig-tails (he seemed to remember Daisy'd usually worn her long, brown 80's hair down, or under a cowboy hat).

He looked, and she was still in same spot, right in his way of her. In fact he still couldn't have claimed to know for sure whether or not the corner girl was still even sitting there. He assumed that she was, since it wouldn't have had made sense for the cowgirl girl to have been standing the way that she was standing, leaning over the back of the chair like that, otherwise. Unless, of course, she was just trying her best to pretend to be as a poster standing there for him. Which he *highly* doubted—(he rolled his eyes)—*trust* him. (He made a half-smile).

For a moment, he tried like he was drilling holes into the back of the sexy-cowgirl-dressed girl's head, but had to scold himself for ending up feeling like he was staring for too long there. So he went ahead and reset his eyes against the mirror for a moment, but couldn't help himself, and went to go back to drilling holes again. But just as he was about to do so, he was suddenly caught off-guard by the corner girl (who was apparently still sitting in the corner) as she rolled one big eye-roll away from the cowgirl girl standing there, in he guessed what just-so-happened to be his direction, the motion of the roll so enormous that it must have had caused her entire head/upper-body to actually shift, if only briefly, back into Godwin's line of sight.

Chapter 4

There, she thought. Now *she* was the one who'd gone completely ridiculous. But in a way that felt almost not completely unendurable. As if she was actually some kind of sea creature who could open herself up to the moment, and feed off of all of the swimming awkwardness of it, until it was all that there was. Like when she'd fall into one of her late-night TV infomercial-watching sessions, where she'd just sit there and watch, and not stop, and not stop, and the blinking, full-colored dullness takes the place of all thought. 70% of her, no longer water, but dumb.

She supposed part of the reason why it felt so okay though, was because Godwin seemed to have felt it too. And he was smiling about it, and so was she. How incredibly beyond ridiculous they both were being. She was almost afraid to say anything—afraid that what she might say might actually accidentally draw too sharp of an attention to the situation, and make it all seem just too much, and tip over, and become something more like complete and utter terror to her. But either this eventuality hadn't yet occurred to Godwin, or else he was just feeling that much more brave.

“Don't *you*?” asked Godwin. “Ever do that, I mean?”

“Do what?” asked Sarah.

“You know,” he said. “Just feel like drinking?”

“Oh,” said Sarah. This did kind of make things seem to wobble a bit off guard for her, though not as bad as she'd half been expecting something to. It was probably an innocent enough question from his end, she guessed, and she couldn't really blame him for asking. It was kind of like someone asking someone if they felt like taking a dip in the ocean, not knowing that about half of the people whom the someone being asked had

ever cared about, or had been at least somewhat close to in some respect in their pasts, had happened to have been either already eaten by, or were still back home being sitting ducks for, sharks. Because of course she couldn't have had expected him to be able to sense that anything like that was just automatically the case. Especially when *she* hadn't even become entirely in tune with the whole direness of the situation back home herself, of the incredible level of fallenness of so many members of her family and she guessed now former church, until just some months ago. Besides, she didn't even really think she *knew* what it actually felt like to feel like drinking when she came to think about it. Meaning it could have been entirely plausible that she might have even actually felt in such straits in the past and just never realized it. Meaning she couldn't really say she had or hadn't and really mean it, meaning she definitely couldn't blame him for having had asked her something to which the answer to her own mind was so heavy-laden with various *aarghs* and *acks* that she couldn't even think straight enough about it to venture an even *guess* much less something of a sustainable answer over time.

Or maybe she could blame him for it, she didn't know.

“Well—I can't say I've never *not*,” she said, finding herself for some reason deciding to try and wade through all of the annoying muck. “I've just never drank is all. Besides, well, a couple sips. And I guess if I have ever—you know, really *felt* like it—then the situation to actually get to drink *itself* I don't think ever really arose itself to happen. Or at least not to happen at a time I might have been feeling like it to.”

“Yeah,” said Godwin. “I think I know what you mean. It's like sometimes you're just like *aargh*, and if there was a drink in front of you you'd probably take it. But there's not, so you don't, and then it's just like you just kind of go on with your day and get over

it.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. “Is *that* what I said?”

Godwin glanced up for a moment.

“Yep,” he said. “That was more or less the gist.”

She supposed that hadn't been so painful—but *still*. She literally had to close her eyes, finding herself inexplicably diving in for more.

“Plus it's that situation where in the past, a lot of the people I know have had demons and things with it—,” she said, “—I mean drinking and things. So, like—,” she opened back up her eyes, “—you know.”

“Yeah,” said Godwin, lowering his eyes and kind of scratching the back of his neck. “I know.”

Maybe now she'd gone too far with it though, she thought. Having to have gone and flipped a once friendly snorkeling session out into an all-out deep sea diving expedition like she'd done. Because now the poor guy seemed depressed. The way he just looked off into the distance as he held the beer bottle up to his mouth. The way he then hung his head as he brought the bottle back down to his chest. The way he scrunched up his lips. She didn't know why she'd decided to get so open with things all of a sudden. Especially with some guy she didn't even know though felt she maybe kind of knew on some level. After all, over the course of the night so far, she might have spent more time with either him, or in the general area of him, than she had with anyone, probably, who wasn't just some guy she worked with, or went to all the same church things as, for maybe years, if not more. Maybe even lifetimes.

“Well I don't think I really need drinking anyway,” said Sarah, trying to re-lighten

things up a bit. “I've got television.”

“Television?” asked Godwin, looking up from his slump.

“Yep. Whenever I feel certain ways about things?” she said. “I just sit down and flip on the set, and everything that seemed so important just then just kind of disappears and floats away.”

“Really?” asked Godwin, looking somewhat lightened.

“Yep.”

“Wow,” he said. “I wish I had *your* TV set. Because mine sure doesn't do that.”

“*Well you can't* have it,” Sarah cut in, using a mock-defense strategy. And come to think of it, neither could she have it. Because unless she decided to just give up altogether, and go crawling back to her mother's house before it was for-all-intents-and-purposes *gone*, then everything—the TV, her clothes, her books, her music—all of her own personal stuff she'd accumulated over the past few years—it, too, would be gone. And so would the years.

“Jeesh,” said Godwin. “Sorry. I wasn't really going to take it.”

“That's okay,” said Sarah. “It's just kind of like an heirloom sort of thing to me.”

“Well it can't be that much of an heirloom,” said Godwin.

Sarah gave him a scrunched-faced look—“why not?”

“Well for the one thing,” he said, “TV's only been around for like—what?—sixty years or so? So how many times could the thing have *really* got passed down?”

“*Whatever* Mr. Takes-Things-Too-Literal,” said Sarah. “I get your stupid point. So what about for the other thing?”

“What other thing?” asked Godwin.

“You said *for the one thing*, so now there's gotta be another thing,” said Sarah.

“Oh,” said Godwin. “Well maybe I meant *for the only thing*. Or better yet just *for the thing*. So for the thing, TV's only been around for sixty-aught years or so, and even then, come to think of it, if you're tellin' me you've got a TV that's from sixty years ago, and that the thing still picks up channels? Well I say that really *must* be some kind of magical fairy god-thingy you got on your hands there. I mean in your house probably.”

“Yeah, well,” said Sarah. “Maybe what I meant was I guess it just *feels* like an heirloom to me then. You know—like how most words don't just have *meanings* to people, but have certain *feelings* to them as well? Or like, *feeling-meanings* you might call them? Did you ever think of that?”

“Hmm. I don't know,” said Godwin. “Not really. Sounds kind of fishy to me.”

“Well maybe your words are just heartless, then, because mine do,” said Sarah. “But anyway—the point is—the TV used to belong to my brother. Who I like, never really got to know all that well?”

“Oh, I see,” said Godwin. “I'm sorry. So, what? Did something like happen to him then?”

“Well—,” said Sarah, and paused to think for a moment. “It's not like he died or anything like that. At least not in your sense of the word probably. He just kind of left at one point and never came back. I guess our family was just kind of like, different like that. Like old-fashioned, maybe—,” or more like *still is*, Sarah couldn't help but think; because no matter how much things may have both just *seemed* to have changed, and actually truthfully changed, there she was, wasn't she? The word *official* was what came to mind; and on more than just one level. Just another adult—whatever that meant—and

on her own. “But that's the thing—growing up, me and my brother and sister weren't actually *allowed* to watch TV, or do anything like that. But David, he went ahead and bought one anyway from this old pawn shop downtown back when he was, I don't know, about sixteen? So he snuck it into the house, but didn't really know what to do with it since we obviously didn't get any cable or anything. And for a while I guess he just kind of kept it hid in his closet, and occasionally brought it out whenever our parents weren't home, I guess to show my sister Meredith some of the interesting things he could get the static to do whenever he'd try messing around with some of the different knobs and stuff. But of course I was just five at the time, so I didn't really know about any of this until later, when my sister first showed it to me. And truthfully, I'd have to admit I was really pretty much a *goody-goody* back then, so I don't really blame them for wanting to keep it from me. They were just afraid I might tell or something, which I guess probably would have—.”

She felt herself turning a little red at this, though she wasn't sure why. It was such a long time ago, she could barely even remember any of it. And in fact it was her sister who was the one who had to tell her about how much of a little puritan she'd always been back then—*not* the actual person who had actually been there being that little person, whoever that was.

“Seriously?” asked Godwin.

“*What?*” asked Sarah, quickly glancing up at him. Now she *really* felt red—almost as if some part of her actually believed he could read her thoughts just then.

“Did you say *knobs*?” he said. “Because I haven't seen a TV with actual *knobs* since back in like—I don't know—probably caveman times or something like that. I

mean back when there were still probably *dinosaurs*.”

“Yeah, well,” said Sarah, with a smile to herself that made the red feel almost good-red. “Maybe *you're* a knob.”

And just like that, it turned a bad-red again.

“Am not,” said Godwin. He took a quiet drink before adding, “*maybe you're the knob*,” under his breath.

“Um—*anyway*,” said Sarah, feeling relieved that she could actually remember what it was she'd been saying just a second ago, while also praying that she could get through the rest of it (the story, the night, her entire *life*) without ever again mentioning the word *knob* again, “—a couple of years later, like I said, my brother turned 18 and decided to move out of the house. And instead of taking the TV with him, he decided to just leave it there for my sister to have. So then *she* kept it in secret for a few more years until *she* turned 18 and decided to move out and left it for me to have. And by that time I was like 12, so things were getting a bit different around the house and things like that. So even though my mom did eventually find out about the thing, by that time, I don't think she really even cared, because she didn't even really say anything about it one way or the other, and just sort of let me keep it. Or at least she didn't force me to throw it away.”

“Wow,” said Godwin. “That's kind of crazy. I mean—so you must have like, really missed out on *a lot*, huh?”

“Yeah,” said Sarah, just then kind of realizing something. “Maybe that's why I've been spending the past few years subconsciously, like, trying to catch up on everything?”

“Hmm—,” said Godwin, making a thinking-face. “I imagine that's actually

probably what it's going to be like when I get back from army.”

“You mean like 24-7 TV?” asked Sarah.

“Yeah, something like that,” said Godwin.

“All day, all night, 365?” she added, but he just kind of smiled and nodded and didn't say anything.

It wasn't until another second or two that it hit her she'd accidentally stolen one of Eva's things to say she'd always say by saying *like, 24-7*. And then *365*. Sarah didn't think she'd mind though. She glanced off towards the corner, looking for any sign of her or even her (assumedly still) current boyfriend, Brad, but didn't see any, so brought her eyes back down to the table.

“So do you mean to tell me you never got to watch *anything* on TV whatsoever? I mean not until, like what—just a few years ago?” asked Godwin. “I mean no *Full House*? No *Saved By the Bell*? No Super Bowls XIX through XXIV?”

“Well, not necessarily *nothing*,” said Sarah. “I mean I never got to watch any of those things. But me and my sister did used to watch one of those soap opera thingies on the TV down at the Laundromat from time to time.”

“Ugh, really?” asked Godwin.

“Yeah—whenever my mom sent us down to do the laundry,” said Sarah. Then frowned. “Why *ugh*?”

“I can't *stand* soap operas,” said Godwin.

“Are you serious? Me and my sister *loved* them,” said Sarah. “We couldn't get enough of that show.”

“Well here—you can have my portion,” said Godwin, acting like he was reaching

for something behind his head, around the area of the hindbrain it looked like, before bringing his hand back around and proceeding to extend it across the table towards Sarah, where he pretended to drop something from his empty fist onto the table in front of her.

“Um—what was that supposed to be?” asked Sarah. “Your brain or something?”

“No,” said Godwin. “Just the hours of my life I’ll never get back I had to spend watching stupid soap operas.”

“Well, obviously you had to have got them back somehow,” said Sarah, and smiled. “Or you wouldn’t have been able to give them to me then.”

“No,” said Godwin. “I was just able to, like, access them for a moment or whatever. You know, from like that tiny little black hole they say we all got floating around up in our heads and whatnot. The one that eats up all our hours.”

“Hmm,” said Sarah. “I don’t know. I don’t think I’ve ever heard them say that.”

“Well they do,” said Godwin, and took another drink from his beer. It must have been one of the ones towards the bottom this time, because he seemed to have to tip it back awfully far to get to it. “*Trust* me,” he said, setting the bottle back down.

“Well *I’m* just saying *you* must’ve never gotten to see the soap opera *Everything Under the Sun* then,” said Sarah. “Because *I* did. And it was a good one.”

“Yeah—actually, I saw like two weeks-worth of it,” said Godwin. “In Junior High, back when I was like, sick in bed for two weeks. So it wasn’t like I had anything better to do. I mean it was either that, or home-shopping network. And I probably just couldn’t reach the remote was what it was.”

Sarah squinted a distrustful look at him. “And you’re sure it was *Everything*?” she asked. “I mean and not something else?”

“I just remember there was this guy on it who never spoke or talked—or did anything, really—but just like, lay there in this hospital bed the whole time,” he said, “and who everyone and their brother on the show, like *literally*, were all up-in-arms about because he was in some sort of coma I think.” He pretended like he had a thought from a while back for a second. “Or else he was just *really* bored. Cause I know I was.”

Despite his dismissive tone, Sarah had felt herself growing more and more excited as he'd continued to speak, until—when he'd finally mentioned the coma—she'd just about bursted, and actually had to cover her mouth for a moment for fear of not being able to stop herself from cutting him off by blurting out about everything she remembered so vividly about precisely the storyline it'd seemed to her he was trying to describe, and all at once. And while, as she sat there and listened to him, Sarah did let slip what actually might have ended up coming out as an honest-to-goodness *peep* right before she was able to get her hand up to stop it, luckily, Godwin didn't seem to have noticed.

“I don't know,” said Godwin. “He looked like he might have been a soldier or something. Like for an army. But I'm not sure which. I mean some of the people in the hospital seemed to be speaking foreign languages. But then again maybe it was just me. As in like my imagination?”

“Was it Giorgio Donatello?” asked Sarah, unable to hold back any longer. “The guy in the coma I mean?”

“I—don't know,” said Godwin.

“He was the guy who went to war and got hurt and fell into a coma because the girl he loved went to war, and also got killed and he loved her so much?” she added,

sitting forward expectantly.

Godwin didn't say anything right away—just sat there, looking down dully at the table. For some reason, his face seemed to have lost all its redness from before, and now looked almost pale and ghostly in comparison. She was sure it was probably mostly just the light, but felt it could have been other things, too.

“Um, yeah,” he finally said, though still not looking up at her, almost as if he was troubled by something. “That sounds about right. I almost forgot that that was what it was about.”

“And you thought it was *boring*?” asked Sarah.

“Well,” he said, sitting up, perhaps looking at least a little bit more colorful. “Maybe not *entirely*. I mean at least I stayed awake through most of it. I think.”

“You see? So it couldn't have been *that* bad,” she said.

“But of course I was on a lot of meds and stuff,” he said. “You know—the kind that makes you kind of funny in the head sometimes? And fuzzy. Funny and fuzzy. So at one point it was like, really weird what was going on, and I was like half-awake and half-asleep, trying to figure out if what I was seeing was actually what I was *seeing*—like on the screen, I mean—or if it was actually just like, my sleep-eyes, you know, superimposing what I was seeing in the whole *dream*-center portion of my brain up there onto it—,” he paused and looked up, seeming almost startled by Sarah's presence, then looked back down, “—or I don't know, it was weird.”

“My guess is it was probably a little of both,” said Sarah. “Cause you're right—it was a little bit *weird*.”

“No—,” he said, and smiled up at her. “I said *a lot a bit* weird.”

“Oh, right,” said Sarah. “Sorry. But you do know what all this means, though, don't you?”

“All what means?” asked Godwin.

“The fact that we both remember those same-exact episodes?” she said.

“Oh—,” he said, and rolled his eyes. “*Those.*”

“What it means is—,” she said, “while *you* were there laying in bed—”

“Actually I was on the couch,” he said.

“So while *you* were there lying on the couch,” she said, “from between exactly 1 o'clock, and 2 o'clock p.m. eastern time, and on *those* exact days, watching *those* exact episodes, there *I* was at the same exact time on those same exact days sitting in the lounge at the Laundromat on an orange vinyl armchair—the one that had the duct tape on the seat cushion, I remember, because my sister would always take the other one and make me sit on the torn one—where we were watching the *same* exact episodes. Isn't that ironic?”

“Um, I'm not sure,” said Godwin. “I never quite got what that meant exactly.”

“I think it means, like, *the opposite*,” said Sarah.

“So how is that the opposite?” asked Godwin, eyebrows arches.

“Well I think it's also sometimes used to mean like when you're watching something, and something happens to one of the characters, or else the character does something that makes something else happen, and while you, as the person watching, know exactly what's going on and everything, the actual character doesn't see what's coming,” she said, but Godwin just looked at her blankly. “You know—since he can't see *everything* all at once?” she said. “Cause there's like, point-of-view problems?”

