

HENDERSON STREET BAZAAR AND OTHER STORIES

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The preface, “Against Buses: Charles Baxter and the Contemporary Epiphany” deals with the epiphany as a potential ending to short stories. Baxter holds that epiphanies are trite and without purpose in today’s fiction. I argue that Baxter’s view, while not without merit, is limiting. Beginning with James Joyce and Katherine Anne Porter and moving to my own work, I discuss how some epiphanies, particularly false ones, can enhance rather than detract from excellent fiction. Five short stories make up the remainder of this thesis: “Dedication,” “Taking it with You,” “Transition to Flowers,” “Profile in Courage,” and “Henderson Street Bazaar.”

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PART I

AGAINST BUSES: CHARLES BAXTER AND THE MODERN EPIPHANY

## Chapter 1 Baxter and the False Epiphany

I think that the reason people tend to respond viscerally to Charles Baxter's *Burning Down the House* is that these essays are insightful to the point of being accusatory. The trends that Baxter writes about are general enough to apply to the larger portion of his audience, but specific enough for individual writers to recognize fault in their own writing. While I could probably be called a habitual abuser of more than one of Baxter's guidelines, the essay that got the greatest rise out of me was "Against Epiphanies." Though I hadn't realized it up to that point, every short story I'd ever finished ended with some kind of epiphany. I just couldn't seem to wrap one up without someone *realizing* something. Reading back through those stories, I found also that all but one ended on a note of saccharine inevitability. Several times, characters had realizations that directly prevented them from confronting whatever amounted to their central conflict. In other words, Baxter had my number.

Daunted but not defeated, my first solution was to follow the advice in "Against Epiphanies"—to leave out insight altogether and write a new and different kind of story. Unfortunately Baxter—perhaps wishing to spark debate rather than issue dogma—offers only sparse concrete advice on how to write without epiphanies. There should be "an introduction of oppositions, a deepening of those oppositions, a crisis, and a resolution" (50). All characters need "powerful desires" and "also, there may be many coincidences that lead to violence" (50). I set out to write this kind of a story, and on some level I succeeded. Strong desires? Check. Coincidences? Check. Violence? Double Check. I felt proud, until I read back through the story and found the thing unpalatable. The strong desires had made the characters seem crazed and inhuman; after my first coincidence occurred, the others seemed mundane

and inevitable. Perhaps most damning, the violent ending that Baxter recommended was gory and hollow, and seemed in retrospect to be the only thing justifying the story. While this piece's shortcomings were my own doing and not inherent in the format, I had had quite enough.

Having failed miserably, I quietly replaced the violence with a small revelation and moved on. Probably this would have been the end of the issue, were it not for the fact that Baxter's book—and this essay in particular—seemed to be having a far reaching effect on fiction. The ideas in "Against Epiphanies" kept surfacing. Just as Baxter claimed that *Best American Short Stories* was chock full of epiphanies in 1997, I found that a large majority of the stories in that collection now seemed to be avoiding epiphanies (50). As if that weren't enough, my peers in workshop seemed to be writing the same kinds of epiphany-less stories. I started to receive drafts back with comments like "Another epiphany" scrawled along the back page. Just as Baxter was pressured by an editor to write stories with insight, I felt pressured to strip insight away.

To me this felt wrong. While I wasn't quite sure why, I felt strongly that epiphanic writing still had meaning. Too many great writers rely on epiphanies to add substance and closure for me to be convinced that now it was necessary to abandon them entirely. Further, having encountered a fair number of anti-epiphanic stories both in magazines and in workshop, I found that they seemed to be as dangerously formulaic as epiphanies only in a different—to me more distasteful—way. While what Baxter wrote about epiphanies was true and elucidated a major flaw in my own writing, fixing that flaw in the way he recommended seemed only to create a different set of problems.

This led me back to Baxter, and back to stories that both do and don't use epiphanies as

endings. I wanted to know more about the effect that epiphany had on fiction, so that I could find an effective way to either use it or abandon it.

To start, I needed to define the epiphanic and its opposite. I began by assuming that an epiphany is a sudden significant revelation or realization experienced by a character, almost always at or near the end of the story. Baxter would add to this that the actions in epiphanic fiction “are less important than what is made of them in the protagonist’s consciousness. The significance of the story has moved part or all of the way out of action into sensibility, and the product of action, in this model, is a kind of wisdom” (50). Baxter also provides a list of authors and works that demonstrate epiphany including works like James Joyce’s “Araby” and Katherine Anne Porter’s “Old Mortality.”

This definition is straightforward enough, as are Baxter’s arguments as to why this model is flawed. First these endings are unrealistic, in that the epiphany has its origins in the mystic and spiritual, and that far fewer are granted in real life than in fiction. Additionally, these endings often feel clichéd, as even “radiance, after a while, gets routine” (53). Authors tend to fall back on epiphanies as a clutch because they have the potential to add closure to even mediocre stories, if in the form of a vulgar, salable payoff (53, 61). When poorly executed, epiphanies offer the false appearance of deeper meaning, which leads Baxter to compare them to the doctrine of cults and conspiracy theorists (48).

While Baxter is very clear on these points, he becomes less clear when he shifts to discuss the anti-epiphanic. As I found earlier, there is precious little concrete description of what to write in place of an epiphany. Instead, Baxter chooses to teach by example, which is appropriate. Yet the examples he provides seem to some extent to skirt the issue. Dino



Buzzati's "The Falling Girl" occurs in a universe too different from our own to be instructive regarding realist literary fiction; editing space-time cannot be a universal solution. Lydia Davis's "Disagreement" is far too short to have time to qualify as either for or against epiphanies—Davis's methods seem ill adapted to stories longer than a paragraph. As I intend to discuss later, James Alan Mcpherson's "Elbow Room" has, in my opinion, an epiphany of a sort, in that it deals explicitly in the language and expectation of insight. If this story does not contain an epiphany, it contains a perfectly constructed epiphany-sized hole, which operates in many of the same ways.

For a story that is truly anti-epiphanic and also long enough and realistic enough to seem relevant to my own writing, I had to go outside Baxter's examples. To me, the perfect example of how leaving out an epiphany works and doesn't work can be found in Alice Munro's "Dimensions," which was published in both *The New Yorker* and *The Best American Short Stories 2007*. The story follows a woman named Doree as she struggles with the aftermath of the murder of her three children at the hands of her abusive and deranged husband. For complicated reasons, Doree chooses to take a series of long bus trips to visit her estranged husband at the mental institution. Through the course of these visits, the husband unfolds that he has had vision of their children, alive and well in a parallel universe. Though well aware of the impossibility of his claim and the dangers of believing it, Doree finds an addictive lightness in the idea. She distances herself from her few friends and her counselor. Unsure of her own motives, Doree plans another visit to the institution, though at this point it is clear that she is treading on dangerous ground, risks potentially being swallowed up by grief and the maniacal personality of her former husband. On the way, she contemplates her relationship as a whole, and remembers that in the past "she had felt that she was put on earth

for no reason other than to be with him, and try to understand him” (290). Though even she recognizes the similarity of the situation, Doree assures herself: “Well it wasn’t like that. It was not the same” (290).

At that moment, Doree is trapped in stasis. She is aware on some level of the danger she is putting herself in, but she does not as yet have the mental clarity to stop her own actions. In an epiphanic story, it would be at this point that Doree might come to a realization of some variety. But for whatever reason, Munro refuses to allow the character any insight at all; Doree cannot and will not realize anything about her situation, and thus she seems trapped on the bus, trapped going to see her husband again. As we see though, Munro does not intend to let that happen:

She was sitting on the front seat across from the driver. She had a clear view through the windshield. And that was why she was the only passenger on the bus, the only person other than the driver, to see a pickup truck pull out from a side road without even slowing down, to see it rock across the empty Sunday-morning highway in front of them and then plunge into the ditch. And to see something even stranger: the driver of the truck flying through the air in a manner that seemed both swift and slow, absurd and graceful. He landed in the gravel at the edge of the pavement, on the opposite side of the highway.[...]