“Yeah, okay,” said Godwin. “I get that. But what does it have to do with both of us watching the same thing at the same time on the same days while in two different places?”

“*Because,*” she said. “While we were just sitting there watching these characters go about their days, neither of us had any idea that the two of us would actually *meet* one day.”

“Oh,” said Godwin, “*I see,*” smiling and nodding as if he thought that was pretty neat. “So it's like, *the opposite.*”

Sarah thought for a moment.

“Yeah,” she said, finally guessing so. “The opposite.”

But whether or not it actually was, Sarah still thought that it was pretty neat. The way two people could be witnessing the same exact thing unfolding at the same time and not even realize it. But what made it even neater was the fact that they would one day meet, and actually come to realize they had been both at the same place on the same days. If not in space, then at least in time. And in mind.

She had to make herself stop thinking about it; she was afraid of it giving her headache. Because that was what usually always happened whenever she tried to think of things in a way that involved having to reach back and forth between two or more different things, and then folding them all together at once into one and trying to hold them that way—she'd get a headache. She guessed which meant some things were just not meant to be thought about in ways. And maybe it was actually *nature's* way of telling her to quit it already, she was being dumb—stop thinking things that way.

So she stopped. And when she did, something other came to mind.

“Actually my sister and I came up with an idea for a soap opera once—do you wanna hear it?” she asked.

“Sure,” said Godwin, shrugging. “Why not? I mean if you want to have two sleeping soldiers to sit with instead of just one—,” they both glanced over at Chance, who at least seemed to be still breathing.

“Fine,” she said, and folded her arms. “Whatever. It's your loss, though.”

“No—,” said Godwin, his face immediately becoming almost desperate. “Go ahead and tell me. I really wanna hear it. I mean I like boring things sometimes.”

“Well—,” said Sarah, pretending to consider whether or not to, but just for just a split second, since she really did want to tell him, “*okay*. So I guess it was technically mostly my sister's idea. But anyway. Everyone knows that the best parts of soap operas is whenever somebody falls into some sort of unexpected coma. I mean that's just fact. Cause what it is is—you never now quite when, or even *if* that person is ever going to actually wake up. One lady even talked about a show she watched where the person was in a coma for *years* on the show. And what ends up happening is you just keep watching, and watching, and waiting for the day when the person finally snaps out of it. Sometimes you're afraid to even miss a single show—you just *know* that any day now could be the day, afraid to death that if you turn away you'll miss it. Cause that's the pay off—seeing it actually happen. But if you only see it *after* the fact, it's like you've wasted all that time for nothing. For instance like during that whole Giorgio Donatello thing, when he was in *his* coma? Me and my sister would stop by the laundry in the afternoon sometimes whether we actually had laundry to do or not!”

“Wait a minute,” said Godwin. “Didn't you guys have like school to go to?”

“No,” said Sarah. “I don't think so. In fact it must've been during harvest season, I think, because I seem to remember us having off.”

“Harvest season?” asked Godwin, looking like he had a bad taste in his mouth. “What the heck is *that*?” But she didn't think she'd seen him drink anything just then, so it must have been something else.

“Well—,” said Sarah. “It's kind of like a really long story, actually. I mean a lot of families around where we lived had farms and things to look after, *so*—. I mean ours didn't, necessarily. But it's not like they were going to keep the school open for just a couple stragglers. Plus half the teachers probably had to help out their husbands on theirs. You know—like to help keep up the ledgers. But don't worry; our parents kept us busy with things, too. *Believe* me. Mostly getting things ready for winter.”

“Wow—really?” asked Godwin, his face appearing especially bright and boyish at the moment. Something about it made her want to look away, so she did, and just slowly nodded as her eyes came to rest on the crowded table in front of her.

But she knew it wasn't him; it was her. Or mostly her, with him helping. She just knew she had to stop and catch a breath for a moment and *think*. Maybe get a grip on things while she was at it. A whole world right then, surrounding her head like an effervescent cloud from a just-cracked can of soda. A whole entire world left open, for anyone to see, or say, or think, or do.

“Well I think I like that story,” said Godwin, after she didn't say anything. “Why don't you tell that one?”

She looked back up at him, kind of caught off-guard that he would say that. That he would actually *have* that particular interest, let alone express it. And here she'd

thought they were just talking—which maybe they had been at one point—just to breeze through time a while until something good came back onto the life-scene for them to be in, even if just as the people watching. Or at least something interesting. But now it had come to seem something different; something more. Something more for just the *sake* of it; without any other end in mind that was somewhere down the line that she could think of. And while the old world eventually came to settle, and start to sink back in a little bit, as she went to consider what more she'd actually want to *say* about that world to him if she was really going to say more about it to him, nothing came immediately to mind to want to say. As if the queue of good things-to-say in a situation like this (and that didn't have to do with *comas*)—which was to say a situation kind of like the sort of situation for which she would occasionally, from time-to-(really-not-all-that-often)-time queue things away in her mind for her to say about herself that were hopefully more-or-less interesting if kind of somewhat vague enough so as not to be or seem too unabashedly revealing of her to say to someone about herself while in a situation that was, while in no way *entirely*, at least somewhat on some level similar in nature to the current situation she was in—i.e. the situation of being on a first-date—just went blank. And stayed blank.

“No,” said Sarah, shaking her head, “it's too boring. You wouldn't like it. It's like soap operas on slow people's medicine.”

“Wait—*what?*” asked Godwin.

“Um—never mind,” said Sarah, giving her head a few more shakes. “But anyway—as I was saying? You know—about people in *comas*—?” she looked back up at him with the most earnest of eyes that she could muster, “—and I guess why they're so exciting to watch over, like, everything else there is to watch—?”

“Uh-huh,” said Godwin, nodding what Sarah decided to take as his blessing.

“Well here's the thing—,” said Sarah, “when someone's in a coma, it's actually kind of like a continual one of those hang-over thingies, where instead of just one exciting scene that happens at the end that leaves you thinking *no way* is this guy getting out alive, he's *doomed*—you know, but without them really quite *showing* you him being doomed? To like whatever it is he's being doomed to?—and instead they just set it up in a way to make you *think* there's absolutely *nothing* he can say or do to stop this thing that's so impending on the screen there right in front of you, and him too, and before you know it they go and cut-to-black the scene entirely and then they're like *next-time on...* whatever the show is you're watching, leaving you just absolutely *dying* out-of-your-mind to know what happens next and thinking, *will he? won't he? will he? won't he?*—and the next thing you know, it's like—.”

“Whoa, whoa,” said Godwin, “wait a sec. Did I hear you say *hang-over* thingy? Cause I thought I heard you say hang-over thingy. Or am I just like hearing things?”

Sarah shot him what it took her a second to realize probably seemed like an actual death-stare. Though she was luckily able to diffuse it some, she felt, by hurrying up and adding smiling. Which she then dropped after a moment when it occurred to her that, in conjunction with the staring, a smile might've come off more sadistic-seeming than anything. Which she didn't think she really all-that minded, but decided to stick with just the death-stare anyway—.

“*You* know what I mean,” she said.

“Yeah. I'm Sorry,” said Godwin. “With all that talk about drinking earlier, I guess I just got confused for a moment.”

“No you didn't,” said Sarah.

“Oh,” said Godwin. “Okay.” He was literally searching about himself, as if for something to say. “Then maybe I was just being difficult?”

“That's better,” said Sarah, sitting up straight and making herself seem prim and proper with her hands folded like she sometimes liked to do when it occurred to her to. Or she guessed sometimes just by habit, but that wasn't it this time (to emphasize this to herself she did this thing that she also sometimes did and which she stole from Jeannie from *I Dream of Jeannie's* way of making wishes which was to nod her head just a bit as she blinked). “So as I was saying. With a coma, it's different. With a coma, you get that *cliff-hanger—thank you—feeling* for the *entire* duration. So what my sister and I decided was that someone should just go ahead and cut all the junk, and make a soap opera where the whole entire thing is just one big coma and nothing else. So just a person, in a hospital bed, in a coma, and that's it—,” she broke the pose in order to make a slicing motion through the air with her hand before folding it back together with the other.

“Okay,” said Godwin. “I can see that. But then aren't there like, storylines, and things like that sprinkled through? Like how does the guy actually *get* in the coma to begin with? You know, for instance?”

“Well, that's the thing,” said Sarah. “You just don't know. You *can't* know. Because it's *just* the coma. He could have been kicked in the head by a camel for all you know. But that's what makes it so great; it just *adds* to the overall mystery of it all. Plus this way there's a lot more of your own imagination you get to put into it if you really feel like i—”

“What if I don't want to use my imagination?” asked Godwin. “I mean no one

really *wants* to use their imagination. They only do it when they have to; it's just *too much* work. Probably *especially* when they're watching TV. They just wanna be able to sit back, and relax, and take it all in. You know—. To let the people actually *making* the god-dang shows be the ones up there flipping around with all the switches and junk.”

“Well for one thing—,” said Sarah, “if you were actually *listening*—I said *if you feel like it*. But if you *don't* feel like it, it doesn't matter, because then you can just watch and hope that one of the doctors or nurses or maybe even one of the visitors somehow come to *reveal* the hidden reason for the coma through the things that they say to each other. I mean—after all, cliffhangers don't always have to be just about what happens *next*. They can just as easily be about what happens *next* that's in reference to the thing that happened *earlier* that everyone's so up in arms about being curious about.”

“Aha,” said Godwin. “So it's *not* just the guy in the coma.”

“What do you mean?” asked Sarah.

“You just said so yourself that there's doctors and nurses and visitors and things,” said Godwin. “So the show's probably actually more about them than the actual guy in the coma.”

“Well sure there's other people *involved*,” said Sarah. “How else would the guy eat and drink and—I don't know—maybe *breath*? But that's *it*; I mean beyond them, like, being in the same room with him. For like support and things. Because it's not like the camera actually follows them around or anything. And while there may be these people, like, coming in and out of the scene from time to time, for most of the time, the room's just empty. So then, what it is is, you're just so focused on the guy just laying there, and wondering when the heck he's gonna wake up—you know, maybe thinking things like

hey, did I see his arm just flinch? Or hey—was that a little eyelid flutter I think I'd just seen? Or was it actually something much bigger, like a sign of something, or a labored attempt to communicate?—that you don't even need anything else than what's in front of you to have to look at to get you through.”

“So—*what*, then?” asked Godwin. “It's just like, one continuous still shot of the guy the whole time? How's that any different than just watching a bunch of security camera footage?”

“I don't know,” said Sarah. “Maybe it isn't all that different. I mean, wouldn't *you* like to watch security camera footage of someone in a coma?”

“Maybe if I was a security person,” said Godwin.

Sarah gave him a stare that she felt was similar to the earlier death-stare she'd given him, only briefer in duration, and with more of a disappointed sort of tone to it.

“Well, hey,” said Godwin, making himself up-beat in his chair, “I'm not saying it's a totally horrible idea. In fact, I think it's actually got a pretty good premise. But—well, *here*—how about this: have you ever thought having the camera be somewhere different? Like shooting from a different angle?”

“Why?” asked Sarah. She shook her head—“or like, *where*?”

“Well what if you had it be shooting from *inside* the actual coma patient?” said Godwin. “That way the audience could be looking *out* at all the action happening. *While* it's happening.”

Sarah thought about it for a moment.

“Wait a minute—,” said Sarah. “That wouldn't work. If you had it from the point-of-view of the coma patient, all you'd see is just *black* all the time. And it's not like

you could even see his dreams, since they'd all be going on actually *inside* his head, and not like, playing out in front of him like how real life does.”

“No,” said Godwin. “Not necessarily. I mean just because the guy's head is off or whatever doesn't mean that the camera can't still be on.”

“So you'd just be seeing everything he *would* have been seeing if he was awake?” asked Sarah.

“Yeah,” said Godwin, seeming excited.

“Alright,” said Sarah. “That kind of makes sense. There's just one tiny, little, major, world-killing problem, though—,” she raised her hand and squinted to make like she was holding something tiny between her thumb and forefinger.

“Oh,” said Godwin. “There is?”

“How the heck are you supposed to know if he's awake or not!” asked Sarah, the tiny thing between her fingers exploding, throwing her arms up and out in mock-exasperation. “Did you ever think about *that* one?”

She sat back and folded her arms across her chest. Godwin didn't say anything right away, but she assumed he was just thinking about that one. Which she knew was a tough one.

“Well,” said Godwin. “Maybe you couldn't know for *sure* whether or not he's really awake. But I'm sure you could tell from everyone's faces what's probably going on with him. You know—like *sadness* means he's still sleeping. *Concerned* means he's taken a turn for the worse. Kind of *caught-off-guard-looking* could mean they maybe saw something, you know—like *you* said—an arm move, an eyelid twitch. And when they look *really really excited*, that of course tells you he's finally awake, and that the

show's probably just about over. Plus someone would probably start saying something like *hey look, he's awake! He's awake! Doctor—come in here! He's awake!*”

Now it was Sarah's turn to not say anything right away.

“You just don't get it, do you?” she finally said.

“What?” asked Godwin. “What is it? I thought my idea was kind of neat.”

“Then you just must not get it,” said Sarah. “Cause for one thing, it's not a show about people's faces. It's a show about *you*, watching a guy in a *coma*, seeing if he's gonna awake or not. And that's it. It's not about other people's dealings, or problems, or anything like that. It's meant to be a *nail-biter*, not a—I don't know—. *Head-scratcher*.”

Godwin started thumbing the stubble just beneath his chin, like he was thinking.

“*Stop that*,” said Sarah, barely able to hold down a smile.

“What?” asked Godwin, releasing his chin so that the hand could form a question.

His lips remained opened, hovering somewhere between smiling and being serious.

“Nothing,” said Sarah.

Godwin eventually settled back down to normal.

“So did you have a name for this stupid show, or what?” he asked.

Sarah knew he was still being jokey, but squinted an angry look at him anyway.

“No. We never got that far,” she said.

“Why not?” asked Godwin. “What happened? Did your sister like, move away too?”

“If you must know—,” said Sarah, “we got a washing machine.”

“Oh,” said Godwin, seeming almost disappointed. “I see.”

The air seemed awfully static all of a sudden. Sarah noticed the music had

stopped, and all there was was a cold, iron undertone of constant chatter—like a colorless background radiation of dozens of voices.

“But if I had to now I'd probably call it *Sleepy Head*,” said Sarah.

“Well *see*—?” said Godwin, pausing in the middle of taking a drink. “*There* you go.”

He took the drink.

“*What*?” asked Sarah, sharply, almost confusing for a moment her fake anger for something real.

“Next thing you know—,” he set down the drink, “—you'd have a hundred other sleepy heads across the land all up and falling into comas, thinking it's the cool new thing to do.” He shrugged—“I mean *you* know how TV can be.” Then he picked back up the drink.

“What's that supposed to mean?” asked Sarah.

“Nothing,” said Godwin, and took another drink. “I'm just saying.”

“Just saying *what*, exactly?” asked Sarah.

Godwin shrugged.

“No—,” said Sarah. “I mean it. What is it I'm apparently supposed to know about how TV can be?”

“I don't *know*—,” said Godwin. “That it can lead to irrational trends happening? You know—like a buncha people thinking it'd be cool to be in a coma just because they saw some guy on TV being in one? I guess I just thought since you watched so much TV and junk lately that you'd be particularly *in tune* to that sort of thing or whatever.”

“Well I seriously doubt *that* would happen,” said Sarah, rolling her eyes and

flashing a smile, yet at the same time feeling a third shade of red start to warm her face that she rarely ever felt lately, but that she distinctly remembered feeling from time to time as a child, like whenever one of her parents (in particular her father) would have had warned her not to do something, something that she'd end up doing anyway and wind up getting herself in trouble somehow, trouble that they would end up having to get her out of. Like the time they took a day trip to that park in the woods that had all those random metal sculptures, in particular that one that she'd seen all the kids climbing, and that she too wanted to climb, but that her father had warned her not to, that she wouldn't be able to get herself back down from it, but that at the first chance she had, she did, and then couldn't, and just had to wait there, holding on, as the other kids scattered, and evening darkened, until her father eventually found her, cold, and hurting, and crying, alone.

“Well—you never know,” said Godwin.

Sarah let out something unavoidable, kind of like a laugh.

“So I guess you're right about one thing,” she said.

“I am?” said Godwin.

“Yep,” said Sarah, and that was it.

For a while, they just kind of sat there. Godwin apparently had finished his drink at some point, and looked to be having trouble deciding what to do with his attention. From where she was sitting, Sarah had a full view of the dance floor, though, where the DJ had started rummaging through his bins of records, and setting back up for another set. This drew the attention of some of the bar-goers, too—couples mostly—who started wandering back to the floor even before the MC made his final announcement of the night. It was almost as if they'd sensed what was coming, and wanted to get there early for

it. To be there, front and center for the night's last act.

“*Well folks—*,” said the announcer, “*—it's about that time again.*” Meanwhile, throughout the bar, those who hadn't already set up near the dance floor started to quiet, and gradually turn their attention. Except for Chase, who stayed sleeping. And Godwin, who just gazed up at a spot on the ceiling where he apparently thought the voice was coming from.

“*In a little over an hour, the smoke'll have settled, the barrels' gone dry, and the last lantern blown,*” the announcer continued, which was followed by a collective moan of disappointment from the crowd.

“*But we ain't quite dead yet—!*” he cut through the moaning with a near-growl that was startling. At least to Sarah. Everyone else just about started cheering, “*—and neither is DJ Tanner—let's give 'im a hand!*” The cheering got louder, and more clap-oriented.