The boy was lying on his back, arms and legs flung out, like somebody making an angel in the snow. Only there was gravel around him, not snow. His eyes were not quite closed. He was so young, a boy who had shot up tall before he even needed to shave. Possibly without a driver's license.”(290)

The bus stops and Doree tends to the young driver’s grisly injuries, chooses to stay by his side

even after it's strictly necessary. With the victim stabilized, the bus prepares to continue on its way, but Doree chooses not to continue on but to stay with the boy. She will not see her husband, not today.

Munro manages to create this resolution of tension and to keep Doree away from danger, all without ever approaching an epiphany. Yet to do so, she had to throw an innocent and unrelated child in front of a bus. Not only is this shocking, graphic, and painful, but the coincidental ending seems forced and convenient, the violence senseless and unavoidable. In a workshop, I would comment that the ending could potentially rob the story of its power. While it is effective, I think this is only because of Munro's mastery of prose and scene; in the hands of a lesser writer I don't think this story, this ending could work. To borrow from Baxter, while I am conscious of this being put over, I think it succeeds, but just barely. Furthermore, I would agree with Baxter that when dealing with the anti-epiphanic "there is probably a limit to how many of these stories can be absorbed on their own terms before some readerly failure to respond kicks in" even in the hands of masters such as Munro (57).

I do not mean to suggest that all short stories without epiphanies are inferior to those with epiphanies. But I think at this point it's clear that removing the epiphany is not an effective way to solve the problems that Baxter brings up in his essay. Fiction sans epiphanies can still be clichéd, forced, and over-written, and with a little more time will become every bit as predictable. Removing the epiphany simply changes "Suddenly I realized" into "Suddenly someone is hit by a bus." In my opinion, this is no kind of improvement, and can easily be—particularly in the hands of learning writers like me—a move in the wrong direction.

Having come to this conclusion, I knew why my own attempt at the anti-epiphanic had failed. But I still didn't know how to address the issues that Baxter brings up in "Against Epiphanies." While the solution he offers didn't work for me, the problems that he made clear were still present in my own fiction. I needed to find a way to write epiphanies that did not result in cliché, or heavy-handedness, or being boring. The answer, perhaps unsurprisingly, came from Baxter himself, who wrote that "stories built from false insights have their own peculiar interest, particularly in a hard-sell society, all of whose economic pressures warp in the direction of secret knowledge that can be cannily merchandised" (52-53). Though he only mentions this idea in passing, I found it enthralling.

Like true epiphanies, false ones still deal primarily in the insight of a major character. But these insights are no longer infallible; quite to the contrary, stories that use false epiphanies find some way to inform the reader that the epiphany is qualified, suspect, or entirely incorrect. For the characters, these insights still seem radiant and earth-shattering, but the reader, thanks to either context or direct authorial intrusion, knows otherwise. The readers are granted enough perspective to see beyond the epiphany. Rather than offering grand explanations, false epiphanies refute the possibility of complete understanding. I began looking for and finding false epiphanies in a variety of stories, including many that Baxter uses as examples.

McPherson's "Elbow Room," which Baxter holds up as anti-epiphanic, seems to deal in a false epiphany. The story arrives at a revelation as earth-shattering as any when the narrator, badgered by the comments of a disembodied editor, declares that "it was from the beginning not my story. I lack the insight to narrate its complexities. But it may still be told" (241). The statement that the narrator lacks sufficient insight to narrate the complexities of

this story negates itself; in realizing and admitting his lack of ability to tell the story accurately, he succeeds in telling it perfectly. This refusal to admit to realizing anything is itself a realization, an epiphany about epiphanies.

Even the familiar last lines of Joyce's "Araby" could be read as intentionally false. The narrator tells us that "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger" (30). According to Baxter, this is meant as it's written, "the boy sees that the world is arrayed against him.[...] The boy is the pale knight-at-arms on the cold hillside, the Byron who has failed at every pose he has attempted to strike" (45). But I wonder if any moment in the story justifies this self-admonishment, if we can trust this epiphany. Reading the story, I see no real evidence of vanity. Rather, he seems driven by isolation and hormones. Further, no one is laughing at the boy, no one is deriding him. In fact, no one is even looking at him. While his anguish and anger are no doubt real, they seem more a naïve disappointment than a soul shattering moment.

It seems to me that the reader must conclude that this epiphany is false, and that it is this falseness that lends it both grace and transcendence. Were the boy truly vain or deserving of derision, by himself or by others, the ending would fall flat. But because his insight is false, Joyce can use it to remind the reader of the shaky nature of revelation, and the fallible surety of youth. The very real pain of the narrator can be expressed in the high emotional timbre it deserves, but the reader can also see past the character's adolescent viewpoint.

If the misguided epiphany adds nuance to "Araby," then the dead wrong epiphany that closes Katherine Anne Porter's "Old Mortality" defines the story in its entirety. Told in three parts, the first section follows Miranda and her sister, but focuses primarily on

the tale of Amy, the sisters' aunt. Amy died young and under mysterious circumstances, but is still much talked about a decade afterwards. Miranda's deeply southern family tells stories that depict Amy as charming, virtuous, and fragile. Amy is an impossible mirage of loveliness and grace, the standards of all good qualities in the family. Though she eventually married a long-time suitor, Amy was betrothed to many. She was also a free and rebellious spirit, and chafed at marriage when it finally arrived. The sisters are told that Amy died from a lung hemorrhage, but also "because she was not in love" (8). The combination of romance and virtue cause both sisters, particularly Miranda, to idolize this aunt they've never met, to strive to match her not only in grace and loveliness, but also in allure and intrigue.

In part three, Miranda, as a young adult, is called home for a funeral. On the train there, she meets an elderly cousin, traveling for the same purpose, who tells her another version of Amy's story. Amy was not virtuous, not even beautiful. She took her own life with an opium overdose, most likely because she was carrying the child of a man who was not her husband. In some sense, Miranda has patterned her life after the stories about Amy. She has let love lead her through life, has eloped at a very young age, rebelling against her family. Seeing that those decisions were based on a false history shakes Miranda, causes her to reconsider her entire life. Perhaps predictably, this leads Miranda to see her own life in a brand new light: "She knew now why she had run way to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said "No" to her" (87). If the story stopped here, we would have an epiphany deserving of every criticism Baxter offers. But Porter does not stop, chooses to stay with Miranda, forces her to follow her own discourse to its logical conclusion: "I hate love, she thought, as if this were the answer, I hate

loving and being loved, I hate it” (87-88). Continuing still, through revelation, then doubt, then back to revelation. At each successive turn, Miranda seems closer and closer to an ultimate truth, closer to finally realizing what it all means. The story ends with this:

Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend of the past, other people's memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child at a magic-lantern show. Ah, but there is my own life to come yet, she thought, my own life now and beyond. I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer, she told herself, listening to the voices back of her. Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance. (88-89)

Both the content and the tone of this final revelation predispose the audience to believe it. Finally, Miranda has come at last to the right conclusion. The reader might even celebrate with Miranda as she declares “Let the tell their stories to each other,” finally sloughing off so much redacted history. But the last line, and truly just those two last words, serve to undercut the epiphany. Insofar as this story has been building to this moment for more than eighty pages, those two last words manage to send Miranda's (and thus the reader's) entire framework of understanding crashing to the ground. Reading back through the piece knowing its ending thrusts a thousand subtle clues into plain sight, casting every detail and anecdote into doubt. The original stories that Miranda believes in are suspect, but so also is the new version fed to her by cousin Eva, who has her own perspective and prejudice. Every detail in every account seems politicized, charged with opinion and calculated intent. The

reader, again like Miranda, must confront that they cannot know the truth in this story, that there may not be a truth to know. Further, since this is a story about stories themselves, some of this doubt and confusion must extend in the reader's consciousness, causing them to doubt their own histories and revelations.

This, then, is the potential power of a false epiphany: introducing a mistake or a lie in the moment of final judgment negates the infallible and faith-based aspects of insight that Baxter finds so unappealing. Ending in a moment of false revelation allows the essence of characters to be on display without manipulative coincidences or senseless violence. Finally, when wielded perfectly, a false epiphany has the potential to force the reader to reevaluate the entire story, and serves to globalize the real doubt and struggle of the issues the piece contends with.



## Chapter 2 Personal Experience

Having discovered a potential solution to “Against Epiphanies,” I set out to attempt the false epiphany on my own. The five stories that follow are the result. Though I wasn't conscious of it at the time, my inquiry into endings coincided with my master's studies, and I feel that the progression of these stories reflects both journeys.