Once things quieted down a little bit, the announcer continued. “*So fill up while you can folks—*,” he said, a bit more calmly this time, “*—and don't forget to tip your bartender.*” Sarah noticed a few scattered *boos* coming from the crowd when he said this. “*But most importantly—before I hand things back over to my good friend DJT for one last round—*,” some more cheering, “*—we here at the Sleepy Saloon want you to remember—*,” at this point, the crowd noise leveled out to a kind of indifference, “*—you can lead your horse to water—*,” a few seeming chuckles, “*—but if your friend's too drunk to drive you home, you sure as hell can't stay here—*,” the cheering swelled to a high, “*—so start ringin' on up them goddamn cabs already 'fore you get too wasted to remember the goddamn number!*” This last part came out in an extended growl that

became so raspy-sounding by the end of it, that Sarah swore the announcer must have had finally lost his voice. In fact, she could barely hear the last part over the sustained static of snap and crackle issuing forth from rowdy revelers from all directions, like a sonic wave of surround-sound, white-capped with small bursts of hooting obscenity.

The noise continued even as the music started, though quickly trailed into a lot of loud-mouthed joshing and general carrying-on. In a seemingly counter-intuitive move, the DJ started playing a slow country love song, announcing partway through the song's violin-laden intro that it was a song meant to be for all of the “lovers out there,” though she was pretty sure he meant “in here.” She figured maybe he just thought he should mellow things out a little bit so they wouldn't get too out of hand; which she guessed was probably actually a pretty good idea. In any case, as she looked around the room, everybody seemed very very happy to be there with one another. Or at least with the people in the their most immediate vicinity.

In fact, the only people probably not happy to be with one another in the bar at that moment, she thought, were probably Eva and Brad. Though she guessed she had no idea if he'd even ever found her, let alone if they were still in the bar somewhere. But she was pretty sure that, wherever they were, if they were there *together*, they had more than likely probably already gotten to a point far beyond that which had been the other's last nerve.

Which was what made her regret not having gone after her. Or at least giving her some time to cool off on her own, or try to work things out with Brad, or whatever it was she was doing, and then going to check up on her. But instead, she'd done neither. And was still doing neither. And it just didn't sit well with her. She really had been having a

good time sitting there joking around with Godwin and Chance, but the longer Brad and Eva stayed missing, the more and more that worry became the dominating feature of that part of her mind that was somewhere near the back, towards the bottom, that was not necessarily concerned with things that were in the immediate, but that could still, at any moment, jump up and grab her and drag her back there with it. Which was exactly what it did, at that very moment, as an overwhelming image of the earlier psycho whom Eva had narrated wheeling Sarah's hypothetical lifeless body across a darkened field towards the woods came to mind—though in this case, it was *Eva* who was the Sarah character, and it was *Brad* who was the perverted psycho.

And that was where her mind lingered as she gazed out past Godwin, towards the couples slow-dancing on the dance floor. She knew it was completely worst-case scenario, but she couldn't help it; it was just where her mind went. And in fact, it was always just where her mind whenever things got to the point where the worst that could happen presented itself as a complete and utter possibility. It was where her mind went back in Brentwood, in the months leading up to her sister's eighteenth birthday, as it started to become more and more clear that Meredith was going to hold firm to her contempt for the Faith, and stand unwavering, and even complacent, as the cold hands of exile came to whisk her away. Just as it had their brother David before her. It was where her mind went after her mother told her they would be moving to a completely new state, where she knew if, when the time came, she didn't play things completely straight, her own passage into adulthood would leave her not only alone, and completely cut off from anybody she'd ever known or loved, but now also cut off by hundreds of miles from any remaining safe and familiar place. Which—the longer Eva stayed out of the picture—

was precisely what was beginning to look more and more to be the swiftly approaching case. Because unless Eva came back to save her, wherever Sarah ended up that night—whichever of Greater Fayetteville's countless cold, dark parking lots at night appeared the safest and easiest to slip into unnoticed by anyone (or any-*thing*) that might be lurking there to meet her—she knew now that the worst-case for her was indeed at very least *real*, and at the very most, (*and the last lantern blown*), aching upon her.

But maybe she deserved it, she thought. After all, she hadn't been there for Eva. So why she should come back for her? And while the *back* back part of her mind may indeed have been primarily concerned with where she was going to sleep that night, she knew it was pointless to keep worrying over it, since she also knew that there was nothing she herself could do about it at that point. Her mind was like some sort of seer of self-fulfilling prophecies, where if she could think it, and it was something bad, it was more than likely already on the horizon. The only thing that could really help her now was her faith in Eva, which, quite frankly, she didn't think she had.

So instead, she remained focused on what maybe *she* could do that would be good for her friend. She knew that the worst-case in this case (Brad's stone face and shadowed-over eyes beneath his baseball cap remaining completely devoid of emotion as he moved as steady as a ghost pushing a wheelbarrow with a passed-out girl in it across the lawn in the moonlight) was actually kind of completely ridiculous, even while considering her track record with imagining worst-case scenarios. But she also knew that that didn't mean that something bad couldn't happen that she just hadn't gotten the chance to imagine. After all, she'd never in a million years imagined as a six-year-old that her father would fall so far in just two short years from seeming pillar of the church, to the

person even *she* had had difficulty recognizing the next time she'd seen him in person. And maybe that was the whole point. Maybe the reason her mind just kept flipping back to some ridiculous caricature was that she didn't really know Brad at all. Meaning nor did she know what he was capable of. But the worst part about it was that she didn't think Eva knew either. And knowing Eva—she'd want to test him.

Sarah was just about to ask Godwin what he thought Brad and Eva's chances of not having killed each other by that point had been, when another image occurred to her. It was of the same dark field, the same wheelbarrow, only this time, it was Eva at the helm. Eva, in her Terminator sunglasses and rolled up farmer's-daughter's shirt, with her deep auburn curls springing up and down as she walked, wheeling Brad across the lawn towards his secret doom; and the best part—smiling about it. Which (knowing Eva) was what she'd do.

And at the thought of it, so did Sarah.

“So what about you?” asked Godwin, out of nowhere. Sarah shifted her gaze down to meet him, at the last second deciding to just keep the smile. “Does your name happen to mean anything interesting?”

“Who?” asked Sarah. “Sarah?”

He looked at her with over-bright eyes.

“Sarah just means *princess*,” she said, and shrugged. “Nothing really too interesting. I guess in Sanskrit it means like *the essence* of something. So I guess that makes me *Princess the Essence of Fisk*.”

After a brief moment, Godwin said “*Sarah*,” but it was so quiet, and with such a far-away look on his face, that she'd barely even noticed.

She cleared her throat—“yes?” she asked.

“Oh,” said Godwin, suddenly back down to normal. “Nothing. I guess I've just never really got to say the name *Sarah* before. Or at least not out loud anyway. I don't think I've ever known anybody named *Sarah*.”

“Stop saying like that,” she said.

“Like what?” asked Godwin.

“Like *Sarah*,” she said, making the *ah* sound extra soft and sustained.

“Sorry,” said Godwin, seeming embarrassed. “I didn't realize it.”

“Well just don't do it again,” she said. “And don't tell me you've never known of anyone named Sarah before, because that's just ridiculous.”

“Well I guess call me ridiculous then,” said Godwin. “Because I *swear* I've never known one. Or at least not a real-life, flesh-and-blood one like you.”

“Oh—*well*,” said Sarah, making as if she was offended by this, “are you sure about that, there, Ridiculous?”

“About what?” asked Godwin, obviously confused. “That I've never met a Sarah?”

“*No—*,” said Sarah, “that I'm *flesh-and-blood*.”

“Well—,” he started to say, “I guess I just *assumed—*.”

“How do you know I'm not a ghost?” she asked him, bluntly.

“Oh—,” he said, “well *are* you?”

“You never know,” she said. “I could be *anything*. I could *very easily* even be just a figment of your imagination right now, and there would be *no* way you could ever know. I mean as long as I don't decide to up and disappear on you.”

“*Oh*,” said Godwin, seeming a bit disheartened by this.

“Well it shouldn't come as a big surprise or anything,” said Sarah. “I already told you I was the essence of something. And from there, it's not really a big step to being a ghost, *so—*.”

“Yeah, but you said that was in Ancient Sanscript or something,” said Godwin, “didn't you? I mean *here* you're probably just a person.”

She felt like glowering her eyes at him for some reason, so that's what she did.

“Oh, *sorry—*,” he said. He rolled his eyes. “A *woman* person.”

“Are you sure about *that*?” she asked, crossing her arms.

“*What—*,” he asked, “you mean you're not a woman, either?”

“Well I'm sure not a *man*,” she said. “But technically I don't turn 18 for like another month. So in terms of *Modern American-ism—*,” she unfolded her arms to do air-quotes, “*—or whatever—*,” then stopped to brush a wisp of hair back real quick before bringing them back down, “I guess that means I'm still a girl.”

“Really?” asked Godwin, taking a moment to look over his shoulder at something; Sarah wasn't sure what. “And they let you in here?”

“Well, *yeah*,” said Sarah, “but I thought—,” she made herself a little quieter.

“Well weren't *you* the ones who got us in here? I mean—that's what Eva was telling me anyway.”

“Hmm,” said Godwin, thoughtfully-looking. “I don't know. Truthfully I'm not even really sure how *I* got in here. I mean without anyone even saying anything. I'm not even really sure how I got this drink—,” he held up the empty bottle of beer and shook it, while kind of peering up through the amber glass bottom at something. “Oh, that's

right—,” he set it back down. “*Brad.*” He rolled his eyes.

While letting herself have a small moment of inner-laughter, Sarah couldn't help but smile.

“What—?” Godwin smiled, interested.

“Oh nothing,” said Sarah. “I just can't believe I got all flustered earlier over nothing.”

“Flustered?” asked Godwin. “What could there possibly have been to be flustered over that was so—,” his head seemed to sway slightly as he closed his eyes in apparent thought (either that, or there was a slight breeze in the room that she couldn't feel), “*nonexistent*, I guess?” He opened his eyes. “I mean to elicit *two* nothings?”

“Nothing,” said Sarah, and immediately cringed at herself. “I guess I was just led to believe that—,” she glanced up at him; but then she actually considered what she was saying for a moment. “*No*, nothing,” she said, and lowered her eyes again.

“No, really,” said Godwin. “What is it? I mean you kind of have to tell me now. It's like—,” she looked up just in time to see him drop his shoulders, and kind of slur his eyes, “—the *law*, and everything.”

“No,” she said, and shook her head. It was like his eyes were two north poles, and so were hers, and so wouldn't let her to stay focused on them. “It's not important.” Or like the glare from the sun on an endless glass tundra (and she arctic the explorer).

“That's no fair,” said Godwin, apparently not having the same problem Sarah was having. At least not at the moment. “Cause now I like, *really* wanna know.”

“Well—,” she said, and sighed. “*Alright.*” She bit her bottom lip. “It's just that—I was led to believe—,” she went slow, making sure to choose her words carefully,

“that one of us—I’m not sure *which*—were supposed to pretend to be like, boyfriend and girlfriend or something like that. You know—. So we wouldn’t have any problems getting in, and getting drinks, and things like that?”

“Really?” asked Godwin, his mouth forming a sort of Elvis-lip, only uncertain. In fact, for a moment it looked like the whole right side of his face had just had some sort of a reverse-stroke. “No one told me that.”

“Yeah, well—,” she said softly, averting her eyes, “I told you it was *stu*—”

“I just wish I would have *known*,” he said wistfully.

“—pid,” she finished, then quickly changed keys. “*Really?*”

“Yeah, I’m actually really good a pretending things,” he said.

“Oh,” said Sarah, with a tinge of disappointment-feeling maybe, “—well like what?” though she wasn’t sure; she couldn’t quite pin him down.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Like lots of things.”

She couldn’t help it; it was like they kept hopping back and forth between two different pages. But just when she thought they might be on the same one, she’d look up. And there she was alone again.

“How about like being someone’s boyfriend?” she asked, keeping her eyes hovering somewhere about his midsection. “I mean for example.”

“I don’t know,” said Godwin, his body shrugged. “I guess I’ve never really tried before. *Just pretending*, I mean. I mean it’s not like I’ve never *been* someone’s boyfriend before. It’s just—*been a while* I guess is all. Plus being and pretending are like, two *entirely* different things.” He seemed to start to reach for something for a moment, but then stopped, and sat back. “I think.”

She herself couldn't say what she was really thinking right then. It was almost as if she wasn't thinking anything. At least not any *particular* thing. Because she was obviously thinking *some* things. Things dealing mainly with what other sorts of things she might actually think about that didn't necessarily concern the range of possible things he might be good at pretending at that she might want to ask him about that mightn't or not encourage her from continuing on her current course sliding more and more steadily and stealthily downward in her chair until she'd just gone and slipped entirely under the table, to the ultimate floor. But that wasn't *thinking*. Unless playing Whack-a-Mole in your head was like thinking.

She did know that the music playing was just about *unbearable*, though. The slow, soft voices. The literal *weeping*-sound that the one instrument was making. It was like getting too much of ice-cream all at once so that it hurt. But no one was saying anything, so there was nothing else to do but just sit, and continue to slip, and listen. Just sit, and slip, and listen. Then one slow country love ballad led to another slow country love ballad, and before she knew it—

“I guess I'm pretty good at pretending to be a soldier,” said Godwin, as if the conversation had never ended.

She stopped sliding and just stayed there. For a moment, she was literally stunned. Because if she was correct, and he'd meant by what he'd just said what she *thought* he'd meant by what he'd just said, then he might as well have just up and flea-hopped himself down onto a page from a whole other book than her entirely, and then closed it on himself. And if the book was a secret diary like one of those ones that had a little lock on the front of it like she used to have, then he somehow must have reached

back out and locked it, and hid the key. She guessed technically he never actually told her himself—at least not straight out—that he was in the Army. But he sure as heck hadn't helped *not* give her that impression (except, she guessed, for with his posture, and overall demeanor maybe).

“Well what do you mean?” she asked him, sitting up, and lifting her eyes to him. He was smiling. “Are you not really in Army or something?”

“Oh, no,” said Godwin, waving his hand, and losing the smile. “That’s not it. I mean I’m *in* the Army. But that doesn’t mean I’m an actual *soldier*. Not like my uncle was, anyway. I mean he really *did* sacrifice for, like, the good of something bigger than him. Personally, I’m not even really sure how the heck I got through basic. It’s not like I actually know what I’m doing or anything half the time. Sometimes I think it’s like they just kind of see me hanging around the place, like with the other guys, and just assume I should actually *be* there.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. So he hadn't actually been lying, or even joking, she thought. He was just trying to be open and sincere with her. “So like, why *did* you decide to join up then?” she asked. “I mean, no offense or anything, but you don't really *seem* like the sort of army person I'm used to seeing. You know—like on TV and things.”

“What? Do you mean like *Brad*?” he said, rolling his eyes again, only more brusquely this time.

“Yeah, well,” said Sarah, trying to think of a different way to put it. But she couldn't. “I guess like Brad.”

“That’s alright,” he said, lowering his eyes. “It’s not like it’s a big deal or anything. I actually never really thought of myself as they kind of person who'd join the

army either. Not even when I really did.” He flashed a smile that almost immediately dissolved. “But I mean. I guess I can tell you why I think I *probably* joined in the first place. I just don't know how really *true* it'd be anymore. *Or—*. I don't know. Maybe *true's* not the word for it. I guess now I just know there's probably something more for me that's like, waiting on the other side of this thing. You know? Like some need in me that needs filled that I never even knew was inside me. That sort of thing?”

“Yeah,” said Sarah, upbeat. “I think I know what you mean—,” she added some slow, shallow nodding for effect. “It's kind of like one of those shows that you watch just because you're like, really bored and nothing else is on? Only come to find out it's really like your most favorite show in the world—you just never knew it? And before long you're sitting there thinking *how in the world* did I ever live life without this great thing in my life without just being one of those people who go around feeling all empty and depressed for themselves all the time?”

Godwin didn't say anything right way. He just widened his eyes, which were cast down at the table. And for a moment, Sarah was beginning to think that she might have had said something wrong. Or at least not entirely optimal.

“*You know—?*” said Godwin, promptly lifting his eyes up to about chin-level and holding them there for a moment—“that's actually *exactly* what it's like—,” then he quickly kissed the ceiling with them, before lowering them back down again. “Or probably *will be* one day I mean. I mean it's like you just said: before I got into this thing—like before the whole process even got started—I don't mean it to sound corny, but I was just like a person flipping through the channels of life, not really knowing what to do with himself, or *anything—*do you know what I mean?” This time he actually

kissed her eyes with them—his eyes—but only briefly, before lowering them back down again. “Because that was *really* what it was like.”

“I don’t know—,” shrugged Sarah. “I don’t mind corny.”

She figured she had to say something. Even if she was having trouble imagining what a “life”-channel might look like to someone who wasn’t necessarily her.