The first story in this collection, “Dedication” is the oldest, and is also my first attempt at a false epiphany. The idea for this story came from my wife, who, trying to get me to clean the fridge, threatened to eat the casserole of the bottom shelf. Thus, I started this story knowing the climax, but unsure of why it would happen, or who it would happen to, or what would happen next. While the first two points settled themselves easily, I was at pains with the ending in early drafts. I kept trying to find a way to make the ending seem legitimately hopeful, and I kept coming up short. I realized eventually that this was not only impossible, but not necessary. While the character feels relief at the close of the story, the reader hopefully recognizes this relief as temporary and reflective of other failed gestures.

The next story, “Taking it with You” is a very late draft of my attempt at the anti-epiphanic. While little of Baxter's suggestions remain, I like to think that the characters have and act on strong desires, and that those strong desires propel the ending, which is perhaps the least epiphanic in the collection. Witnessing the final action of Slim and Owen, Ishmael wants and needs to feel a sense of closure, to gain meaning from it, but in the end grace eludes him.

This was also the first instance of a motif that repeat in the collection: the weight of things. In this story, as well as in “Henderson Street Bazaar” and “Transition to Flowers,” characters feel both attached and trapped by things that they own. While I wasn't consciously

attempting this, I like the way that these stories hang together. Ours society has made consumption its great task, and I think that the detritus of that consumption can easily pile up in the modern psyche. Owning and the desire to own carry a price, and if these stories comment on that, so much the better.

I also noticed on looking back through these stories that many of them seemed to focus around individuals with strange occupations: junk remover, bricoleur, temp agency boss, historical reenactor. I think this results mostly from the way that I write stories. I like to start with rounded interesting characters, to know who is in my fiction before I know what will happen to them. Most people spend more time at work than they do at home, or anywhere else. Following people through their occupations shows me who they are, and gives my characters space to be unique. At first I was self-conscious about these two motifs. Neither were intentional, and I felt they might make the stories seem repetitive. But reading back across them, I think they work together, and these ideas could be partially responsible.

With “Transition to Flowers,” I tried to expand the ending to include two different points of view. Originally, this story followed Charlotte, who is still my favorite character in the collection. While terminally strange and mildly disturbed, Charlotte manages to get away with always being honest, which is hard to find in a fictional character, at least one of my own creation. Jamie, on the other hand, tells lies only to himself. As I see it, this story wants to end with one or both of the characters finding or at least defining what happiness means to them, which leads them to each other. If the ending succeeds, the reader sees their new togetherness as a reiteration of their individual loneliness; there is change, but not redemption. I felt that the best way to accomplish this was to end with both of them declaring that they have changed and they are happy, which I hope makes the reader question whether either

change or happiness are achievable.

“Profile in Courage” was another example of a story with an obvious ending but not an obvious reason for it to happen. I visited Dealey Plaza early last November. That the Sixth Floor of the Book Depository is now a museum is strange. That they were preparing for their annual anniversary rush by opening a new exhibit was stranger. Perhaps most unsettling, an X has been painted on concrete of Elm St. at exactly the point where the head shot connected. Though this is a dangerous, busy thoroughfare, I watched from the seventh floor, ten feet above the sniper nest, as tourist after tourist rushed out between moving vehicles to touch the spot, or have a photo snapped. A week later I saw an article in the Fort Worth Star Telegram relating that the Dallas Police Department had found an exact replica of the patrol car of J.D. Tippett, the patrolman Oswald shot on his way to the Texas Theater. They had fully restored it, even painted Tippett's car number on the side, but now they were unsure what purpose the vehicle could serve. I knew that I wanted to write about the assassination, and that I wanted to talk about people's odd desire to touch the bloodiest parts of history. I wanted to write about Kennedy and Oswald, and thus the ending was obvious. The difficult part—aside from the meticulous research—was explaining that ending, making it justifiable and honest. I found this possible only by allowing the ending to mean something very different to the characters than to the audience, making this (to me) the most clearly false epiphany in the collection. In their minds, both Jack and Lee are heroes, and yet the reader must see beyond that, must realize that the violence they enact can neither preserve their own sense of history nor apologize for their personal shortcomings.

The final and namesake story, “Henderson Street Bazaar” takes its name and its setting from a real flea market in north Fort Worth, a place my own father took me as a child. While

most of this story is invented, it is true that my father encouraged me to become educated, and that now that education makes communicating with each other difficult. The pain that Daniel feels is real to me, and so I found myself using the false epiphany differently than in the other stories. In the others, incorrect revelation complicates the meaning, but in a way I feel in control of. In this story, I need the false epiphany to convey my own confusion regarding the issue at hand. Daniel alone, among all the characters in this collection, has a chance at being correct—it is possible that following in his father's footsteps is the only way to honor his memory, that keeping this tradition alive is worth sacrificing his other life, the life that his father worked to provide him. I do not think so, but I am not sure.

I feel this to be an appropriate way to end things. For me, epiphanies began as a source of confusion and uncertainty, something I didn't really understand. At this point I feel they have become a tool I can wield more or less accurately, often to convey those same feelings of confusion with my writing. I hope that this transition and these stories that witness it reflect the progress I have made during my years here at the University of North Texas. While Mr. Baxter may never agree, I hope that you, my readers, find that these stories offer some proof that epiphanies, if only false ones, can have a place in contemporary fiction.

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PART II  
SHORT STORIES

## Dedication

“This must be what it's like to rob graves,” thought Joann, and she opened the refrigerator. Her nose found what she was looking for before her eyes did. The refrigerator motor whirred as she scanned the shelves—her vacuous look reflected in the faux moon light of the antique refrigerator that Dylan had won two years ago in an online auction and driven all the way to Indiana to retrieve. According to the original manufacturer's catalog, which Dylan had also bought on the internet, this color was known as Mother of Pea. Joann thought it looked like baby shit. That was during his antique appliances phase, when he'd gotten so bad as to make her pull over the car while they were on vacation in the Smoky Mountains, so he could ask if the owner would part with a thoroughly oxidized laundry mangle shading the foot tall weeds near the highway.

He'd given up the appliance bit shortly after he came to the personally startling if globally obvious conclusion that restoring antiques was hard. That was just after he finished the fridge, but not before he had acquired three other ‘projects.’ The other refrigerator, along with two stoves stood in the back yard, arranged facing each other in the far corner, like alley-men in a dice game. For the longest while, Dylan was always meaning to get around to fixing them; thereafter, he was always meaning to get around to hauling them away.

After the appliances, it was distressing thrift shop furniture, which was good for Dylan, in that he'd actually finished five of them, and bad in that he'd filled the garage with seven more. For what seemed like months, she would go looking for him at 3 a.m., only to find him in the garage, sanding off part of the lacquer coat he'd just finished applying. She couldn't fathom what was supposed to be attractive about furniture that had been lovingly and painstakingly disfigured. Dylan assured her that made them French Provincial, and they would be the envy of the University

wives, just as soon as he had enough ready. Maybe he'd get a stall at the ultra-chic farmer's market, or even rent a small store just off the square. Something to help him pass the time, he had said.

The thought drove Joann's lip towards her nose, as she finally found what she was looking for in the fridge. The smell followed the casserole dish to the partially-mosaicked counter top. The plastic wrap was mint green, rendered opaque by foggy swirls of condensation. This had been in the fridge for forty-two days at this point; pulling the cling wrap from the heavy glass dish was like picking a scab. At one point this had been mashed sweet potatoes with orange zest and a maple-molasses glaze. She knew that from the sticky note attached to the side, which also listed the date it was made, a grade (B+), and a suggestion for next time (good texture, change up the spices, add nuts?), all in Dylan's slanted nearly illegible handwriting. The syrup mixture had separated, pooled, and congealed, tiny black ponds in the overtly orange landscape. Here and there in patches, white mold had set up outposts. Joann forced herself to swallow the spit pooling in her lower jaw, and reached for a spoon.

She aimed her spoon near, but not actually touching one of the mold colonies. She closed her eyes, and imagined Dylan right behind her, not understanding again. She had to act quickly; Dylan was at the Home Improvement Warehouse, buying supplies for his latest project. There would be no explaining this. Joann's eyes crossed slightly, and in a single motion she brought the spoon to her mouth and swallowed the greasy casserole in one lump.