“I mean I wouldn’t say I was *bored*, necessarily,” he said. “I mean I’d *tried* a lot of different things. I’d just never really *done* anything. For a while I was thinking about trying college. But then I just kept thinking, *you know*—. By the end of this thing, sure I might be four times smarter than I was four years ago. But could I have really said I’ve *done* anything after that? Like when it was all said and done? And then, I was painting houses with my uncle for a while, and that was alright. I was making some money—which I know isn’t anything—or at least not to write home about, *but*—. At least I could go home from work and say *hey, I may have actually done something today*, but the thing is, and actually truthfully *meant* it. Unlike high school, which was a total *waste*. Only I wouldn’t have really said it—I’d probably have only just thought it to myself after stretching out on the couch and like, having got to relax for the first time in hours. You see, cause my mom worked the 4:30 to 12:30 in-the-morning shift at the Mini-Mart across town from us, so if I would have said it to anyone, it would have been her, but she was never around when I was half the time. So—. And then my uncle—he was the one in the army I was saying before, so of course he was always talking about how Army isn’t a decision to take lightly, but by all means, if ya think ya got it in ya, and ya ain’t gonna be a doctor, or the next Pope, or the next Kyle Petty, then go ahead and go for it. And if you are gonna be a doctor, there’s probably no better training then on the battlefield. But

if you don't think ya got it in ya, then *well*—. Then ya must not have a very high opinion of yourself, and that's too bad. Cause every fella should have a high opinion of himself, no matter who he is. Even if he *is* the Pope. In fact, he said there's two things in life every guy should keep in mind if he's gonna be alright. He said there's gotta be something he believes he's best at, even if it ain't his job to do—.” But then, for some reason, he just stopped talking. He did say “um” at one point, but other than that, he just kind of gazed off. Once, he coughed.

“Is something wrong?” asked Sarah.

“Oh, um. No,” he said. “Not really.” He scratched the back of his neck.

“Oh,” said Sarah. “So then there's just one thing your uncle said? Not two?”

“Well—,” said Godwin. “I mean there *was*. But then I, um. Forgot—.”

“I see,” said Sarah.

“I mean I forgot it was kind of—,” he said, and then stopped, and tried again—“I mean my uncle was always kind of—. I don't know—. Maybe not like, always one for saying things really meant for mixed company, I guess you might say.”

“Well alright,” said Sarah. “I mean you don't have to say if you don't want. But it's not like we haven't heard *Eva* say some pretty un-mixed-company things so far already tonight.”

“Yeah,” said Godwin, smiling kind of embarrassed. “I guess you're right.”

“And I mean it couldn't be much worse than what she said,” said Sarah.

“*Well*—,” said Godwin. “I don't know. I guess maybe not *that* bad. But still pretty bad.”

“*Hmm*—that does sound bad,” said Sarah, smirking.

“No—,” said Godwin. “I don't know. I guess not really. I mean now that I think about it. I'd say just kind of—*crass*. In the sense of like, being joking. But not really joking either, because I think he was half-serious when he said it.”

“Well just say it already,” said Sarah. “I mean you can't hold back now. You yourself said earlier—it's the law.”

“Did I say that?” asked Godwin.

“Yeah, when we were talking about—,” she had to think for a second. “*Other things*.”

“Well alright,” said Godwin. “I can't believe I'm saying this. But you're the one that asked for it. So okay—he said there's like, two important things to keep in mind if you're gonna be alright in life. I mean, when it comes to being a guy, anyway. And the one is to think you're the best at something. Anything. Even something small. So then the second one is like, I guess, about how each guy only gets one particular—how to put it?—,” he paused to think, “—*other-word-for rooster* in life? Like no matter what? So that what they have to do to be alright, then—I mean according to my uncle—is to just to accept 'im for who he is, and then learn to get along with 'im. If that makes any sense.”

“Oh—that's funny,” said Sarah.

Godwin just looked at her for a second. “Wa-what's funny?” he asked, kind of hesitantly.

“—cause my grandparents actually used to have a whole *boatload* of 'em running around on their farm,” said Sarah, making herself look serious, if a little lost in memory.

“Oh—,” said Godwin, “*well—*,” he tried out a series of passing glances, as if to read her, “I guess there could be exceptions.” She thought it would be funnier in general

if she didn't let him know whether or not she was actually joking, though.

“You know what I heard—?” she said, changing her demeanor to something a bit more actually serious. “I heard, in *China*, you're only aloud to have *one* child per family. And if you don't, they like take them away or something. That's what my sister said anyway.”

“Wow—*really*?” said Godwin. “That sounds horrible.”

“I know,” said Sarah. “Can you imagine? A whole country's-worth of nothing-but only child?”

“I don't know,” said Godwin. “I'm an only child. What's so wrong about only children? I mean except for the whole taking-them-away-from-their-parents thing?”

“Well, nothing *per se*,” said Sarah. “I mean, personally, I didn't actually even *know* many of them growing up. In fact, most of the families we knew had probably about as many children running around as actual *roosters*, so—,” she couldn't help but glance a small smile towards him. “But anyway—all I'm saying is—I guess I was just led to believe that people in families with only one child—by which I mean the actual *child*—just tended to be more, I don't know. Self-involved or whatever. Like the world revolves around them, and they can't really imagine themselves as like—just a smaller part of a bigger all-around *thing*. You know—like a *family*, for example. I mean sure they have their own families they grow up around. But the whole time they're treated like they *are* the thing that the whole family actually revolves around. Like as the be-all and end-all of its entire *existence* just about. Whereas at least in larger families it's more, like, spread out amongst themselves. I mean their whole sense of self. And the bigger the family gets, the more spread out it actually *is*. Haven't you ever seen *The Brady Bunch*?”

Because that was what the whole first season was pretty much even *about*, more or less. But the point is, the more people around you all the time you have to care about, the less time you have to care about your actual *self*, to the point that it's like there's less of *you* there actually *inside* of you. If *that* makes any sense.”

“Sure,” said Godwin, as he kind of turned away from her, towards one of the empty shot glasses that was on the table. “Except for the fact that it's not *true*.” He started to turn the glass around in little circles with his fingers.

“Well, whatever—,” said Sarah, deciding to change the subject. “Like you said, I'm sure there's exceptions. I mean I'm sure there's not like a billion or whatever people in China all walking around like they're the King or Queen of Sheba all the time.”

Godwin stopped spinning the glass, but kept his hand on it as he looked up at her. “So where is *Sheba*, anyway?” he asked. “I mean I've always heard that, but no one's ever mentioned where it actually *is*.”

“I don't know—,” Sarah shrugged. “I think it might be like one of those made-up places. You know—like Shangri-la?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” said Godwin, and just sat there for a moment. But then he looked down and started spinning the shot glass again.

“So,” said Sarah. “What thing are *you* the most best at?”

“Hmm?” said Godwin, looking up.

“You know—,” said Sarah, “like *in the world*. Like your uncle. Didn't you say he said *everyone* should believe they're the best at at least *something*?”

“Well, yeah,” said Godwin, taking his hand off of the glass, then bringing it to meet the other just beneath his chin. “I mean he just said *guys*, though, not *everyone*—,”

he rolled his eyes at *everyone*. “But I don't know. I guess if there was one thing I'd have to say I'm probably best at, I guess it'd be—.” He sat forward at this point, resting his elbows on the table, and keeping his hands folded up around his chin. But the longer he sat there like that, the more his one knuckle seemed to be pushing up into his bottom lip.

“Well *I don't know*—,” he finally said, dropping his arms flat to the table. “I mean I don't even really *think* in terms like that. At least not usually. I mean, it's not like—”

“Well—just try thinking in terms of something small, then,” said Sarah, seeing that he was struggling. “I mean if you can't think of anything right away. It doesn't have to be something major; it can be *anything*. You know—like, maybe you're really good at polishing your boots or something? Or maybe you're always the quickest one at getting your bed made in the morning? In the Army I mean.”

His arms had crossed, but were still flat to the table. That, and his eyebrows made him look angry. Luckily, though, the rest of his face told her that he was just thinking. Which was what she figured he was really mad at—the actual *thinking*—and not her.

“I don't know—it's not like I'm *bad* at any of those things,” he said. “It's just that—,” he glanced down, speaking almost as if to himself, “I mean I guess I'm pretty good at Scrabble sometimes—but I wouldn't say *the best*. Though I did get that 100-point word once.” Then his eyes shifted back up an inch to meet hers. “Well what are *you* so good at, then, hotshot—? That you're the best?”

Sarah felt she could smirk right then and get away with it. So she smirked.

“As a matter of fact,” she said, “I happen to be really really good at telling the time. I mean, like without a watch or anything.”

“Okay,” said Godwin, seemingly not too impressed.

“So—,” she said, “I could be going through my day, and just doing any-old average thing, and all of a sudden just look up and be like *hmm, I wonder what time it is*. But instead of consulting a watch, you see, I’ll just consult my own brain. And nine times out of ten—?” she paused for a moment, blinking once. “I’ll be right. *And I mean exactly—*,” she said, more quietly, leaning in, as if it was a superpower she had that she didn’t want to get out, “—to the actual *minute*. And the thing is—,” she sat back up, “I usually don’t even really have to think about it. It just comes to me. And in fact, it’s the times that I *do* actually think about it too much that I usually end up getting it wrong—.”

“Hey—,” said Godwin, cutting in, “*wait* a minute. How do you know you’re right if you don’t even consult a watch? You can’t just like, *think* a time, and say *yep that’s the time*, and that’s it. I mean I could say it’s like, 10:30 right now, but that doesn’t mean it is.”

“And that’s why I check the clock *afterwards*,” said Sarah. Then she thought for a second. “And it’s definitely way later than 10:30 right now.”

“Okay,” said Godwin, smiling smugly. “But then how do you know the clock is actually *right*? *Hmm?*”

“Well,” she said, “I always just use the clock at work. So I know it’s at least always the same.”

“Alright,” said Godwin. “Whatever.” He reached his hand up to yawn, but then brought it back down so that he could fold his arms as he sat back, letting them fall against his chest. “Well hey—,” he said, looking up. “Why don’t we see how good you are under pressure? *Hmm?* Let’s see if you can tell me what time it is—,” he paused for a second, “—right about—*now*.”

“I can't,” said Sarah.

“Why not?” asked Godwin.

“Because there's not a clock in here,” she said.

“So?”

“So even if I *were* to guess, we'd never be able to check,” she said.

Godwin sat up and started looking around the place. “How do *you* know there's not a clock in here?” he asked. But after a few seconds, he stopped, and sat back.

“Because,” said Sarah, “I already checked.”

“When?” he asked.

“I don't know,” she said. “Probably like *hours* ago.”

“Hours?” he said. “We haven't been here that long, have we?”

“Um, yeah,” said Sarah. Her back was getting stiff, so she decided to sit back as well, folding her arms under her breasts, not necessarily to copy him, but since it was the most comfortable way she could think to sit right then, what with so few options. “We've been here long enough.”

It was strange. She wasn't mad at him or anything. She was just getting sick as heck of sitting there in those hard wooden chairs for so long, in that god-awful artificial light. But at the same time, she didn't really care if she looked to him like she was mad at him, which—the longer she sat there, with her arms folded, looking down at the thickly lacquered-looking table edge like she was—the more she felt he probably thought she probably was.

She reached out and dug her thumb into the edge (—so it was awfully thickly lacquered, she thought). But after a while, she decided she wasn't being fare. Even

though she didn't think she was playing any sort of mind games with him, she was afraid he might actually think that. And that was just not something she did to people—*ever*. Even to people she didn't like—who she usually just ignored if she could. But even if she couldn't, she was nice. Not that she didn't like Godwin. Because that was thing—she actually felt she kind of might have. Kind of might have *quite a bit*. She just wasn't sure how he felt, necessarily. After all—for all she knew, he could have just been being nice all this time. Or at least when he was not being overtly sarcastic. Though she guessed she'd found that people who were just being nice to people tended not to pay enough attention to them to actually joke around with them. Like how cashiers and things would stare right through you while asking you how you were, and how was the weather. Like how most of the cashiers were at work, she guessed, with most of the customers. And though he *was* paying an awful lot of attention to her—and had been all night, really—that fact didn't really *say* much, since they'd really had no other choice than to sit there and pay so much attention to each other. Like they'd been actually *forced* together somehow—like by some magical force. But then again, she guessed it'd mainly just been Brad and Eva's doing—their being put there, at that specific table, in those specific chairs, on this specific evening, at this specific time (which—she checked—was 12:53 in the morning).

One thing Brad and Eva definitely *hadn't* done, though, was to make it so that Godwin was actually *looking* at her when he looked at her. Nor her when she looked at him. And if she was sure about one thing, it was that they had both been actually looking *at* each other that night (if, she guessed, a little hesitantly at times), not *through*. And *that* was something people could only do on their own. There was no special magic that

could make you actually see the person you were talking to.

She looked back up—

“So was it your uncle, then, who mainly influenced you into joining the Army?” she asked.

“Well, yeah,” said Godwin. “Mainly.” Then he started to redden a little bit. “But I guess there was also this girl I kind of knew who was joining who always made it seem like it was a really good thing to do. I mean she was always talking about the plights of people—especially like Middle Eastern women—and how it's people's duties to help people who are in much worse positions than they are. I mean, she was always being pretty inspiring like that. Plus she explained how like the Army is so much different these days than it used to be—like how it's really more about helping people anymore than actually just going around blowing stuff up. And in fact, it's really the *only* way to help people in any really major way. So yeah—I guess she was a pretty big influence.”

He seemed to be done, but just as she opened her mouth, about to talk, he started back up again—“plus I guess I'm just a little bit disappointed by the fact that—well hey, it's not like we'll be going to war anytime soon. So why don't we just go out and do something actually useful for once? I mean I could be in like—I don't know—Afghanistan right now, helping paint some poor Middle Eastern lady's kitchen for her. Or I don't know, helping build a school or something like that. But no—instead we're here in America, just kind of marching around and dodging tennis balls all day, waiting around like there's something actually big that's gonna happen to warrant our attention, when we all secretly know there's not. And when something small does happen, it's the guys over in Airborne who're the only ones who ever get to see any action. I mean I keep hearing

about all these secret wars they used to have in places, but then I'm just like—okay. So where are they? I don't see any secret wars anywhere. Plus they keep saying that we're *definitely* going to do something about that ship we had that was bombed over in um—. Yemen. But that's been almost like a year now. Since that happened. And heck—I'd say that's a pretty big something. Isn't it? I mean our own ship being attacked? I mean good-old 'So-Damn Insane' Hussein didn't even do *that*, yet we still went after him. They say we need a Republican in office is what we need, but I don't know. I'm not so sure about that. I mean it's not like I actually *want* a big war to break out anywhere. I just want to be in a position to actually do something for once. You know? But some of the guys claim that unless something changes, when we actually *do* go somewhere, wherever it is, when we're not out patrolling around the place, we'll probably just be on base most of the time, working in our TRE units.”

“Tree units?” asked Sarah.

“*No*,” said Godwin. “T-R-E units. As in Terrorism Response Exercises. Probably the most boring units out there.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. “Well, what do you mean by terrorism? I mean exactly? Because I'd actually say that sounds pretty *terrifying*. Not *boring*.”

“Yeah,” said Godwin. “I'd say that sounds like something you'd say. But anyway—*yeah*. It's like car bombings. Hijackings. Deadly gasses. Things like that. I mean, haven't you ever seen like—every Steven Seagal movie ever invented?”

“Um,” said Sarah, kind of quietly, feeling embarrassed that she had no idea who he was talking about. “Is that, like, *Sea-gal*? As in French for Seagull?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Godwin, extremely sarcastically. “Steven the French Seagull

who goes around fighting terrorists all the time. I've gotta tell that one to Chance when he wakes up."

"Well that's what it *sounded* like you said," said Sarah. "Besides, how's that any different than Godwin the American Falcon, who goes around just *pretending* to fight terrorists?"

"Well—," said Godwin. "As a matter of fact, right now we're spending most of our time and energy focusing on pretending to fight *Iraqis* and *Serbs*. Not terrorists."

"Oh," said Sarah, hoping she was using her sarcasm right. "Sorry." She decided it'd be best, though, not to chance just sounding mean. "So whatever happened to that girl you liked, anyway?" she asked.

"What girl I liked?" asked Godwin.

"You know—that Army girl," said Sarah.

"I never said I liked her," said Godwin, looking a little bit unsure. "Did I?"

"Well no—," said Sarah. "I mean not with actual *words*. But it was pretty obvious anyway."

"Oh," said Godwin. "Well I guess I did kind of like her at one point. I mean we did kind of *date*. But that was like—a *really* long time ago. And actually, she ended up meeting someone, and then like—*not* even going into the Army in the first place—*so*. I mean we're not even really close anymore, or anything. I can't even remember the last time I actually *talked* to her." He brought his hand up and started kind of rubbing his chin, like he was trying to remember. But it wasn't quite like any of the previous thinking habits she'd seen him do so far that night, she didn't think. It must have been a new one.

"Well I guess she wasn't *too* into it then, was she?" asked Sarah. "I mean to

change up all of her plans just because of some guy?”

“Um—not necessarily,” said Godwin. “I mean I wouldn't say it was *just some guy*.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. “I think I see.” After all, she knew from TV how love could change people sometimes. And movies. “So did this girl have, like, a name?” she asked.

“Who?” asked Godwin. “You mean Courtney?”

“No,” said Sarah. “The Queen of Sheba. Who else do you think I mean?”

“Oh, well—I don't know,” said Godwin. “No one, I guess. But, um. Yeah. Her name was Courtney. Why?”

“No reason,” said Sarah. “So have you like, *really* never known a girl named *Sarah* before?”

“Oh, well—,” said Godwin, “I don't know.” He paused. “I mean I don't think so. At least not that I can think of.” He paused again. “At least not off the top of my head.”

“That's kind of *strange*—,” said Sarah, “don't you think? I mean it's such a common name.”

“Well I guess I've known *of* Sarahs before,” said Godwin. “I've just never *known* known one.”

“Well I've known like a *ton* of them,” said Sarah, rolling her eyes. “I mean—even in my own family, there's Sarahs. My cousin Sara. My great-Aunt Sarah. My great-great Aunt Sara. Heck, I've probably got Sarahs in my family going all the way back to the *Mayflower*, just about.”

“Really?” said Godwin. “The *Mayflower*?”

“Well—maybe not *that* far,” said Sarah. “And actually we didn't come over on

the Mayflower, we came sometime later. But the point is, it's been an awful long while, and I just can't believe in all that time they haven't been able to think of at *least* few new names for people.”

“I don't know,” said Godwin. “I kind of like *Sarah*. As a name I mean.”

“Well it's not so much the name that bothers me,” said Sarah. “I mean I glad I'm *Sarah* and not like, *Waneta*. Like my one cousin is. I just don't like the fact that they can't even bend just a *little* bit. Like if you were from where I'm from, and you decided you wanted to name your little girl like, Rhapsody, or something like that—? You know, something that wasn't either from the Bible, or at least in some way traditional German-sounding—? Well then there'd be no-bones-about-it—you and your family would be completely *ostracized*. You might get like, one chance to change it to something proper, but that'd be it. After that—you'd be out. You might as well pack up and leave altogether, because unless you eventually changed the name and went crawling back on your hands and knees asking the church elders to accept you back in, you might as well be a *leper* living in like—I don't know—the land of the extremely healthy, like, fashion magazine people I guess. And all because of poor little Rhapsody, who you thought was so special, and deserved a special name.”

“Oh,” said Godwin, looking a little taken aback by this. “*Wow—*” And Sarah immediately wished she hadn't spouted off so much. Because while what she'd said technically hadn't had anything to do with her and her own family's situation, she realized now that she may have inadvertently revealed more about herself to him in that one little rant than in anything she'd said to him all night. But then on second thought—

“So you're like, *German*?” he asked. “I didn't realize they were so strict about

names—,” he made a face.

She took a deep breath; so she guessed she hadn't revealed as much as she thought she had, she thought.

“*Well technically Pennsylvania Dutch,*” she explained real quick, “*but anyway—* how 'bout you? *Hmm?* Where's your family from?”

“Well—,” said Godwin, looking up at something, “I know there's no Dutch in us—,” (which was apparently where his thoughts were), “and I think maybe only a little bit of German—,” he looked back down. “But I do know that a good part of me is Irish, and then English—,” he looked up again, and in a tight voice said, “I think *Austrian—? Maybe—?*” He looked to Sarah as if she knew the answer, but she didn't, so she just shrugged. “Well anyway, there's another big part that's Scandinavian of some sort—you know, a little bit of Swedish, a little bit of Norway—.”

“Wow—you got a lot of parts in you, don't you?” asked Sarah, thinking he was finished.

“*Yeah,*” said Godwin. “I guess I do. Then there's Scottish, of course, we can't forget Scottish. There's Belgium. *Ish?* And then finally, a *little tiny* bit of French, and a *little tiny* bit of Indian, I guess to like, round me all out.”

“Really?” asked Sarah. “You mean, like, *Native American* Indian?”

“Yeah, well—,” said Godwin. “I think those last two must have met in the war.”

“Wow—,” said Sarah, “that's pretty amazing.” And she was actually truthfully amazed. She guessed she'd just never realized that there were people like that actually *out there* before. She did know that not everyone was just one thing; she'd just always figured most were either mostly one thing, or else mostly another. Not a bunch of this

and that and the other thing all wrapped up into one.

“Yep,” said Godwin. “I am pretty amazzz—”

“Oh my God—I can't believe it—,” Sarah cut in.

“—zzzing,” said Godwin, not seeing what she was seeing. “Well it's not *that* big a deal,” he said.

“No,” said Sarah, pointing to the dance floor. “*Look.*”

Godwin turned and looked. And there, in a break in the endlessly swaying, slow-dancing crowd, were Brad and Eva. And they were holding each other. Closely. Not to mention swaying to the music. Eva was too short for her head to reach Brad's shoulder, so instead, it was buried into his chest. With his chin hovering just above her head, Brad was standing up mostly straight, looking like he was keeping watch over the entire dance floor. But for what, Sarah didn't know. Since his baseball cap was still on, she still couldn't really see his eyes, and at one point, it looked like he was almost staring right at her. But she quickly shook the heebie-jeebie feeling off of her, and turned her focus back to Godwin, hoping at least to verify that she was indeed seeing what she thought she was seeing.

After a moment, Godwin turned back around as well, at first just keeping his one arm loosely draped over the top of his chair-back and staring down at the top of Chance's head. But then he shifted again, bringing the arm down to his lap, and went immediately in search of Sarah's eyes with his. And when he found them, once again, they sat in silence for two whole seconds that way—no words 'cross lips, nor eyes.

That was, of course, until they just couldn't hold it anymore, and broke down into something like absolute laughter.

That first bout did indeed seem to be in response to Brad and Eva's back-and-forth antics. But the second bout, which came just a few moments after the first one had finally tapered, seemed to be more about everything else in the world that had come up until that point.

Or at least it had seemed that way to Godwin. But of course, he was feeling just a *wee bit* drunk at the moment. To the point that, each time he would think of himself as being drunk (which was actually getting to be quite *a lot*), he would think of himself in terms of not just being drunk, but of being just that—a *wee bit drunk*—which he'd say to himself in his head in a high-pitched voice of cartoon-Irish decent. Possibly Leprechaunian.

But then something else occurred to him. Something much less cheerful. Because Brad was probably going to be wanting another drink sometime soon. Which meant when the song was over, him and that girl were probably going to leave the dance floor and get some drinks and come back over to the table they were at, which was the absolute last thing Godwin wanted right then, besides maybe an asteroid coming crashing down through the roof and landing directly on top of their table, killing both him and his friend Sarah, dead. Oh, and then Chance.

His first thought was to say “hey babe, let's get outta here,” to Sarah, or something like that that wasn't really that, and get up and take her by the hand and go running out the front door and into the trees that he'd seen out back of the place earlier, on the way in. He wasn't quite sure what they would do when they got there, but he did know that to be there with her right then would not only be much preferable to being at this table in this

bar with Brad and his creepy girlfriend, it would also be optimal. Especially if there was a pale glowing moonlight that was being cast down upon them from between the leafy branches of the trees.

But he also knew there wouldn't be. Because even though he was a *wee bit drunk*, he still didn't have the guts to have there be. To have let there be that happening. So instead, he tried to think of something that he *could* conceivably get up the guts to have happen to them that they'd be doing that was something both between them, and at the same time *away* from the table where they were currently at that had, quite frankly, worn out its welcome by then a long time ago.

One idea was to have another drink, but he knew that'd be more him than her doing that. She could have her Coke at the bar with him having his beer (had he a beer), but then he would fear it'd fly too far out of his hands—the situation of them being there. There'd just be way too many people over there with them, drinking, chatting, whatnot, etc., finding a way to make him look bad in front of her, somehow luring her away from him from right out from under his nose, though of course he'd let her have the stool if there was one open—that went without him even having to have had considered it just then. He would stand. And he would like it. Because what could be better than for to be standing there beside her on a stool while she sat? Absolutely nothing; he would feel no pain. Not even from standing. If it only weren't for the drunkards, he remembered. Those future bunglers of his time together with her. Those makers of bungler out of *him*; he wouldn't have it. There were just too many humans; too many variables. Too many human-variables.

A better place would be to be alone with her somewhere. Somewhere that would

necessarily (due to lack of guts) have to be in that bar. Alone with her somewhere in that bar right then where they could be left to each's other's devices. Whatever those were. But it didn't take too much glancing around the room at things for him to remember: *there* it was. That perfect somewhere. A possible place to be left to with someone.

He'd first noticed it on his way in, but hadn't given it much thought. Not until later—when he'd been sitting alone at his table with nothing to do but stare into the blue-green vortex that had been created by all of that black light being reflected so luridly down onto the walls, with their undulating wood grain (and that continued to be created, and that continued to be created). Because it was then, as now, that the perfect place started reaching out and beckoning to him—the ringing, flashing, blipping, beeping—like fire in the corner of his eye.

The old-fashioned arcade game rested all the way back against the front wall, near the entrance. He had to turn sideways in his chair to get a fuller view. For a while, as the more-immediate world had gotten more and more interesting to him, he had come to forget all about the game. But there it was—once again beckoning. A fire like no other. Calling, no longer just to consume him, his few loose shreds of time. But burning to actually *be* there for him. To stand around with someone. To bring to light this most cherished moment together; to let them see where it may lead.

The game stood in the only area of the bar that was completely unoccupied at the moment—right next to a shaded-over picture window on the one side, and an electronic dartboard on the other. There was also a framed picture of something in the shadow between the video game and the dart board; and though it took a minute to develop, he squinted, and recognized it as that famous picture of a monkey dressed up like a cowboy

riding a pony. Other than that, there were just a few abandoned chairs and tables in the area, as well as a short stretch of empty floor to move around in. But the only movement he could see going on right then was of the steady march of tiny, identical, pixilated-squid-like aliens, advancing in slow, even rows (step, step, *break*, step, *scoot*, step, *turn*, step, step, step—) towards their eventual demise. The only sound—a series of digital bass drops—of foe after foe being bitcrushed, vanquished. Foe after foe after foe after foe. But it was only a demo; and eventually it would have to change back to the original title screen.

Now. Godwin remembered finding it strange that there'd be an old-style Space Invaders arcade game sitting near the entrance of a *cowboy* bar of all places (though it'd also occurred to him that there probably weren't too many astronaut bars around for them to put them in, which had summarily caused him to desire Tang). But then he'd also found it strange to be sitting in a cowboy bar *period*. Or at least that'd been the general feeling for most of the night before he'd run into Sarah while just sitting there doing nothing. Since then, he guessed he'd still felt a bit strange, but more in a good way. And not so much strange for sitting in a cowboy bar than for just being generally dumbstruck by the way things had worked out. A little flustered he might say. A bit of the old bubblics. As if he actually knew now what those ladies in the olden days used to mean by having the vapors. Not to mention still a wee bit drunk.

Yet even before she'd come along, the longer and longer Godwin had continued to just sit there, considering the swirling vortex, the more he'd come to feel that the Space Invaders game actually kind of seemed to fit. In fact, now (as he considered it), it seemed to almost make complete sense. After all, it couldn't have been just all bolo ties and hay

bales. Because then where would have had been the haven for the freaks? There had to be a place like that—no matter where you went. A place for an odd-man-(and/or woman)-out to go to get some peace. That place, within a place, where one could go to take one's leave. After all, even in the time of the dinosaurs, the Fruitafossor (or “first digging mammal” that he'd done a report on in Evolution class in high school) had its holes to crawl into. Which was one thing (now that he re-thought about it) he guessed he could say for himself since joining Army; if there was anything he was expert at, it was finding just that place, and inhabiting it. No matter where he went.

So there he had it, he thought; he'd finally found it. And without even really having to think about it. The one thing he could think he was best in the world at—and yet actually almost believe it. However entirely inconsequential to anything or anyone else in the entire world besides himself that that one thing happened to be. But enough of re-warmed old thoughts, he thought. It was what it was. And if it was going to work out like his uncle had said it would, he was going to have to shout it from the rooftops, so to speak—*he was the best in the world at finding things to crawl into*. Even if by “rooftops” he merely meant that place in his head he went to shout things at himself from time to time.

He had to at least tell Sarah, hadn't he? Even if it was kind of dumb, he felt he had to tell her. After all, she'd told him hers. But before he could, he noticed that the ballad that Brad and his girlfriend had been dancing to was coming to an end. He could tell by the sound of the one note being held out by all the instruments, along with the long, drawn-out, tom-heavy drum fill that took up the space underneath, the kind of drum fill that ended with a cymbal crash that rang out for a few moments, moments that were

measured by a flourish of sullen strings that in one fell swoop brought the listener up, and then down again, before slowing into a sudden *kick*—then pause—a brief stealing of breath—and then ultimate landing of everyone in the band on that one last note in unison, keeping it suspended over everybody’s heads for as long as they could before it all came crashing down into a shudder of rumbling, then nothing.

He turned back to the dance floor real quick, and saw that Brad and his girlfriend now had their inner-arms around each other’s waists, and were walking side-by-side that way, slowly across the floor towards the bar.

It was too late, he thought. And now instead of telling her about how good he was at finding holes to crawl into to die when he needed to, he would have to just go ahead and show her. There was no more time to spare. Brad and his girlfriend would have their drinks and be back at the table in no time, just plopping right down on each other’s laps and effectively trapping them there. Metaphorically reaching right in and ripping out their tongues from them and ruining everything. And if they didn’t act now, it would have to be never. It was time to make their escape into the other part of the room.

“*Man*,” said Godwin, “that thing’s been like, eyeballing me all night.” He nodded in the direction of the arcade game.

Sarah turned and looked; “*what*—that monkey there?” she asked, and turned back to face him.

“No,” said Godwin. “The *game*. What do you say? Wanna go play it with me?”

Sarah turned back to check out the game. She seemed to be literally sizing it up, as if she was trying to figure out if it’d be worth her time to play. Then after a moment or two, she turned back and shrugged.

“Okay,” she said, and smiled. “Looks like fun.”

“Well alright then,” said Godwin, sitting forward, but remaining seated for a second. He didn't know what the heck he was waiting for; but as he looked at her still sitting there, it was almost like he expected her to be the one to get up first. Which he knew was just ridiculous; it was *his* idea in the first place, and plus—(*just get on with it already*, he shouted out over the ledge, took a deep breath, and then stepped)—“let's have at it.” He slapped his hands down on his thighs, while simultaneously thrusting himself up out of the chair from the balls of his feet. Just as he did, though, he caught a flash of something in the left of his periphery; he couldn't tell what. But its suddenness caused his autonomic nervous system to automatically assume the worst, so that his heart jumped, and head turned immediately to see what it was (his autonomic nervous system tended to do that at times—jump to conclusions about things).

But it was just Chance. He was hunched over, reaching down around his feet for something that Godwin quickly gathered was his cowboy hat—seeing that it was no longer on his head. Apparently, he'd must have lost it at some point in his sleep. Which had apparently also caused him to wake. Godwin just stared at him, dumfounded for a moment, completely forgetting Brad and his girlfriend and even the video game as Chance picked up the hat, dusted off the brim, then went to put it on his head, but dropped it again and had to bend down to pick it back up, finally just taking it and pulling it down over his head with both hands, before leaning back into his original passed-out position, oblivious to anything and everything that may have been going on in the world right then that might have in any way mattered.

“Should we see if he wants to play?” asked Sarah. Godwin turned to see her

fixing first herself, and then her hair, as she slowly got up out of her chair. Which reminded him of his immediate purpose—to get her the heck out of there with him—to which he added an emergency provision—*him and only him*.

“Nah—,” said Godwin. “Chance doesn't like video games.”

“Who doesn't like *video games*?” Sarah wanted to know.

“Um, well—,” said Godwin, “*Chance*, for one. I mean, he just says how they keep facilitating in like, the downfall of our youth and things like that. You know—in terms of moral turpitude.”

“Oh,” said Sarah. “They do?”

“Well, yeah,” said Godwin. “I mean their kind of famous for doing that.”

Sarah turned for a moment back to the arcade game, to the 4-bit little green monsters who were scrolling across the screen just then, which to her, from her vantage (they were about twenty or so feet away, Godwin figured)—and depending on her visual acuity of course (which Godwin realized nobody else but her could possibly truly know)—probably looked like nothing but a bunch of little green nothings scrolling across the screen and doing nothing.

“Wait a minute—,” she said, as she turned back around. “You're telling me *that* is going to actually do *harm* to our moral turpitude?”

Godwin slowly nodded—“I'm afraid so,” he said, then turned back to check on Brad and his girlfriend real quick, who were standing, waiting at the bar.

“And that *he* actually says that?” she added, nodding towards the sleeping Chance.

“Um, yeah,” said Godwin, looking down and fingering the edge of the table. “I

think he actually wrote a paper on it in college—,” he looked back up and shrugged. “Or that's what he said anyway. Now come on—,” he motioned for her to follow as he inched sideways past his chair, “we kinda gotta hurry,” and then continued on towards the maze of chairs and tables in front of them. He sensed her eventually fall in behind him as he forged ahead, pushing aside chairs and kicking at a couple of empty plastic cups as he attempted to make a path for them.

At one point, when he stopped to avoid a wet spot on the floor, he felt her bump into the back of him.

“Oops,” she said, as Godwin just turned and smiled. “Sorry—,” she fixed some strands of hair behind her ear and glanced down, blushing. He thought she looked exceptionally beautiful right then—her silky, smooth-looking, if a little bit green-tinged hair; her downcast eyes; small, embarrassed smile. *Beauteous* was the exact word that had come to him; which was odd, since he wasn't even sure that that was a *word*.

He didn't want to turn away, but he knew he'd better. He didn't want her to think him strange—or at least not any more than she probably did already from just about everything he'd ever said and done in front of her.

So he turned—“that's okay,” he said—though he felt he could have had stayed like that for hours. Just as long as she didn't look up, or get used to them being so near each other, so that she'd stop blushing. “Just look out for this, um. *Obstacle* here,” he said, looking down and dipping the toe of his shoe into the wet spot.

“What obstacle?” she asked, moving up next to him. There was a table there, so she had to kind of peer around the side of him in order to see what was down at his feet. She was about as close as she could get to him, he felt, but without actually touching. He

could actually almost see her there, in the absolute limit of his periphery, stretched to the left as far as he could possibly stretch it without moving his head, where the slightest of profiles—just her brow, her nose, her lips, and her chin—appeared as a part of the folds of his uncle's jacket almost, only outlined with a thin blue glow, like an aura. They stood that way for what felt like entire tens of seconds, completely frozen, until she finally leaned in—*just*—and squinted. And while he knew it was dark, and probably hard for her to see what was actually down there (what with the obstacle being basically invisible, like water), something told him—no, something *felt* to him to be like—she was staying there, hovering like she was, for reasons other than just seeing. But whatever it was, he could have stayed that way for hours and not grown bored or anything. And even if his feet or back had started hurting, it would have been okay, because it would have been a good hurt. But not the kind of “good hurt” his sergeant always claimed they'd get right before a particularly grueling drill, which was never even really *good*, but just *hurt* that felt *good* to be over. No—this kind of hurt would feel good to be *in*. In fact, this kind of hurt might not even *be* hurt. This might be some altogether other level Hell the devil'd yet to touch.