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She was, she had to admit, responsible for this. All her life, Joann had desperately wanted things to happen to her. Her childhood—watching TV, reading books—led her to believe



that real life was not only fascinating but certainly on its way, and that when she was old enough to be independent, but still young enough to not be her parents, she would lead that real life. She would have adventure, or at least experiences. As the years went by, she couldn't help thinking that if her life was a TV show, the plot would have to pick up soon, or she was in danger of losing viewers. She of course realized that solving mysteries and being a spy were most likely out of the question, but still had vivid, if unspecific dreams about the future. From these dreams, she remembered most of all the feeling that she, Joann Goodman, was part of something interesting. She couldn't tell who she would be, or where she would live, but she was sure that it would involve excitement, action.

But the large university in the small southern town had proved to be shockingly like high school—alarm clocks, laundry, elaborate lunch table caste systems, homework. The feeling of being involved in some sort of interesting occurrence never materialized, and even began to fade out of her dreams over time. She thought about joining clubs, or becoming a regular at frat parties, but the only thing that would have depressed her more than not finding what she wanted in life on accident was to go looking for it, and still come up short. She felt that she was now less important, more mundane than before, as so much of her time had to be dedicated to getting the good grades that her parents required in exchange for full financial support. Since she didn't know what else to do, she stayed in school. But by her second year as a doctoral candidate, she felt dead in her own skin, desperately close to positive that she would end up being tragically normal.

It was during those doldrums that Joann met Dylan, when she needed coffee and hash browns to get through another all-nighter, and the waffle waiter told her he thought Ciardi's *Inferno* was far more lyrical, if not as true to the Italian. She looked up from her notes into eyes so brown that the pupil had overthrown the iris, colonized it.

Raised by his grandmother because his parents were both in prison, at 16 Dylan had taken the GED on a dare, and dropped out after passing. Back at his place, he showed her the desk he'd collaged with magazine clippings and packing tape, and on it the antique Underwood and the 112 pages he had of "Angel on the Gallows: The Early Life and Times of Dylan Rodriguez." It was a mildly fictionalized account of Dylan's brief but illustrious career as a petty thief in South Dallas. A full third of it was so poorly typed as to be illegible—but what could be made out showed promise, at least to Joann. When she read the last page he'd written, the one that was still sticking out of the typewriter, she had cried, not because the story was sad (it actually trailed off mid-sentence), but because it was, undeniably, a story.

At first, she and Dylan only saw each other on Monday and Tuesday, his weekend from the restaurant. She would ask him strangely mundane questions like, "What do you remember from second grade?" and get fabulous answers involving cock fights and truancy officers. His mind moved at a hypnotizing pace, seemed to jump from modern mechanics to post-human criticism to a new idea for a cooking show involving a good deal of fire. While the rest of her week was largely the same, her Mondays and Tuesdays were now full of intrigue, which in and of itself was incredible and uplifting. Her few friends seemed jealous of Dylan, jealous of Joann for having discovered him. Moreover, in the very back of her mind, she could allow herself to write faint outlines for the upcoming chapters in her life. Perhaps the two of them, after she finished school, would backpack through Europe, or hitchhike across the country. Eventually they would settle down, but only later, a peaceful and appropriate resolution.

That was when her parents called to tell her that, due to what her father termed "a market foible," there was no more money left for her to finish school. Suddenly, and for the first time at all since she'd started seeing Dylan, she was made painfully aware of the other side of life, the one

not yet in line with the stated thesis. Because she didn't know what else to do, she knocked on his door at noon on Saturday, even though she knew that he'd gotten off work five hours ago, and was now sleeping hard in anticipation of another late night bar rush. He answered on the second knock without a shirt or his glasses, squinting into the cloudless sun.

He saw that she was crying, nodded and went to put on coffee. Before she had finished explaining what was wrong, he had offered to let her move in, and to cosign her student loans. He could pick up extra shifts at the restaurant, and when his lease was up, they could move to a bigger place. Dylan's mouth gaped in a yawn, and he told her that he loved her. In less than half an hour, she allowed herself to be comforted, undressed and led to his mattress. He fell asleep almost instantly afterwards, with his arm draped over her. She found the weight reassuring, despite the fact that she wasn't sure she could have moved if she wanted to. But then she didn't want to. Not at all tired, she spent the whole afternoon staring off at the ceiling, thinking that, perhaps, this was all meant to be.

For the next while, she was too busy worrying to notice anything. While Dylan had never actually had any of the utilities turned off, bills frequently seemed to ripen on the counter from white to pink and green. Joann still couldn't pick up a phone call from an unknown number without a trace of anxiety left behind by bill collectors. She also had to learn to live without the precooked meals in the cafeteria, or her monthly gas and toiletries allowance. But, whenever things got dismal for her, which was often, and Dylan and she were awake at the same time, which was rare, he would take her hands in his, and talk about the future. "Someday," he would say. "Someday, all this"—he gestured weakly in most directions—"all this is going to be perfect. Just the way you dreamed it. Curtains, and plenty of money, and everything."

Waiting for that dream seemed like the hardest thing she would ever have to do. But now

Joann found the experience strangely pleasant in hindsight. She caught herself reminiscing about that first rental house, the one with the hole in the pantry ceiling and the doorways too crooked to close. How pleasant it seemed now for the gas not to work, and the two of them to have to cling to each other mindlessly, weighted down by four used quilts. He would come home with twelve hours of table waiting pushing his forehead towards the floor. Cereal for her, Tuna Helper for him, half an hour of “us time,” and then he would go to bed while she went back to school, just in time for her 11 o'clock Faulkner seminar. If they talked, and sometimes they didn't, it was about the awful slavish work, cleaning up after people too drunk to properly operate a syrup carafe for piles of dirty change, the futility of trying, the awful rude nature of the universe, the merits of various forms of suicide. Joann always felt guilty watching him drink scotch at dawn so he could get up in time to make the bank, so the rent check would clear. But he always kissed her softly before going to bed in the morning, and he always told her that he loved her. She would smile the entire mile and a half walk to school, even when it was raining.

For three years, they talked about how it would be. And then, long before Joann felt was justified, would be became was. She got a job at the state university across town. Dylan ceremonially burned his name tag in the ashtray outside the Waffle Hut. When he got home he had the finest bottle of champagne that the Kwik Mart had to offer sweating in a brown paper bag.

She told him he had class to teach, but he pretended not to hear her, poured her a glass, took her hand and wrapped her fingers around the stem. “We made it baby! This is our day,” said Dylan, finishing his glass, wrapping his hands around her. She could still taste her morning coffee in the back of her throat, and the sweet pink wine left a bitter residue on her tongue. But when he looked at her, she smiled, largely because he was smiling, almost dancing in place at the truth of it. At least, she thought, he'll start sleeping when it's dark now. The wine at such an early

hour left her in a pleasant mood in spite of herself, and she joined him in dancing without music, trying hard to believe that this was a celebration of all her dreams coming true as well.

But all of Dylan's dreams were not-dreams. Not being broke, not waiting tables, not being alone. The region that satisfied these conditions was a vast place, and Joann found herself lost in the middle. She had assumed Dylan would start writing his novel right away, but he'd insisted first on a break. He spent a week trying not to change the channel or shift his weight unnecessarily. When Joann had come home from class at three to find him stumbling drunk "just for old time's sake," she had insisted that something had to give.

He nodded solemnly, and locked himself in the office. For two days, he came out only for bathroom breaks and to grab more beer and sandwiches. When he finally collapsed in bed, and subsequently came to four hours later, he called Joann in to see what he'd been working on. His typewriter remained where it had been, shoved to the corner of the desk to better display the collage on the desktop. He pointed proudly at the screen of the computer across the room. An internet page was pulled up that looked something like a bank statement. Across the top it said [ultimatepoker.net](#). "I've won over four thousand dollars," Dylan said, pointing proudly at the last line on the screen.

Joann looked confused. "I thought you were writing."

"The novel?" Dylan turned to the computer, calling up two different virtual tables. "Not feeling it now." He turned and focused on the computer screen. She stared holes in the back of his skull but he only muttered under his breath about good and bad luck. It was then that she noticed that Dylan was starting to get fat. It was subtle, but there was extra skin hanging ungracefully from his chin and the back of his arms. She grabbed his rolling chair and spun him around.