“I don't see anything,” she said, and backed up. “What is it?”

Godwin swallowed—his throat suddenly incredibly dry for some reason. “It's just water,” he said with a slight rasp. He coughed—“*excuse me*”—which made him feel somewhat better.

“Oh,” said Sarah, leaning in real quick to check before stepping back—“well can't we just like step over it?”

“Well *yeah*,” said Godwin, finally stepping over it. He took another small step

before turning slightly back to face her. “I mean I was just saying—,” he shrugged. “Be careful.” He wondered where there was an Ancient Chinese Master when you needed one.

For the very first time, he noticed that the place wasn't nearly as packed as it had once been. In fact, the chatter was a lot quieter than it had been all night, and he was left wondering what the heck the DJ's problem was for letting the music go on stopped for so long. From where he was standing, he could just barely see him through the band of loitering dancers, past some square wooden beams standing there, almost frantically rifling through his bins of records for something.

“I'll be careful then,” said Sarah, glancing down briefly at the floor as she basically just did a little hop over the wet spot. “See—?” she looked back up.

“*Good*,” said Godwin, with a nod. “You don't even *know* how many people break their necks each year because of wet floors, and not being careful.”

“Oh?” asked Sarah. “How many?”

“Well I don't know exactly, but it's gotta be a lot,” said Godwin. “I mean how come you think people started setting all those little yellow *caution* signs everywhere?”

“I don't know,” said Sarah. “To be nice I guess?”

“*No*—not to be nice,” said Godwin. “It's so people don't break their necks and *sue*.”

“Well I'm sure some of them do it to be nice,” said Sarah.

Godwin rolled his eyes at that.

“What? Haven't you ever heard of someone being a gentleman, and like, laying his coat down over a puddle for someone?” asked Sarah, squinting her eyes into wry little

smiles.

“Well I’m not about to get my uncle’s coat wet if that’s what you’re asking,” said Godwin, feeling half-joking, yet almost half-serious at the same time.

“*No*, that’s not what I’m asking,” said Sarah. “I’m just *saying*. Occasionally people just feel like doing a nice *thing* for someone. Like if a guy can put down his coat for his lady-friend to walk on, why can’t that same spirit be brought to something like sign-putting-upping?”

“Yeah—,” said Godwin, putting his hand up to his chin, and thinking back a minute. “I just don’t think anyone really ever *did* that.” He dropped the hand and looked back up. “That whole coat-laying business, I mean. I think it’s just one of those things people like, invented to have in movies.”

“Well, whatever,” said Sarah. “I just know that’s why *I* do it.”

“What—?” asked Godwin (he really had to strain to keep his smile muscles from springing into completely full-blown smile mode), “—laying your coat over a mud puddle? Or do you mean you just go around putting down little yellow signs for people?”

“When I’m at work I do,” said Sarah.

“Oh,” said Godwin, falling kind of flat. He looked back up—“well where do you *work*?”

“*Here*,” said Sarah, nodding down towards the green shirt she was wearing as she leaned slightly forward, stretching the shirt taut from the bottom so he could see.

There, in yellow block letters, right over the top part of her right breast, were the words “GoodFoods, Inc.” As he stared at the logo, time seemed to literally stop, and at first, he wasn’t even sure what he was looking at. It took a moment for it to register with

him that it shouldn't have been taking him as long as it was taking him to read what it read, and that by now it probably just looked like he was staring at her breast. The thought of which caused him to *actually* start staring at her breast. And then breasts. Which were perfect. But only for a moment, until it hit him—"oh," he said, blinking one big blink. "*GoodFoods*—," he jerked his head back up to meet her eyes. "So *that's* where you work."

"Yep," said Sarah, letting go of the hem. "Maybe not for long, though. In fact, that one waitress said she could probably get me a job here if I wanted."

"*Here?*" said Godwin, making a kind of disgusted face. "You would like—*really* want to work here?"

"I don't know," said Sarah, and shrugged. "I'd be making more money than I do now, that's for sure."

"Well *yeah*," said Godwin, "but—." He was about to say something about having to deal with the likes guys like Brad all the time. But then he looked up, and actually caught a *glimpse* of Brad standing over by the bar. He had a beer in his hand now, a beer that he hoisted to his lips as he turned, spotting Godwin with most-likely mouth half-open, face ghost-white with fear. Because while it was only just a second that their eyes met, it was in that second—as he lowered the beer to his side and swallowed—that he winked a good, solid wink at Godwin, and smiled. As if he could read his actual mind.

"But what?" asked Sarah, snapping him out of it.

"But, um—," said Godwin, glancing back over to the bar to see that Brad had turned his attention to his girlfriend, who was on her tiptoes, whispering something into

his ear. “Never mind—,” he turned back to Sarah. “I just heard it’s not that great a job is all. Now come on, let’s go.” He motioned for her to follow, which she did, each taking just a few more steps before having to turn and squeeze sideways, one by one, through a final tight strait between tables.

“So what’s the rush, anyway?” she asked, finally joining him up beside the machine on his right.

“What rush?” asked Godwin.

“The one we were in when you said *hey, come on, we gotta hurry*,” she said, dropping her voice to try to mimic him, but really just sounding goofy.

“Well isn’t it obvious?” he said, smiling as he gestured towards the screen. “I mean somebody’s gotta hold off these aliens from invading.”

“Oh, is that what they’re doing?” asked Sarah, squinting. “Looks to me more like they’re waiting patiently in single-file lines for something.”

“That’s just what they want you to think,” said Godwin. “In reality, it’s more like one of those psychological types of invasions. In fact, they’re quietly slipping into Chance’s dreams as we speak. Didn’t you see his eyelids flutter like that?” He tried to make his eyelids flutter like he was dreaming, but didn’t think he pulled it off that well. “But yeah—that’s them like, in the midst of brainwashing him or whatever. And now we gotta stop ‘em before they, like, make him into one of them. Psychologically-speaking I mean.”

“Well how will we know the difference?” asked Sarah “When he wakes up—how will we know if he’s psychologically an alien or not?”

“We won’t,” said Godwin. “And *that’s* why we gotta hurry up and kill ‘em all

before he wakes up. Because then it will be too late.”

He followed her eyes as she turned to check on Chance, who was still by himself at the table.

“Well hey, come on—,” she said, turning back to the machine, “we gotta hurry.” She tried messing with the controls a little bit, but stopped when nothing happened.

“*Oh.*”

“What? Do you think killing aliens is free?” asked Godwin, reaching into the right, front pocket of his jeans. “In this line of business, nothing's free.”

“And what line of business would that be?” asked Sarah.

“I don't know. The saving the world from things line of business,” he said, still digging, “I guess.” He went to try his other pocket even though he'd already realized that he didn't, in fact, have any quarters, or even anything. “Um—,” he tried the coin-return real quick before taking both hands and sliding them into the pockets of his jacket, if just to rest. “You wouldn't happen to have like any money, would you?” He was really really hoping they wouldn't have to go to the bar to get any change.

“Well let's see,” said Sarah, tapping her finger on the little instruction placard that was screwed into the control panel. “It says here that one play plus one player equals one credit, but one play plus *two* players equals two credits—,” she stopped tapping. “*Hmm.*” Then she looked up at Godwin. “So what the heck's a credit?”

“Have you *seriously* never played a video game before?” asked Godwin, not really sure what to think. His first instinct was seriously to feel kind of bad for her, like she'd been abused or something—neglected. But he knew that was probably ridiculous.

“Well not one that *cost* anything,” said Sarah, boinking the little red knob at the

end of one of the joysticks. “I told you—we were *Stone Age* growing up. And when we did finally get to branch out a little bit—I don't know. I guess we just never really got into them. Or at least I know me and Meredith didn't—I'm not sure about David.”

“Well—,” said Godwin, “*here.*” He held onto the control panel as he knelt down onto his haunches, then pushed into one of the glowing red coin-return buttons that also served as a coin slot with his finger as she leaned in to see. “See?” he let it spring back. “It says one credit equals 25 cents. Now—one credit *always* equals 25 cents, so I don't know why they don't just say *25 cents*. But I digress—that's where you put the quarter.”

He struggled to pull himself back up, but when he did, his mind was so focused on the subtle aching of his knees as he stood there, that it took a moment of him standing there being stared at by her to realize that he was being stared at by her.

“I *know* what a coin slot is,” she said, turning curtly away from him. “It's not like I'm from—,” she squinted again at the screen, “whatever the heck planet these guys are from.”

Godwin cleared his throat, really just wishing he had enough money for another drink. “I think that they're um—. Just from outer space,” he said quietly. “Like in general.”

“They can't be *just* from space,” said Sarah. “No one's *just* from space. I mean there has to have been an actual planet somewhere that like, helped mold them into what they are—,” she paused for a moment before turning—“don't you think?”

Godwin had to admit. On one level, that did make a lot of sense. Because it wasn't like all of whatever elements that made up the actual aliens could have had been just floating around by themselves in space all those billions of years ever since the big

bang to then have had been expected to have had gradually, over time, yet somehow still randomly, have had gravitated toward one another at a high enough overall speed to have had created enough friction upon coming together to have had reached a high enough temperature to have had become intrinsically fused together enough, element by element that way, to have had eventually come to form one specific, coherent corporeal being, over and over again until there was an entire facsimile army of them out there, who with one mind were out—not as the title indicated, to *invade* actual space—but to invade Earth *from* space. But on another level, he had no idea how things were really made. He just knew how to fancy them up a little bit sometimes with paint. And even then, only after he'd been given instructions, and gotten to borrow the right tools. So for all he knew it could have had been true what he'd heard one time from one of the guys he'd worked with his uncle with, that the entire world and everything in it was made up of the singing voices of millions of angels in heaven, with each succedent element distinguished by nothing other than a plus-one variation in the tonal waver of each individual angel, from one angel to the next, just like 7-8-9, and that was it. Heck, for all he knew, (as he blinked at her looking at him standing there in the darkened screen as a family photograph), he could have had opened this machine up right now with a screwdriver, and it'd have been filled with human smiles inside instead of wires—what did he know? For all he knew, *he* could have been the alien (which was seeming more likely). For all he knew he could have been the alien-making angel. He didn't know anything. Except for maybe how to add a fresh coat to something, and pretend it's not decayed.

But that wasn't even his thing he was best at—it was his uncle's.

“Yeah—,” said Godwin, looking down and messing with the buttons. “I guess

you're right. No one's *just* from space."

"Well I'm glad you see things my way," said Sarah. He looked up in time to see the reflection of her head dip down, followed immediately by the lowering of her right shoulder, both of which then popped back up, along with her hand, which she brought up to her eye, shaped into an "okay" sign.

The "oh" part of it was holding a quarter.

"Now watch out—," she said; his attention was still on the quarter when he suddenly, out of nowhere, felt the force her hip actually purposefully banging into his hip, successfully budging him out of the way of her—"quarters go first." She bent down and inserted the coin into the slot marked "1st Player"—the one he had been standing in front of just a second ago—then stood back up. And as the start-screen blinked on, and then lit up their faces, so struck the *aah* of a million harmonious angels.

He didn't think he'd ever blinked up a more beautiful-sounding chord in all his life. Neither with voices, nor country violins. Because it was more than just voices. And as he watched her choose "2 Player Start," not "1," sliding a second quarter into the second slot when the words on the screen asked for one, he felt it was more than just her hip that'd touched him. It was the move itself. And not *just* the move, but an entire past of associated moves that'd touched him, and that re-touched him then in such vivid touch. It was a younger him and Courtney, walking together, brushing hands; it was Jersey's swinging fist down—the hard, cold tile—darkness; it was older Courtney's digging nails into his arm and drawing blood; it was heads up, after heads up, after heads up, and every touch or near-touch in-between; the entire spectrum of possible touches, from the actual touch, to the mere want of touch, which was so much so much stronger than the touch.

It'd occurred to him once to be one of those people who died young; like at those times when he felt that just to *want* was just enough. Which he guessed was what made him so immune-feeling lately—if not from every little thing, than at least himself, which was the big one.

“Aargh!” said Sarah, fiddling with the controls as the march of little green aliens loomed closer and closer to her spaceship. “They're shooting at me!”

“Yeah—,” said Godwin, in literal pain from having to hold back what would have been the purest shaped smile he'd ever smiled, he felt, but couldn't stop his eyes from watering, “that's kind of what they do.”

“Well, I guess that blows my whole—,” she let out a sort of groan, and did a little hop, springing from her slight hunch over the control panel as she attacked the joystick with more and more force before ultimately settling down, “—polite-little *alien* theory then.”

Godwin straightened out his face, then his coat—“I guess *so*,” he said—and decided to let his mind just go empty for once. He smiled: it felt good to just watch.

But after a moment, Sarah frowned, as the machine struck a much more sour tone. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to shoot all of the aliens before one of them finally made it past her shields, blipping its way down all the way down to the bottom of the screen, where it bumped into her spaceship, effectively destroying it. It was almost like a laughter then—the *sound*—as the screen turned black, and the words “game over” flashed across it.

She was dead.

“My turn,” said Godwin, and stepped around her to get to the right side of the

machine, where the Player 2 controls were.

Godwin did much better than her the first time. But by the time they'd played two more games, having slipped real quick over to the near end of the bar for more quarters, Sarah was actually getting very close to him in terms of score.

"I thought you never played video games before," said Godwin at the end of a game in which he only killed one more alien than she did. "What are you—some kind of Space Invaders shark?"

"A shark?" asked Sarah, giving him a look. "They live in the ocean," she said, bending down to add another quarter.

"*No—*," said Godwin, "I mean like a person who pretends they're no good at something at first just so they can come back and beat you. You know—. Kind of like those girls who wear glasses so people will think they're ugly, and then won't want to date them until it's like, too late."

"Oh," said Sarah. "I see."

She explained to him how she used to play Sonic the Hedgehog on her sister's boyfriend's Sega Genesis back when she used to visit. She said she actually got pretty good at it.

"Now these are my last two quarters," she said as the start screen came on. "So we better make it a good one."

Neither of them said anything as Sarah played. She was really getting into it, and before Godwin knew it, she had already passed his highest score.

"What the heck?" asked Godwin. But Sarah just continued killing aliens, saying nothing, until she finally died to the sound of triumphant music.

“*Congratulations!*” the screen said. “*You made the Top Ten!*”

Godwin couldn’t believe it! His highest score hadn’t even come *close* to the Top Ten. Another screen appeared that asked Sarah to type in her name, but there were only four spaces available.

“What should I put?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” said Godwin. “How about *Sara*. Without the *H*.”

“But then no one will believe it was really me,” she said, pouting her lip.

“*Sorry*,” said Godwin.

“Oh well—,” she used the joystick to move the cursor first to *S*, then to *A*, then to *R*, then to *A*, carefully following the directions that said to hit the *fire* button in order to enter each letter as the cursor was hovering over it. Once she hit the *fire* button over the word *end*, the Top Ten screen then appeared. She smiled when she saw her name appear at number 7, sandwiched between *FART* and *NADS*.

For the first time that night, Godwin became determined. He wasn’t about to let some girl beat him at video games. No girl had *ever* beaten him at video games before, and he was going to do what he could to make sure that didn’t happen now. So he cracked his knuckles, one by one, making sure they were good and limber before he reached down and hit *start*.

He got by the first few levels with no problem. But in order to beat SARA, he was going to at least have to get to Level 9. She had died almost as soon as she got to that level; by that time, the aliens had been scrolling just too quick, and shooting laser beam after laser beam at her without once letting up. So as long as he made it there, and was able to off at least a few aliens, he figured he’d be in the clear. Then he could die in

peace.

But then something happened when he got to Level 7. She started messing with him, trying to distract him. And at first, it was just a few words of anti-encouragement—things like “oh boy, their moving pretty quick,” or “hey, you better watch out—there’s another alien.” And those he could ignore. But once he’d gotten passed Level 7 without a hitch, and suddenly found himself in Level 8—right in the middle of a virtual maelstrom of aliens and lasers—his attention started to falter when he saw her out of the corner of his eye moving closer and closer to him, finally bringing her lips up right next to her ear and saying—“hey, I think Brad wants you.”

“*What—?*” he paused the game, and turned quickly around to face their table. But all Brad was doing was sitting there with his girlfriend on his lap, making out heavily with her.

He turned back to Sarah and said “that was *totally* not fair.” He gestured towards the paused screen and said “now there’s no *way* I’m gonna get past this.”

“Sorry,” said Sarah. “I thought he wanted you.”

“*No,*” said Godwin, “you didn’t. And now I want a rematch after this.”

“No can do,” said Sarah, reaching down and pulling out the pockets of her khakis. “That was my very last quarter.”

“*Fine,*” said Godwin, and just turned back to the screen. “Just don’t bug me this time. It will be a miracle anyway if I even last two seconds after this.”

Godwin braced himself, keeping one hand on the joystick, and the other hovering right above the start button, where he could extend his thumb to the point that it could still reach the fire button at a moment’s notice.

“Well here she goes—,” he said, and took a breath, then pressed the start button, getting hit immediately by a stray laser and disintegrating into nothing. “*Fuck.*”

The triumph music didn’t at all fit his mood right then. But although he didn’t beat SARA, he did pass JBOB, replacing him at ninth on the Top Ten list. So when the new list appeared, there was GWIN, two spots below SARA.