"You've been doing that for the last fifty hours straight?"

He looked at her, and his eyebrows tilted inwards, sharpening his features, drawing his dark eyes into shadow. “So?”

“I teach five classes so you can stay at home and play cards all day?”

“I worked for years while you sat on your ass and went to school. Don't I get a turn?” She was nearly stammering, but he was calm and collected, seemed to have his responses planned out. He knew this was coming, she thought. He planned it this way. She leaned over, met his glance, and touched his cheek.

“I thought you were going to write baby.”

He looked over his shoulder at the screen, but took her hand in his. “I was. I tried. It wasn't working, and I thought I just needed a little break, so I started looking around some blogs for writing advice and I found this ad with a really good deal, and then I started winning. I think I'm pretty good at it, and I honestly really like it. Is that so bad?”

She didn't know what to say.

“Could you not love me if I wasn't a writer? Could you not love me as a poker player?” For just a moment, Joann saw herself in a casino, wearing a slinky red dress and possibly a fur wrap, looking on as he won fortunes so immense they carried stories of their own. She almost smiled at the idea, stupid as it was. She pushed the thoughts away.

“This is ridiculous,” she said, and walked away. She told herself that this was just a phase, and that he'd come around soon enough, and besides she had papers to grade. If time had shown her anything, it was the value of waiting. She was convinced there would be no story, and then there was Dylan. Then she was convinced they'd be too broke to be anything but miserable, and that too had come to pass. All she had to do was wait for whatever would happen next.

She was right about it being a phase—after a week like that he'd grown delirious, and lost

upwards of eight thousand dollars in less than two hours. He quit with fifty dollars more than he started with, bragging about showing a profit. But the end of poker turned out to be the beginning of refacing the kitchen counters, followed by selling board games on E-bay.

The only thing that didn't change was Dylan's sleeping pattern. No matter how hard she begged, or how many times she set an alarm to ring after she left for work in the morning, Dylan refused to relinquish nocturnalism. Almost every night, Joann curled up into a very small ball, and slept alone. She'd wake up in the morning to find him there with her, turned the other way, drooling.

At one point, while he was practicing to enter an upcoming video game tournament, she had flipped all the breakers in the power box, soaking the house in hot darkness. For a week straight, the house had buzzed with the sounds of electronic football, and now the silence gave weight to the air between them. She could sense him in the blackness, edging along the couch, reaching for her. "Something has to give," was all she got out before he reached out for her in the darkness and wrapped her in the heat of his skin. She had planned on calling it quits, right then, telling him he had to leave in the morning, but she found his closeness distracting.

"I'm sorry," he said, over and over again. It didn't sound true, and she hadn't even told him what she was angry about. She wanted to hit him, felt her slender pale fingers form a tight fist, felt her palm begin to sweat. But he didn't let go of her, kept his skin pressed against her. She thought about hitting him, thought also about screaming until her voice cracked, or just running out the door. But he would just grab her arms until she lost strength, or hug her till her breath was gone, or find her, find her no matter where she ran to. She knew he would, just like she knew that when he did it, she would want him to, that she would go back with him. The narrative would require it, and she knew she wouldn't do anything that might leave her deserving of an unhappy ending. She

pushed away, fumbling in the darkness, and went to their bedroom. She thought she heard him breathing in the doorway, but the sound faded away, and she fell asleep alone. He still entered the video game tournament and even won, but neglected to go to the finals as by then he was in the middle of—

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She'd gotten the idea the other day at her appointment. The doctor had said something about her need to avoid food borne illnesses, and Dylan, like always, couldn't resist making a joke. “Well then I should probably clean the fridge out huh?” he said.

The doctor—who clearly did not have any appliance caucuses in his backyard—gave Dylan a patronizing nod. “Yes, bacterial infections can often result in miscarriages, especially this early in your pregnancy.”

She was in tears when she told him that she had missed her period. He had hugged her so hard he lifted her feet off the ground, swinging her around like a rat in a terrier's jaw. The mere thought of something growing inside her made Joann's stomach knot up. She may not have had all her plans laid out, but she knew instinctively that a child, now, was not something that could make the final draft. It's a little parasite, she thought. It's attached itself to me, it's feeding off my blood supply. And Dylan was at the store, buying materials to build it a crib and repaint the office a bright yellow. He had already decided that if it was a girl, he was going to name her Fatima. Fatima Maude Ann Goodman-Rodriguez. The child would probably grow up to be just like its father.

She had imagined that after swallowing the thing, she would get an immense amount of satisfaction, having finally done something about her life. Instead, she could feel peristalsis slowly



edging the old yams down her digestive tract, still one tight chunk catching in her throat. She thought that by forcing it down immediately she wouldn't have to taste it, but now as she tracked its progress towards her stomach, every exhalation brought it through her nostrils. Her head spun and her mouth flooded with spit; she ran for the toilet.

The now brownish clod bobbed up and down, orbiting the edge of the bowl, mocking Joann as she stared helplessly from her knees. She heard the front door swing open.

“Where's my baby and my baby's baby? I have a surprise for you.” She weakly turned around and started looking for a towel to dry her mouth, and saw him walking towards her. His face was soft with menacing tenderness. “Did you get morning sick?”

Joann looked in his eyes and nodded feebly. He handed her a towel, scratched the top of her head, and went to the kitchen, returning with a glass of water and a quizzical expression. She drank thirstily as he watched. When she had gotten up, and straightened herself in front of the mirror, Dylan reached out and put his hand on the rise of her hip. “Joann,” he said, stepping behind her and rubbing her abdomen. “This is going to sound a little strange, but have you been eating old leftovers?”

Joann spun out of his arms and looked down. “Of course not.”

Dylan cocked his head to the side, cupped her chin in his hand and studied her facial features. “But it's on the counter with a spoon it.”

“Are you really accusing me of eating old food?” she heard herself saying. “I was trying to clean out the fridge, and the smell made me queasy.”

Dylan shrugged. “Okay,” he said, and leaned over her to flush the toilet. “Sorry baby. Anyways, I've got something for you,” he said and went bounding out to the car again. He was always so full of energy, she thought, dreading to think what deranged piece of baby equipment

Dylan had come across, and that she would now have to ooh and ah at appreciatively over.

Whatever it was fit behind his back. At least it was small, she thought.

“Close your eyes,” he said. “I just got this back from the print shop.” When she opened her eyes, she held a manuscript bound in black plastic, like a sales presentation. It was open to the two hundredth page.

“You?”

“Yup,” he said. “When I was moving the furniture out last night, I saw the typewriter, and I knew how it ended, so I finished it.”

She stared at him, confused. “How does it end?”

“Dylan has a baby,” he said, as if this should have been obvious to both of them for years. “I went ahead and took it to the Print Shop and had them run off a hundred copies for submission. I guess I should have had you get all the comma errors out first, though.” Joann looked at him, shocked speechless, unsure whether to cry. “Well don't just gawk at me, read it,” he said. “I'm going to bed; I've been up since Tuesday.” He left her sitting on the toilet seat, with the manuscript in her hands. She leafed through it backwards, half expecting to find blanks space somewhere in the middle. The second page from the front was titled in bold across the top: “DEDICATION.”

It said, “To Joann, naturally, without whom, I could never finish anything.”

## Taking it with You

The last house on today's list was at the end of a dead end street—not a cul-de-sac—the road stopped in the lawn, or where the lawn should be. Most of the grass had died under the shade of a scarred mesquite tree. The house had once been white, but was caked in dirt and had taken on the same slight rust coloration of everything else this far outside of town. Large clay flower pots and wide window boxes stood stacked against the front of the house, crowding the porch and the wicker swing that hung on long links of thin black chain. Ishmael, Slim, and Owen sat in the cab of the truck, finishing their cigarettes and soaking up the last of the air conditioning, watching the brightly colored weeds that had sprung up along the foundation.

"This is the one they told us about," said Slim, mumbling as he read to himself from the clipboard. Of the two categories of men who have adjectives for names, Slim was in the less fortunate—the ironic group. He was built like a can of beans, as were both his current and ex-wives, and all six of their collective children. "She died in there, and nobody found her till they came to evict her for taxes." A long pause. "Door should be open."

Every wall inside was wooden bookcases packed with trinkets, bric-a-brac, shadowboxes. One shelf proudly displayed a homemade rag doll that bore a striking resemblance to Jesus on the cross. Below that was a whiskey bottle in the shape of Elvis Presley, still in its commemorative box from 1966, sitting next to a scale model of the Eiffel Tower made entirely from beer can tabs. A poorly executed portrait of a pumpkin headed boy next to the snapshot it was painted from. A tiny model house inside a mason jar painted with picket fences. Ishmael's breathing became shallow and ragged, his eyes darting from thing to thing. There was also a smell, something warm that seemed to come from everywhere.

"What a bunch of shit," said Owen. He crossed the living room and headed for the kitchen.

He had been riding the junk truck for just over four months now, since just after he'd flunked out of community college. He had garbage bags with him and went straight for the refrigerator, which he started emptying with practiced unenthusiasm.

“Not so fast,” said Slim, pulling the dice from his pocket. The dice had been found a year ago in a house that had six beer kegs half buried in the dirt out front. There were no mattresses in the house, no furniture that wasn't also cinder blocks or milk crates. The former tenants had taken the front door knob with them, but they'd left behind the backgammon set with the ivory dice. Because the junk team made so many uncomfortable decisions, they used the dice more often than they did the wet-dry vac. Someone needed to sort through the shelves for things worth pawning, someone had to fight the rats and the roaches for what was left of the kitchen, and someone had to clean the stench out of the bathroom. The three men circled together, not making eye contact; only the dice spoke. Owen cursed his luck and went for the truck, while Slim walked into the kitchen. That made Ishmael in charge of clearing out the living room. He couldn't decide what to touch first.

Whoever the woman had been, she was a collector, something like Ishmael. But unlike his piles and stacks, the narrowing width of the hallway, every object in this house was perfectly organized, facing straight forward, evenly spaced on the wall to wall to wall shelves. They were more than divided, they were organized, coded—all the commemorative spoons in a diorama, the blue and red ones favored towards the right side. He knew there had to be a pattern to it, and he felt that if he could just stand and stare, if he had just a moment, it would come to him. He could almost hear it singing to him, and he felt his pulse jump. He closed his eyes, reopened them, and started to his work. He put the spoons in the keep pile.

Owen returned from the truck clothed in blue polyvinyl, wearing two vent masks one on

top of the other with a pair of over-sized scuba goggles. “A god-damned alligator” he said, shaking his head, shuffling towards the bathroom, trailing a roll of garbage bags and a shovel.

Up to that point, no one had looked in the bathroom, but the smell seeping through the drywall told them that the sheriff probably knew what he'd seen. Owen reached out and turned the handle, and the door swung silently. He took two steps into the room, coughed, sputtered, and then collapsed backwards, falling out of the bathroom and into the wall, dislodging a case of pig and angel figurines. He managed to make it to his knees before he started heaving, but forgot about the respirators. He clawed at his face, sending the masks flying, slinging bile over the carpet and walls. Slim stood up from the fridge, opened his mouth to swear, but stopped short. With a sigh, he reached for the dice, which were still on the kitchen counter, but Ishmael held his hand up. He gently took the cleaning supplies and garbage bags from Owen, and walked towards the bathroom, pulling a pair of gloves from his back pocket. Slim nodded a grateful thank you, kicked one of the two breathing masks back towards Owen, who was already moving towards cleaning up his own mess.

The junk crew cleaned twenty houses a week, which made him more tolerant of stink than most, but the smell that had casually been tugging at the back of his mind began to crowd all the other thoughts. It was surprising only in that it wasn't intolerable. Ishmael certainly didn't want to touch the alligator, and he certainly didn't want to break it into pieces that would fit inside a fifty-five gallon plastic drum. But he was curious. The job sheet and every single thing in the house pointed towards a single woman, an older lady, the sort with no family and no acquaintances, the sort who liked to engage grocery clerks in long unrequited conversations— and then there was this. There were a few swamps close enough—had she found the thing? Or had she bought it, brought it home in an ice chest in the back of the over-sized sedan in the driveway?

Would they mail an alligator? He flipped the light switch, and saw that the alligator, or what was left of it, had been abandoned in a tub half full of water. There was a small food bowl and water dish next to the tub, both of which had “Roxie” stenciled on them in black magic marker, little dots at the joints of every letter. Above these, a snap shot push-pinned to the wall. He could tell the picture was old because the alligator in it wasn't more than a foot in length. The creature dissolving in the tub was six times that size, and must have died the way it lived, with the end of its nose and its tail sticking out of the claw-foot tub.

He stared at the corpse in the tub, and the water it was slowly becoming, in awe of the staggering incomprehensibility, the decomposition and the white and purple wallpaper. He felt pretty sure that alligators lived a long time, and he wondered if she'd if she'd ever thought about this moment. If she was like most people, the ones that the junk crew cleaned up after on a weekly basis, the answer was no. They made their living being the answer to the question what now. Everyone assumes that things fade away, that the story ends when they're no longer telling it. They just leave, run away, who knows to where. He doubted it bothered them. But nothing ever goes away until someone comes in with a trash bag and a bottle of bleach. He closed his eyes, broke the water with his hand, felt around, and pulled the drain plug. The loud sucking noise broke the silence, and Ishmael whipped open the first of several trash bags.

Ninety minutes and a half gallon of industrial strength cleaner later, Roxie had been reduced to a dull brown stain that a future buyer might confuse for hard water. Ishmael turned his attention to the rest of the bathroom. He took the picture off the wall. The reptile in it seemed tiny now, even cute in an impish way. She looked to be smiling. How had the old woman not known? Standing behind the camera, could it have made sense that it would stay small? Was this intended as a catch and release scenario, or was this, the curved spine and the cracked tail, always a part of

the plan?

He liked to think about the why of things he was cleaning; it gave him something to think about other than what his fingers were touching. It also gave him a good excuse to take things home with him. Slim and Owen didn't mind, as they couldn't help but have their own collections. Slim's property featured both a summer and a winter pool table; Owen had 510 inches of television screen in a two bedroom house. Of course Ishmael took more than they did, but he told them that he sold most of it on the internet. Since this wasn't true, he was trying to bring less home these days, but he could always find a reason to bend the rules, usually because something was unique—a word he thought about a lot. It was a perfect word, in that you couldn't add anything to it; there is no very unique, no mostly or partially. It either was or it was not, and lots of things, most really, could qualify. He might not need a dog food bowl, as he had three already and didn't care for pets. But who could throw away Roxie's dish, particularly when you considered the woman, who ever she was, considered her at the store, wondering what kind of food bowl an alligator might, who could throw it away when you thought about her stenciling the name on, the alligator splashing happily nearby.

He heard glass breaking through the wall. He slipped the photograph into his coveralls.

“Well, I'll be goddamned.” It was Slim from the next room over. He was hunched over a broken ceramic animal clutching a small slip of lined yellow paper. When he'd dropped it, he said, the paper had fell out. It read “This pig used to be Miss Ruth Irene Henson's, but she died and they give it to me, on account of we worked together at the nursing home.” Ishmael read the note through twice, didn't want to let go when Slim tried to hand it to Owen.

Slim seemed to notice the look on his face. “So you think it was worth something?”

Value in the general sense of the term hadn't occurred to Ishmael. Of course he knew that

many of his things—the bear skin rug, some of the vases, most of the candlesticks—would have brought a reasonable sum. This particular ceramic pig had been cheap when it was new, but he saw the way that Slim's eyes twisted when he said 'worth;' it gave him an idea.

Ishmael usually wasn't much for talking on the job. Slim and Owen took to jawing about sports or what kind of sandwich they'd had the other day, and where the good deal on motor oil was at, but he usually stayed out of these little exchanges. Sometimes, without even meaning to, he could go a week without saying anything that couldn't be communicated in a yawn. So when he did talk, like that day, when he explained the idea of provenance, they tended to listen.

Provenance, he told them, still clutching the yellow note, that's what it was about. Having something was one thing, but knowing where it came from, that made it special. It wasn't just stuff, it had history, and history meant money. If there were more of these notes like he thought, there could be a fortune here. It might not look like much, he said, but buyers loved this. Tack was a commodity, and that meant the three of them might be rich. If he could get these things on to his auction site, they could all make a killing.