Oh well, he thought as they both stood there, admiring the list. At least they were up there together. And now anytime anyone ever came into the bar, they could turn over to the video game screen flashing in the corner, and see that SARA and GWIN had been there. Along, of course, with all the others. He just hoped they’d last up there a little while before someone replaced them.

Godwin watched as Sarah turned and crossed her arms, then leaned with her back against the control panel. “What now?” she asked him, looking out over the floor.

“I don’t know,” said Godwin.

“Do you think we should go back to the table?” she asked.

No, he thought. *Definitely not.*

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Well what else is there to do?” she asked.

Godwin turned and scanned the entire place with his eyes, from the bar, to the bathrooms, to the dance floor.

“I don’t know,” he said.

“*Hey*, look at that—,” she said, pointing towards their table.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first. But after a moment, as his eyes adjusted to the scene, he realized that the guy whose lap Brad’s girlfriend was now sitting

on was no longer even Brad at all. And neither was it his lap. It was Chance's.

“What's she doing?” asked Godwin.

“I don't know,” said Sarah, sounding like she had a bad taste in her mouth. “She's just weird like that sometimes.”

The girlfriend was sitting sideways so that she could reach her arm around the back of Chance's neck. But it wasn't even him who she was really even paying attention to; it was Brad. She had her upper-body turned, and was facing back towards him, laughing. And while Brad didn't seem quite laughing, but he didn't seem mad either. Chance, for his part, looked still sleeping.

“Hey, look,” she said, as if she was sportscasting something. “She's putting on his hat.”

She was, indeed, putting his hat on.

“He's not gonna like that,” said Godwin. “He's gonna want it back.”

But all Chance did was stay sitting there with his eyes closed, mouth hanging slightly open, doing nothing. And after a moment of Brad's girlfriend sitting there on another guy's lap with another guy's hat on, acting generally giggly and girlish with him as one might the unsuspected corpse of a former party animal left for dead on the couch at a party (especially one that was still wearing his trademark Hawaiian shirt and sunglasses, and thus to the unsuspecting party-goers mightn't have seemed to be acting much out of character to be just be sitting there with his head back and his mouth hanging open, thought Godwin), while Brad did indeed seem to be acknowledging all of this from a spot just about three quarters of the way around the table from them, and taking it all in in what must have had been to him (Godwin pondered) one incredibly saliferous stride,

by then Godwin thought he noticed a small change in him. A kind of tightening, perhaps. Though whatever it was, he could say now with more-or-less confidence that Brad was definitely seeming to now be gesturing at his girlfriend with a small, inward-stroking wave that spoke in more-or-less terms of *alright now, show's over*.

“*Hmm*,” said Sarah. “That’s kind of interesting.”

And it was. Although Godwin wasn't sure that *interesting* was quite the word for it. Because instead of going back to Brad like his wave had seemed to be asking her to, Brad’s girlfriend was now just beginning to giggle even harder, and act even *more* girlish than she had been before. But then the next thing she'd do would go even *beyond* being girlish, to being something Godwin thought he might have had described as being almost *female-doggish* in nature.

She licked his face.

Godwin turned to Sarah, who then almost immediately turned to him as well, their faces, he felt, meeting like mirrors of each other's shock.

“Was that—?” she asked, glancing back at the scene.

“Mmm hmm,” said Godwin, checking out the ground around his feet for a second.

“I mean—,” she said, as he looked back up at her, “did I just see that?”

“Yep,” said Godwin. “You *sure*—”

“I mean *wow*,” she said.

“—*did*,” he said.

From the side, she looked almost still as startled as she had a moment earlier, with her eyes still wide, but her mouth-gape a bit softened. She turned back to him like that, seeming to have forgotten herself for the time being. She blinked, which helped with the

eyes, but as she continued to glance back and forth a couple of more times between the scene in front of them and Godwin, the scene and front of them and Godwin, it was the mouth that retained most of its initial impression.

And if there was ever a time he felt he could have kissed her, it was then. And not only in the sense of his almost squeamish desire to, but in the whole incredible beeping-red sense of opportunity as well. Because the desire had been there, wriggling beneath the surface for a while now, to a more or less extent. But never in the history of anything had such a crossroads of timing and desire hit a person in the gut (nor, he felt, in the gut of the correspondent) as hard as this one had just hit Godwin in the gut right then.

If he didn't act now, he'd miss it. The moment would pass, and most likely bifurcate into million other different possible moments, and there he'd have to wait, in the exact same spot in front of the video game console, unmoving, for however-many lifetimes it'd take to even have the *hope* of ever finding two such rhapsodic strains of moment times desire as such ever come so close the same tenor again. And then and only then would he be able reach out with both hands—slowly, gently, held a face's-width apart—and then *clap* them closed-together, hopefully capturing whatever'd be left of that glowing green bug inside. Only this time he'd refuse to heed the desire, no matter how strong, to peek at what he had. Not until he was absolutely certain there was no more light.

“What?” asked Sarah.

“Oh, um—,” said Godwin, seeming to swallow something, “*nothing*,” then finally turned away from him looking at her funny. Which she guessed had mainly just

consisted of him looking at her as he'd been looking at her all night, but for a period of longer than five seconds.

It wasn't until after he'd turned away that she got suddenly self-conscious of herself, feeling the way her face had probably looked to him right then, and so quickly narrowed her eyes and shut her mouth.

"Well *Jesus!*" she said, quickly letting herself open it again, but just to speak—"why didn't you say something? I probably look like a *fish*." She hit him with the back of her hand in the chest as she swum her eyes and smiled.

"I don't know," said Godwin, "I thought it was kind of cute."

"Oh *really?*" she said, sarcastically.

"Yeah," said Godwin. "You know—like a *cute* kind of fish."

"Well I doubt *that*," said Sarah, not feeling *entirely* uncomfortable with this, but still—. She didn't know. She guessed Godwin was technically a good enough guy to be around. And could actually be pretty fun at times so far that night. Not to mention not *entirely* all that (she checked to make sure) bad-looking. (She lowered her eyes, but then raised them back up again real quick)—and okay, perhaps a little cute at times. Though she wouldn't have gone as far as fish—that much was for sure!

Okay, she thought, so maybe it was just that she didn't think tonight, at this precise (oh, about 1:25 in the morning, she guessed) moment, was a very opportune time for her to be flirtsome with someone. First of all, her friend Eva was over there acting like a crazy person, licking other people's faces in their sleep. And trying at what—to get him to have one of those weird dreams she'd caught the tail end of them teaching about whenever she finally got to join her public school's health class? But on top of that, she

knew she just looked bad, and probably smelled bad too. Or at least felt like she probably smelled bad. She couldn't necessarily smell the deli on her so much anymore, but it might've just been that she'd gotten used to it. In fact, it wouldn't have surprised her at all if Godwin could actually smell it, but decided to just be nice and not saying anything. The sad fact was that she was getting more and more homeless by the second, and in a couple of days, if she kept it up, she'd be a full blown bum. And by then probably even the top nicest person in the world wouldn't want to be with her. Meaning now she guessed she was just on the *verge* of being completely undesirable. Whereas the merely just agreeable were already wary enough to keep a stick's-length distance from her.

So what *would* have surprised her right then was if anyone would have had wanted to do to her—or have had done *by* her—anything *close* to resembling what Eva had just been doing to Godwin's friend Chance over at the table. *Unless she happened to have a glob of honey still on her cheek from the ham she'd had to glaze earlier*, she rubbed her cheek as she gazed over to check on Eva who was still being Eva. If a little less lizard-like at the moment; it looked like she was finally getting up to go back over and be with Brad. And while she didn't think she'd have had quite minded having had, if not necessarily *that* done to her, precisely, than at least something involving more-or-less similar facial implements, she just didn't think she wanted her first kiss with someone to be that big of a surprise. Maybe if it was on a different day, another planet (she eyed the one on the side of the Space Invaders cabinet for the time being)—something with maybe just an all-around brighter atmosphere, a better outlook, one more on the up, and up, and up and up and up and up—she could maybe see herself being kissed by someone.

She attempted to see herself being kissed by someone for a moment, but she couldn't do it; she could see him coming in for it, but then just slip into nothing. His face would literally just slide right past hers, and slip into nothing.

She stopped daydreaming when she thought she heard a glass break somewhere. Her first instinct was to glance over towards the bar, having had a quick flash of someone from a movie smashing a beer bottle against the edge of a bar to then wield as a weapon. But then when she heard the word “*fucking-asshole*” come flying from Brad and Eva's side of the room in Eva's tone of voice immediately after, she quickly realized that that was not the case. It was not a movie trope she'd heard being smashed to bits just a second ago, it was something else. And as she felt herself leap up from leaning against the video game cabinet to the sound of “*fucking slut*,” eyes darting directly back towards the scene at the table, what that something was did not make itself immediately clear just yet.

She saw Brad still leaning back in his chair, with Eva standing a couple of feet away from him. Only now she staring down *hard* at him, with her arms out to her side in what at first looked like confrontation. And it *was*—that much was obvious from the previous yelling, and current almost pluckable tension (oddly, while almost everybody in the bar seemed to have become quiet, and had turned to take in the scene, the DJ—whom Sarah could see back in the corner holding some sort of headphone up to his ear—must not have noticed, as he just kept playing a song that Sarah couldn't help but recognize as Dolly Parton). But the pose was more than just a pose of confrontation. Because as she watched Eva continue to stand like that, with her eyes seeming to drift back and forth between Brad in the chair, and her own body unfurled in front of her, she quickly saw that

Eva was covered from head to toe in beer.

“I can't believe you'd fucking do that!” she yelled at him, flicking some of the foamy liquid from her hands.

Brad just sat with his jaw tight, arms crossed in front of him. “I can't believe you're such a fucking slut,” he said back to her, his voice sticking to mainly one note.

It suddenly hit Sarah that Brad must have had actually smashed a bottle of beer overtop of Eva's head, a thought that frightened her for a moment beyond belief, and made her heart jump, and throat go dry. And for a moment she was extremely confused as to why no one was doing anything. Everyone—including Godwin beside her—was just staring. But even though the notion started to slowly leave her, little by little, once her mind began to truly absorb what it was, exactly, she was seeing, the feeling attached to the idea that Brad would do that to her was something that her nerves wouldn't let her soon forget.

Thankfully, Eva did not indeed look hurt—just drenched. And though it was hard to tell through the obstruction of tables, there did not seem to be any broken glass around her feet. What finally convinced her, though (her head, if not her heart), was when she realized that the smashing sound she'd heard simply did not seem to fit such a chilling image as the one that came to mind of her friend getting hit, which, despite her doubts, she'd felt impelled, if not obliged to let play through to the end, if for no other reason than to be definitely sure that it had not somehow happened that way.

“Well if I'm a slut, then you must be my *fucking* dickhead pimp,” said Eva, “cause *you're* the one who told me to *freakin'* go mess with him in the first place, *asshole!*” As she looked down at herself, she seemed to just then become re-aware the mess he'd made

of her, and let out from her gut what sounded like a mix between a wordless scream, and *God*—“I could just fucking *kill* you!”

“Yeah—,” he said, leaning forward in his chair, “I told you to *fuck with him*, not *fuck* him,” jabbing with his index finger at the air with each f-word.

As Brad remained hunched forward, glaring down at the floor with widened eyes, and cracking his knuckles, Sarah felt impelled to look away, and so moved her gaze to the wall behind him. And there, she was struck by what she saw; struck that she hadn't previously noticed it. Because lurking right above Brad's head, highlighted by the wash of blacklight, was something that looked to her at first just like an ink blot, complete with asymmetrical growths and appendages, and reminding her so much of a severely deformed version of one of the aliens she'd been trying so hard to murder just a minute or two ago. The only thing she could figure was that Brad's head must have been mostly in the way of the weird-shaped irregularity in the wall until now. But it wasn't until she then discovered that the image wasn't a static part of the wall at all, but was actually slowly bleeding *down* the wall, that she was quickly able to put two and two together, and decide that *that* must have had been where the bottle had hit before making the smashing sound that every single possible soul in the bar except for the apparently still-spinning DJ must have had heard, and been startled awake from their stupors by. And only *then* did things finally start to make some real bit of sense to her.

She immediately let her eyes fall back down to Brad, who—despite his previous unflinching look—she could see now, in this new light, seemed almost shaken by something. It wasn't much that told her this; he still appeared to have a strong enough grip on himself *physically*, to the point that if he were any other person, she would have

had said he looked fine. Maybe a little on-edge. But the simple fact that she could actually *see* his eyes now—that they were no longer just these thin dark things like little tildes hidden beneath the arch of his baseball cap—read to her like unabridged volumes on the subject, complete with footnotes. In fact, she saw now that the hat seemed to be resting slightly higher atop his head than usual, and looked a bit off-kilter, something that she felt must have only added to the fullness of appearance of those two waxing moons of his.

But it wasn't like he looked hurt or anything. Which she guessed was a good thing. She did have to wonder, though, whether or not it was feasible that the brim of his baseball cap could have had gotten that way on his head by itself somehow, or if something would have had to have actually helped it get that way—namely, the bottle, whose remnants were still lost to her somewhere, out of sight.

From looking at the wall-splatter, she was able to at least make some quick forensic guesstimations that helped her to piece together a working scenario of what had actually happened here. She knew for one thing that Eva had seemingly been on her way back to Brad's lap in the moments leading up to the incident; but whether or not she'd actually succeeded in sitting down on it, she couldn't be sure, as she, herself, had got distracted by something (which was *what* again, she tried to think real quick, but couldn't remember). So at some point, whether Eva had actually been back down on Brad's lap, or whether she'd just been about to be, Brad (whether or not he'd been further angered somehow in the interval) must have had reached up and started pouring the bottle of beer he'd been drinking overtop of Eva's head. And at this point, Eva must have had been so livid that, as she angrily squirmed away from him, she must have had overpowered him

enough, or else caught him off-guard enough, to have somehow gotten the bottle away from him (Sarah could see her snatching it out of his hand, or even prying it loose from his fingers—either seemed plausible in the imagined *heat* he'd had her in). But whichever it was, she didn't even have to think about it—she immediately just wound-up (or not) and whipped it at him. But Brad, who at that distance (and this was where his army training had kicked in) must have had the reaction skills of either a fox, or a really quick cat (she couldn't remember which was which when it came to reflexes), and thus hurried up and ducked real quick so that she missed, the bottle merely nicking the brim of his hat before it went on to hit the wall behind him, and smashed to bits.

“Just—*fuck* this,” said Eva, throwing her hands down, her eyes cast at the floor, before his feet. “*I* don't need this.” With her head kept down, she turned and started to step in the general direction of Sarah and Godwin, but then hesitated. “*I really* don't need this right now,” she said, moving her hands from down around her sides, to up around her head for a moment, as if to establish a quick equilibrium. But for Sarah, it finally allowed her see how bad Eva's hands were shaking.

“Whatever bitch,” Brad seemed to mumble. With his own eyes still cast to the floor, he reached up and pulled his hat down tight, before crossing his arms, and leaning back in his chair.

Eva didn't acknowledge him this time, but just moved her hand up under her sunglasses so she could wipe at her cheek, near the bridge of her nose. But she couldn't seem to keep the hand steady enough to do any good, and in a seeming fit of frustration, she almost immediately took it and flung it back down to her side along with the other, then continued walking, shoving a chair out of her way as she tried to make a swift path

through the congestion of tables in front of her.

Sarah thought that she was headed towards her and Godwin at first. In fact, it was the only thing that had presented itself to her as a possibility. After all, it would seem only natural that someone in a position that Eva was in right now would want to seek comfort in a friend; if their roles had been reversed somehow, Sarah felt that that would be exactly what she would do—immediately seek out Eva. Not that she could see how such a case would ever come about, but still—. She could at least guess at how it would feel. And she could guess that how it would feel would be much like how she felt just *looking* at Eva right then, if to a considerable less degree; because while at first she'd just seemed glazed completely over in anger, Sarah could now see in the furrowed forehead, in the drips of eyeliner that ran down her reddened cheeks, in the jaw tightened almost to a quiver, something much different than anger—something much closer to fear. She could guess at how it would feel, and she could guess at how badly she would want that fearful feeling to leave her as soon as possible, to the point that each obstacle between her and that outcome appeared now not simply as another object to her—something standing in her way—but as a literal *pain*. Something that was there to literally *hurt* her.

But as soon as Sarah started to clamor for something to actually *say* to her when she got there, Eva—who she realized now might not have even seen her standing there—turned and started heading in the apparent direction of the door.

As Eva broke past the last table, and into the empty stretch of floor before the exit, Sarah felt her own body almost vault past Godwin as she took took a couple of steps in Eva's direction.

“*No—*,” said Eva, stopping just a few feet from the door. She didn't turn to look

at Sarah, but just kept her head down as she held her hand up to her for her to stop, which Sarah immediately did. “Just—,” she brought one hand up to her forehead, letting the other remain extended towards Sarah, where it now fluttered, as if to hasten her search for words, “—*enough*.” Then she finally let it fall. “You can just—*forget* it. Alright?” She turned, keeping ahold of her forehead for a moment with her right hand, but still not looking up at Sarah. “I’m calling Keith, so you can just—,” she let the other hand fall, “*nothing*—just stand there.” She turned and reached for the door—“just stand there and forget anything ever happened.” Then she started to push through the door with her shoulder, pausing once more to say “I’ll be fine.”

She slipped through and disappeared into the night.

Sarah turned, and at first, half of the eyes in the place were on her. Only they weren't looking past her this time—they were actually on her. And though they'd quickly go back to Brad, and to the new scene that was starting to open up over by him, she couldn't help but take it all as an admonition—Eva's words, their stares. Because even if they hadn't actually been meant as such, it was still true; she couldn't have had done anything for Eva right then even if she had wanted to. In fact, Sarah's first thought upon seeing Eva leave hadn't been about where she was going, or how she was going to truly be, but about what exactly she'd meant by “calling Keith”; in other words, what next scene was Keith going to make once he got there. The nose-ring, the cocaine, the trance music: whatever it was, it didn't seem to be adding up into something good. And if nothing else, those brief empty stares (which now lingered), allowed her to see how selfish it was of her to think that way.