It didn't take much convincing. It was a given for the junk men that they threw away more in a day than they were paid in a week. There was a fortune right in front of them, and they knew it. They kept what they wanted and pawned what they could, but trying to keep even a tenth part of the valuables out of the trash was infeasible—there was just too much. Still, even though they almost never acted on it, all of them, even Ishmael, liked to imagine finding a way to wring something from that wasted river of money. Before Ishmael had finished explaining about the auction fees and how getting the money might take a while, Slim and Owen were nodding at each other, packing knickknacks into boxes, stacking them carefully near the gate of the dump truck.



Since there was more to keep today than throw away, they went to Ishmael's house before they went to the landfill. They unloaded their catch and spread it out across the neglected lawn, then leaned against the side of the truck surveying, applying themselves studiously to cigarettes. Though he knew that it would never happen, it was probably true that most of this could have been sold. It was all dingy, yes, and a few things were cracked, but there was a charm to it all. Laid out across the lawn, you almost couldn't help but see potential rolling off it like waves.

The old woman, whom Ishmael had started to refer to as the collector, had an eye. He wondered how much money he would have to give Slim and Owen, what their 'cut' might be, and how he was going to come up with it.

Plan or no plan, Owen and Slim still felt obliged to take what they wanted and stack it off to the side. Owen's pile was two signed baseballs and the old woman's television. Slim had more, a silver teapot they'd found in a chest upstairs, a box of costume jewelry, four Elvis LPs, and the portrait of the pumpkin headed boy. The rest of it swarmed the yard, made the house look small.

They offered to help him get it inside, but Ishmael waved them off. They both spent a moment sweeping their heads across the long aisle of things they'd just laid out on the grass, eying Ishmael cautiously. It would take one man hours to move this much on his own. Scrambling, he said that they were letting him out of the trip to the dump, it was only fair.

The truth was that Ishmael wasn't sure how much of this could make it through the door. He'd been trying to reduce lately, but it was hard. But for now, he didn't let that ride on him. Even if there wasn't a place for it yet, there would be soon enough, after he rearranged enough. In the man time, he had research to do. As soon as the truck was done throwing dirt up from the driveway, he began to slit open boxes and pry cases apart. There were more of the little notes, one in almost everything. I knew it, he said out loud, giddy and unthinking.

He began to piece together details about the collector, who had one daughter, and who didn't care for cats, but kept birds in a golden wire cage that hadn't survived. Even broken and reassembled in piles on his lawn, the collection spoke deeply about how her mind worked, the pattern to her life, the deliberate tone of the notes. His favorite, like most of them, was written in slanted pencil. It read "These spoons were collected by me, Eula Mae Jergens, beginning in 1938. All spoons are from the place they say they are, except for the ones about Mexico. I didn't go there, but my daughter Henrietta did, and she brought me those in 1963 or 1964, when Johnson was president anyhow."

Of all the things and stories he'd collected, not once had he ever wanted to be a part of those narratives; it was enough to watch and listen. But Eula Mae Jergens and her perfectly arranged shadowboxes and her tiny little notes in illegible handwriting had been different. In Eula Mae, he saw something of himself, but better, more clarified. Besides, so often Ishmael and the junk crew cleaned up after mistakes. A couple of kids find each other and the money for a deposit at just the right moment, only to run away four months later, too much in a hurry to wait for the load of blue jeans in the washing machine. Then in came Ishmael, with a trash can, while they, whoever they were, ran off, left all of it behind them.

Eula Mae was different. She hadn't run away from anything. She had been writing those notes for forty years at least, had found those things, and loved them. She had made something from them; her house and her things and her life were beautiful, and she deserved better, so Ishmael had bathed, called into work, and spent half the morning comparing the stack of yellow notes with his collection of phone books.

The next day, Ishmael found himself driving his pickup down a long country highway. He had combed his long curly hair, trapped it in a rubber band. He was wearing a permanent press

polyester dress shirt, and square toed brown loafers. His fingertips, wrapped tightly around the steering wheel of the pickup, were red and raw from scrubbing. Everything he'd taken from Mrs. Jergen's house was packed into boxes in the back of the truck; on the seat beside him were a map and a several dozen sheets of faded yellow paper.

The house in question was in a new subdivision outside of a small town. Each of the houses in this neighborhood conformed to one of three floor plans, was covered by shingles of one of three muted colors. A short woman in her fifties answered the door. She had an expensive looking haircut, wore rope sandals and delicate silver reading glasses on a chain around her neck. "Can I help you?" she asked Ishmael, a slight flash of worry in her eye.

He asked and she confirmed that she was in fact Henrietta Jergens, daughter to Eula Mae. Ishmael breathed deeply. This was hard for him. He'd practiced on the way up, but it didn't keep him from tripping stumbling over his words. The woman eyed him impatiently and he spat it out, how he worked for a company that clears junk away, that he was called to a house yesterday that had to be her mother's that her mother was dead. When he rehearsed this scene, she had gasped at this point, put her hand on her mouth. Ishmael left a pause for these things, but Henrietta took the news with a blink.

"Anyways, my crew got sent up to clean her place out. I...I... I found these notes in things," he said, and shoved the stack of papers in front of him. "I tried to save as much as I could. I know it's not much, but I felt like her family would want to know, would want to keep—"

Stop, she said. There had been a mistake Her mother had a disease, something Ishmael couldn't pronounce. "She was sick. She could never throw anything away, never. We tried everything, but she kept telling us we didn't know what she had. She kept telling us she'd be rich someday." The family had tried to step in, but Eula Mae wouldn't have it. At the end, right before

they cut off contact, the local kids had made a game out of it, daring each other to ring the doorbell and hand something to The Collector Lady. She always took it, no matter what, and kept it. "I didn't have a choice," she said, and shoved the notes back into Ishmael's chest.

Ishmael's mouth worked, but no sound came out. "But I saved a lot of good stuff. There's still her spoon collection, and the Elvis whiskey bottle and—"

"No," said Henrietta. "All that's trash." She closed the door, leaving Ishmael staring at the spindly handwriting. He turned to walk back to his truck, and heard the door swing back open.

"Excuse me," said Henrietta, "I hate to be a bother. but can I get the phone number for that company you mentioned. There's a bunch of my husband's family's things in the garage that are just sitting around not doing anything."

When he got back home, it was nearly dark and he almost didn't notice that the junk truck was crowding his driveway. Slim and Owen stood leaning against the truck, smoking. They looked up when they saw Ishmael's truck pull in. "Hey Ish," said Slim, with a cartoonish grin. In his hands was the portrait from Mrs. Jergen's place. They wanted to come in.

Ishmael's eyes scanned frantically from one man to the other, and then to the painting. He pushed past them, making for his door.

Slim laid a heavy hand on Ishmael's shoulder. Was this, he asked, how Ishmael treated his friends, not to mention his business partner. He grinned again, the smile looking out of place and crowded next to the thick mustache. Owen stepped away, not looking Ishmael in the eyes. We have to talk, he said.

Slim turned the little portrait around to show the back. The corner had been ripped away, and in his other hand Slim had a slim roll of dirty money. "Two hundred dollars," he said. They just wanted to look was all, he said, just look so that they could know if there was more. They had

a right after all, they said.

Ishmael looked at the two of them. Their eyes were wide and hungry. He wondered briefly, what would happen if he said no, if they would force their way in, what they would do then,

when they found that the living room door couldn't open more than a few feet, when they saw the hall way. Even if they walked away, which seemed doubtful, all they had to do was decide to hate him, lie to the truck's owners, get him fired. Most of it wouldn't even be a lie.

He walked to the tailgate of his pickup and motioned for the two to follow them. With the speed of professionals, they had every box out of the truck and open on the lawn.

Owen and Slim started pulling things out of boxes, prying up corners of paintings and photographs. When looking gingerly was unrewarded, they started checking more and more thoroughly. Slim smashed the box of spoons against the ground, pawing through the splinters for anything of value. Owen used a gold-handled jack knife to disembowel the stuffed Christ. Little bits of everything started to cover the lawn and the gravel. Ish watched the pile of collected value start to shrink, the apron of trash and scraps begin to grow. To them, to most he reckoned, this was not a remarkable moment. By then, the two of them were smashing things earnestly against the ground, hardly stopping to look through the wreckage before turning to more loot.