Thoughts of any kind would have to wait, though. Because the next thing she

knew, she saw three people—led by the lady waitress—walking across the floor towards Brad's table in a seeming rush. The lady waitress eventually stopped at the head of the table, and just stayed staring down at Brad, tapping her foot with her arms folded, while the two men who were coming up behind her—a tall, middle-aged-looking guy wearing a white, striped dress shirt tucked into jeans, and a tan cowboy hat, along with the younger-looking guy with the tight black t-shirt and bulging, tattooed arms whom she'd seen earlier—continued on around the side of the table until they were standing directly in front of Brad, with their backs mainly to Sarah. Brad, meanwhile, didn't appear to be paying them any attention at first, while Godwin's friend Chance (who'd unwittingly, she guessed, kind of started this whole mess) must have been either playing dead, or else just pretending to still be sleeping, though he did appear to have scooted his chair over a few inches. Which—she guessed she couldn't really blame him. About any of it.

Brad was the first one to speak; but without acknowledging the two guys in front of him, he just turned towards the waitress and said “*hey—*,” then nodded up at her, “*there* you are. How 'bout a beer?”

“Brad, I think it's time for you to leave,” said the older guy in the cowboy hat immediately after. He was a big guy, who was especially big in the stomach, so much so that his dress shirt seemed to almost be holding him from spilling out of himself. He stood with his back at a bit of an angle, which reminded Sarah of the way that some of the older farmers back in Pennsylvania had stood who'd had bad backs. And while he looked strong, she also worried that if he were to have to move too quickly, the sudden movement might act as that slight last straw and bring him down, and Brad wouldn't even have to lift a finger.

“That's odd,” said Brad, finally turning to look up at the guy, “cause I was just thinking it's about time she pranced her ass on over to the bar to get the drink I just ordered—,” he made a walking motion with two fingers off in the direction of the bar. Sarah could see the waitress turn just her head towards the older guy, giving him one of her stone-faced looks, as if encouraging him to do something.

“No—you're *done* Brad,” said the older cowboy, holding his hands out flat in front of him, “that's *it—*,” he flung them outward, as if calling someone safe.

“*Who is that guy?*” Sarah whispered over to Godwin.

“*I think he like, owns the place,*” said Godwin. “*Arthur Jacobs, I think it is. Or maybe Jacob Arthur—I don't remember which. Anyway, they call him Big Art. And yeah—I think he fought in Korea.*”

“*Oh,*” said Sarah, realizing that that was the guy she was supposed to be meeting for her sort-of interview once the place was closed for the night. She wondered if there was any chance of that happening now.

They must have missed something Brad had said, because the next thing Sarah knew, Big Art had got suddenly more loud and (if still a bit cautiously around the back area) animated, “you know what? *Brad?* I could care less. And I don't *give* a shit what kinda shit you feel you gotta come in here 'n work out with your fists any other night of the week. But just know one thing—tonight, you fucked up. Tonight you fucked up *big time*. Cause *no one* treats a woman like that in my bar, no matter who you are. And that's *period—*,” he did the same safe motion with his hands again.

“So now you can either get your ass up, and start walking on outta here all your own?” he said, pointing towards the door with his thumb, “or guess what—you can let

me and Jimmy here help you out with that. *Your* choice—,” now it was his turn to cross his arms below his chest, but he seemed to need to tilt his back a little more forward in order to do so.

Brad sat forward, but then just stayed there for a moment, cracking his knuckles again. Maybe he was just stalling, or maybe he was thinking what to do—Sarah didn't have a clue *what* could have been possibly going through his mind. Then, or ever.

Eventually he stopped, and looked up at Big Art with a smirk on his face that looked like something for the ages, and said “well then you ain't really giving me much of a good goddamn choice then there, aren't you Big?”

“Guess not,” he said, keeping his arms crossed, not budging.

Brad looked back down, and scratched his nose real quick with his knuckle, before then letting his own arms hang loose down at his sides. She swore he looked like some sort of a dejected orangutan right now like that.

“Well *shit*—,” he finally said. He sat there for a little while longer, but then slowly stood up, refusing to meet Big Art's eyes. He didn't make his intentions immediately clear, and as he took his first couple of steps forward, it looked like Big Art and the other guy were mentally readying themselves to just about pounce on him. But then as he continued to step directly in between them, the two men backing up just a bit to let him through, but still not taking their eyes off of him, Brad adopted the voice of a cartoon cowboy, saying to Big Art out of the side of his mouth, “—guess I'll be moseyin' on outta here, then.”

Big Art and the other guy remained silent, and continued to follow him with their eyes as Brad worked his way through the tables the same way Eva had just a few minutes

earlier, only going much, much slower. Like he was literally moseying, thought Sarah.

“—just lemme saddle on up my horse,” he added, using the same voice, and without turning to face them. It took him a few more steps to get around the last table, having to nudge aside a couple of chairs whose seatbacks Eva had apparently somehow managed to get tangled together in her rush, and once he was out in the open, headed towards the door, he paused to shoot a quick, hard look at Godwin—

“Yo—. Horse!” he yelled, swinging his arm up for Godwin to follow, his voice ringing out sharp overtop of everything else in the still quiet bar. Even the DJ, back at his booth in the far corner, appeared to finally look up from his machinery to glance about the place confusedly for a moment.

Sarah turned to look at Godwin, who didn't seem to have budged. At least for the moment, he just stood there, looking at Brad with a slight frown, a subtle detachment in his eyes. Under any other circumstances, she might have said he just looked bored; but at least for now, she could tell—somewhere in his head, under perhaps the barest of breath, he was telling Brad to go fuck himself. And this made her smile. But only briefly, as the rest of reality came to quickly dawn.

She turned, and let herself fall back against the side of the Space Invaders machine, right where it met the wall. She didn't like the feeling of having Brad be somewhere still lurking behind her, and that was why she did it—for the same reason mobsters would only sit in chairs that faced the entrance of a restaurant, she guessed—to gain a better perspective on the whole situation. But Godwin must have had thought that something was the matter, probably having seen her in the corner of his eye fall so suddenly out of view. Because he immediately seemed to forget the bore in front of him

entirely, as the look on the side of his face grew from an almost blank disapproval, to complete and startled concern in the space of about two seconds. And this was the face he turned to her with, as he reached up and grabbed the side of the machine to seemingly steady himself, and then stepped into Sarah's little corner, leaning in slowly to quietly whisper "*Sarah, is everything alright?*"

And the odd thing was that it was. For a moment, everything seemed to be just about perfect. Eva was probably going to be okay after all (as long as she didn't happen to die in a fiery car accident while riding around with Keith, that was). Brad wasn't over there beating them up right now (though she could still feel him looking at them in that way). And she'd totally forgotten for a moment that she wasn't going to have a roof to sleep under that night that wasn't either the cold, cold stars, or the roof of her car 'neath a dome of flickering streetlamps, out there in some ghostworld of a parking-lot. Especially now that Eva was long gone somewhere, if somewhere just outside the door still. Because somehow, Godwin seemed to have the power to do that for her—some dude she just met. To just lean right in with his she guessed maybe slightly intrusive forehead (it didn't usually seem as pronounced as it did right now anyway), and as if by magic, or something deep within his worried eyes, whisk all her cares away for her, like breath, and make them his. As if he was some magic plant that could feed off of all her worst poisons if she needed him to. Maybe he could be that vessel for all her little joys, and all her little pains—like her mom had talked about her fiancé Jack being for her—so that they wouldn't have to just end up dying into dust like all the rest of them. So that they wouldn't have to just hang there, in the air and all around her, like the hovering husk they always became. A world of them, to live in, and move around in, every day the same like

that. Like so much wasted breath—.

“*Fine*,” she said she was, as she leaned there looking up and him, with both her eyes, and heaving chest.

When finally his eyes turned back towards the door, she let hers follow. Brad was now standing there at the threshold, with his hand on the knob, having apparently realized that Godwin hadn't been following him. He first looked to Godwin, and then to Sarah, all the while holding the same dull look in his eyes, and appearing to be running his tongue back and forth along his bottom gums. It reminded Sarah of what the guys who'd chew chewing tobacco back home would always do when they didn't have any to chew.

He looked back to Godwin, then stopped—“I'll be in the car,” he said. He turned to the door like that was going to be it, but then said “just don't be for fucking ever, a'ight?” before swinging open the door, and stepping out into the parking lot.

Godwin turned back to Sarah once Brad was gone, and once again asked her if everything was alright. And once again, she said it was fine; she was just worried about Eva.

“Well *I* think she'll be okay,” said Godwin. “She seems like she can probably hold her own in a lot of cases.”

“Yeah,” said Sarah, “you're probably right.”

“I mean to have to deal with an actual *Demon*?” said Godwin, and smiled from before.

Sarah smiled at this too, and before she knew what she was doing, she actually reached out and grabbed on to either side of Godwin's jacket for some reason, as if she'd been suddenly tempted to inspect the rough fabric with her fingers.

Godwin looked briefly startled, but didn't lose his previous smile; instead it became something almost arrogant—as if he'd just made a really good joke that everyone'd laughed at. It was a look she'd yet to see on him so far that night, and she thought that perhaps she liked it.

“—and I guess she did okay with Brad, too,” he said, letting himself be slowly pulled in towards her, but not making it easier on her, as he still had a hold of the side of the cabinet. She was afraid for a second that *she* was going to have to do all of the work (which was ironic since she had no idea what she was doing, she thought, somehow managing to smile another smile upon her already smiling smile).

Luckily, at the very last second, he finally closed his eyes and let go, and so did she, and together, they moved in to meet each other's lips, and kissed; they slipped in to meet each other's tongues; and it was strange but it was good. Like having a place to go.

Soon into it, her eyes popped back open as she'd got her first taste of whiskey. It was *strong*—like she didn't know what. Not too unpleasant necessarily; just startling (she'd forgot that he'd even been drinking).

But they continued to kiss, and the taste soon abated. There seemed to become a rhythm; a sensation like gentle waves, which quickly took over everything. They tugged at her eyelids, which rose and then fell, rose and then fell, rose—and then finally fell back closed.

She didn't think she'd slept like this since she was a baby.

It'd happened so suddenly, Godwin had barely even had time to worry about his breath. But once he did, he almost as quickly got over it, finding that all thought had

gone briskly out the window. Because kissing a girl, he'd soon found (or at least *this* girl—*Sarah*), was like something that took a sort of easy concentration; on the one hand, you had to keep moving, and exploring. But it was much more like just sitting back and steering a boat, than actually having to row one.

It wasn't until Godwin heard Big Art's voice sounding off from somewhere over his shoulder, saying something to some guy named *Jimmy* along the lines of *hey, whyn't you go check on things out in the parking lot for me now* that Godwin even remembered there were other people in the world right then. And when he and Sarah then let up for just a second to take a breath, and look in each other's eyes, unfortunately, Godwin was unwelcomely reminded again.

“Hey bud—sorry to bug ya,” said Big Art, his voice sounding even closer this time. “You got a minute?”

At first, Godwin was ready to just assume that the words weren't meant for him so he could get back to kissing Sarah. But then, just as he was about to, the only thing that probably could have stopped him from doing so right then—the look in Sarah's eyes—actually stopped him from doing so right then. She nodded, and pointed with her eyes in the direction of the person who was apparently now standing right behind him.

Sarah let go of his uncle's jacket, taking a second to smooth out some of the wrinkles she'd must have caused in it by clutching it like she'd been. With her last stroke, she let her hand linger there on his chest for a moment, which was when Godwin suddenly remembered that holding hands with a girl existed, so he reached up and slid his fingers through hers, and they folded them there. They then slowly let the hands fall between them as he turned to see whatever it was the guy wanted from him.

“Listen man,” he said, leaning in real close—in fact a bit *too* close. “I wanna apologize again for buttin' in. I don't mean to be ruinin' you folks' good time. In fact, I *encourage* it—,” he turned and nodded briefly around the room, which Godwin now saw had started to get at least a little back to normal. “N'a in a place like this? That's what it's here for. Havin' a good time; plain and simple. Don't let tonight fool ya—nine times outta ten in a week, we here's as laid back 'n easy goin' as any other sleepy little *luvin'-duvin'* dancin' 'n dinin' side-o'-the-road establishmen' this here fah south of the Mason-Dixon'. Now on the weekends'—that's another story. 'Specially them nights when you'sa boys from way o'er Bragg is all out n'about 'n on the town like you is right now. But *listen*—,” he looked from Godwin to Sarah, then back to Godwin, and then nodded away from their little corner, out towards the open floor, “say we go o'er there where we can talk.”

Godwin had no idea what the guy could possibly have to talk to him about that would need to be so secret. He'd never met the guy in his life, and had only ever heard his name thrown around the base from time to time by guys who knew him from their time spent at the saloon. But when they did talk about him, in whatever context, it was usually with a high amount of respect, which Godwin now guessed probably stemmed from his willingness to not only just admit military patrons of any age into his establishment, but to actually welcome them with open arms, as much, if not more than it stemmed from their knowledge of his legendary adventures fighting in Korea almost 50 years ago (apparently he still had a bullet in his lower back somewhere that was lodged—depending on who you talked to—anywhere from a centimeter (if you talked to Billy the Brit) to an inch-and-a-half away from his spine, the image of which (of Big Art on some

hillside in Korea in his cowboy hat and dress shirt, getting shot in the back, and then reaching for the wound as he stood grimacing towards the heavens in pain) made his own back feel sore for a moment). So regardless of how very little he felt like leaving Sarah right then, he figured it probably wouldn't hurt too much to at least pay the guy the courtesy of seeing what he wanted. As long as the talk didn't last too long, that was, it wouldn't hurt. After all, the guy did seem like he was trying to be nice and inviting with both his body type of language, and then his actual language, even if his body language was still a bit too up-close for him to care for, and even though his excited drawls were difficult to understand at times.

But first, Godwin turned to Sarah as if asking permission, so she squeezed his hand and nodded. Godwin said “sorry” (and meant it) then reluctantly, with maybe an immediate twinge of regret, let go her hand.

He turned and nodded to the owner, who then led him a few feet away from the video game cabinet to a place where nothing was going on at the moment.

“Art Jenkins,” he said, and reached out his hand for Godwin to shake. “But y’all can call me Big if you’d like.” His grip was overpowering, but Godwin at least remembered to not just let his own hand hang there like he did sometimes when shaking hands. And he also remembered to make eye contact—“Godwin Falcon,” he said as Big Art let go of his hand. Then he nodded towards the door. “That guy Brad’s my—”

“Yeah, I know,” said the owner. “And that’s what I wanted to talk to you about. You see—,” at this point, he put his hand on Godwin’s shoulder and looked off in thought. “Now I understand’ you mightn’t be too happy with the way yer Corporal’s been actin’ in relation to tonight’. And Lord knows I ain’t either. It wuzn’t right the way

he treated that poor girl, and it wuzn't right the way he made you look just now on his way out the doh."

Wait a minute, thought Godwin—how he made him look *what?*

"Now if this was durin' trainin', I'd say shit, go head—treat them boys like dawgs. S' fair game as far as Ahmy's concerned. But notcha out here in the real world. Notcha when ya got yer gurl oveh there in yer little corneh."

With his enormous hand still on Godwin's shoulder, the owner got in real close, and kind of rubbed at the shoulder with his thumb. This made Godwin extremely uncomfortable, and for a moment, lose his sense of propriety towards the old veteran as he narrowed his eyes.

"But regardless of all that, he's still yer corporal—," said the owner. "And what that says is *you*, son, hold a certain responsibility towards 'im. Now he took on the responsibility to see y'all make good soldjahs. 'N if this was War, he'd be lookin' afteh ev'ry single one'ya. But in here? Boy, you betteh be payin' 'im the same appreciation. Cause if you don't think he won't soon be helpin' ya outta a jam, well then you ain't must know a thing 'bout soldierin'."

Godwin wasn't quite sure what he was getting at, so he just chewed on the little inner part of his lip for a second.

"Okay," he finally said.

"Now Brad tells me you gotta good head on yer shouldehs," said the owner, "so obviously he thinks high a'ya."

He does, thought Godwin?

"And though it might be hard fer 'im to show it, I know fer a fact he'd appreciate

y'all if ya helped him back to Bragg a'ight," he said. "Heck, so would I. But if I put 'im in a cab right now, no tellin' where he might end up come sunup. And most yet, a guy'll remember a thing like that. You can *bet* e'will. Even if he is a bit sopped at the moment."

Godwin didn't know what to say. This guy was making it seem like giving Brad a ride back to base would be like some kind of selfless act, worthy of a medal. As if Brad was about to get shot or something, and Godwin was the only one who could save him. The truth was that Godwin hadn't yet thought of what he was going to do; he'd been too busy worrying about Sarah, and kissing Sarah. He just knew that in that moment, when Brad had acted like he thought Godwin would just fall right in behind him, and follow him out to the car like a beat-down dog, no questions asked, that actually capitulating to that presumption would have had been the most spineless, weak-willed, beat-down-dog-feeling thing he'd ever done. And he'd done a lot of spineless, weak-willed, beat-down-dog-feeling things in his life; most of which he'd obviously never learned from, or else he wouldn't have had kept doing them.

But that wasn't even what concerned him anymore. Because the only thing that concerned him now was being with Sarah. And if this guy expected him to just drop everything and drive Brad back to the base, well then *he* was just an old fool who didn't know anything about the beating human heart.