But it was just more junk, and soon enough no one, not even Ishmael, could argue. He turned away, and instead watched the last of the daylight filter slowly through the limbs of a willow, fingering the yellow notes that were still in his pocket. Fall was coming. It would be cold soon, and then soon enough warm again. "When y'all get done out here, there's some more of it inside." Ishmael said, "Here take this," he said, and tossed Slim the door key. He mumbled an excuse, something about meeting a friend, and he climbed back in his truck, turned around in his

yard, and left Slim and Owen breaking things in the tall grass. Ishmael turned towards the freeway and wondering where it was that everyone else was running to. He waited for an overwhelming lightness to come crashing down on him.

## Transition to Flowers

Jamie Deeds sat in his office conducting a cost-benefit analysis regarding staying for the rest of his shift at the temp office and throwing himself from the fifth story window. Nominally, the decision seemed obvious—but, as he'd learned when pursuing the business degree that seemed so important at the time, discovering creative alternatives made analysis a vital part of the Process of Making Decisions.

“Mr. Deeds.” There was an intercom, but the secretary chose instead to arch her voice over the short wall where it landed on Jamie like sleet. “Ms. Dorsett to see you.”

Using the intercom in what he hoped was a deliberate manner, Jamie called the girl in. The name Charlotte Dorsett was unfamiliar, but he recognized the young woman as soon as he saw her, or rather he recognized her breasts. They were enormous, and hung low and freely in a satiny buttoned blouse. They were not now and looked as though they may never have been encased in a bra. Strictly speaking these breasts were unattractive, but there was something uncomfortably enticing about them, like stumbling across the wrong kind of pornography, finding yourself thinking “those are nice feet.”

Jamie felt small as soon as he thought this because that was the first thing he noticed about Charlotte, her tits, and not the five foot tall wrought iron floor lamp with the iridescent glass shade which she had brought, along with eight grocery sacks bulging with clothes and tacky housewares, into the office with her. She spent one hundred forty seconds arranging her belongs, took a seat, and said promptly “Mr. Deeds I've come for my position.”

“I'm sorry?”

“Last week I was told, by you personally I might add, that something would turn up in a week to ten days. Nine days have passed have they not?” She spoke with a thick southern accent,

the elegant sort that devalued rs and let vowels rise like yeasted rolls. Her hair hung in greasy ropes. She spoke with such conviction that in spite of it all Jamie found himself rechecking her file.

“We don't have anything right now,” he said, watching her thick eyebrows join and separate. “Check back with us soon. We should have something in a week to ten days.” He noticed that her eyes blinked at slightly uneven speeds. It bothered Jamie that she seemed to believe him, that he was lying, that he did have a job he could give her, could in fact put her to work that day. But company policy required that jobs only go to the loudest and most frequent applicants. He wanted to tell her this, and also that the jobs he gave out were never enough to get ahead, only enough to get by, and then only for a brief, brief while. But instead of saying these things, Jamie stared at her with his lips held just slightly apart, and waited for her to get the point. This took time, and for a while it was a standoff between the girl and his facial features, which would move first. Her left hand finally reached for the lamp, the gesture involuntary and nervous. He dropped his glance, closed his teeth.

“That's a nice lamp,” he offered.

She wrapped her long fingers around the cord. Jamie noticed that the stem of the lamp was not only graceful and dangerously thin, but carved and molded in the form of some water bird—a heron maybe—wings tucked, feet extended, mouth surrounding but not yet capturing the tail of a fish. “It's real,” she whispered.

The edges of the shade glimmered in greens and browns, stylized tree trunks studded with impossibly tiny lizards. As the trees climbed the lamp, the leaves and lizards gave way to tulips, daisies, and finally roses and lilies set into each other, woven like a parquet floor.

“It's not for sale,” said Charlotte. Jamie realized that he'd been staring and that she'd been



watching him stare. Her eyes felt hot on his forehead. He looked down at his desk.

“Listen,” he said to his blotter, unsure at the time what he was really doing. “Can I give you my number?”

“I said it's not for sale,” said Charlotte, and she got up quickly, started fussing with her belongings.

“Oh no, of course, I mean” Jamie let his words trail off into a mumble, hoping that this would at least be the end of things.

He watched her eyes cut to the carpet. Her hand released the lamp, grabbed at the fabric of her slacks just above the knee. “I suppose you're right. Desperate times,” she sighed, and stuck her hand out, leaving it there, waiting.

Jamie's lips moved, but he gave them no words to form. He thought about explaining himself more clearly, but was afraid that would upset what felt like progress, so instead he wrote his number on the back of his card and passed it to her. She left without looking back, appearing dignified in the process even as it took her two trips to get through the narrow office door. Jamie watched through the crack in two wall segments as she waited for the elevator, then he turned and stared out the window until he saw her come into view, jaywalk, and then wait to catch a bus. He couldn't be sure at the distance, but it looked as though her lips were moving, though she was alone on the street. Jamie wondered hopefully if she was talking to or about him.

With her gone, an itching kind of quiet set over the office, and Jamie looked down at the yellow pad in front of him, the neatly labeled columns. On the one hand, there was clearly little upside to the window, which was wide and in all likelihood very thick, yielding a high chance of what seemed the worst kind of failure. Further, the window looked out over the Cincinnati Trade Center, an oddly shaped building pocked with rust which Jamie avoided unless absolutely

necessary. His mother had imbued him with certain pieces of wisdom, things like “Know your limitations.” While the window did have a certain comforting air of permanence, Jamie was terrified of how much regret his mind could squeeze into five stories falling.

The trouble, of course, was that the other two columns, the ones labeled 'benefit' in neat block lettering, were both equally empty, making the paper look lopsided, like an elaborate pulley system.

Jamie's benefits most strictly speaking included a meager salary, an office with walls that gave up before they met the ceiling, and a boxy apartment on College Hill. If he were presented with a consumer survey asking him to rank his job satisfaction, which he had not been though he would have enjoyed it, he would bubble in either Poor or Unsatisfactory, or perhaps both, though this would most likely upset whoever it was that was in charge of the surveys, as it might cause the machine to malfunction so the whole stack had to be started over.

Temp work was one of the last rocks to cling to before the deluge of unemployment and homelessness. Some were only passing through, young college students who seemed to be flirting with poverty out of some misguided sense of adventure, looking at the two-day-trade- show-data-entry-no-lunch-breaks gigs as a postmodern extreme sport, the last word in irony. Even these upset Jamie, with their tight pants and their hope.

Yet the hipster crowd made up only a small portion of his, he resisted the word, clientele. Most found themselves at this last juncture due less to their own poor choices, and more to the cruelty of luck. Unlike the slumming college students, of whom Jamie was vaguely jealous, the others kept him up at night with their gaping stares. Some managed to claw their way back to paying taxes and having phone numbers, but most simply slipped over, became unusable.

Jamie's job was to discriminate between those who were still competent and those that were

not. Because they had no security guard, and because he was a large man, it fell to him to pry loose those who resisted categorization. Earlier today he'd had to tell a mother of four that a permanent address was a prerequisite to employment, that there was nothing he could do.

He took another look at the window, then threw his worksheet in the trash. He began with a fresh page, writing "Immediate Action Items," which was another thing he'd learned about at the Executive MBA program.

He wrote 'Find a new job,' considered crossing it out, settled for adding a question mark. He strongly suspected that a change of venue would have little or no effect on the situation. Here, at least, he knew when to clinch. Moreover, he was probably only qualified to work at another temp agency. At any new job, he would be stuck doing much of the same work, probably for still less money, and possibly while suffering the indignity of an even smaller office, or a chair without arms.

He considered writing 'Vacation,' but he knew his wasn't due for another eight months, and that "Hope and worry were kissing cousins," this being another of his mother's favorite sayings. He wrote down 'get laid,' crossed it out, seriously considered girlfriend question mark, settled finally on 'sex.'

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She called at 1:40 in the morning three days later. He agreed to pay for a cab. Though he'd been in bed, counting backwards, he got up as soon as she called, dressed, made the bed, considered putting on cologne or jazz, deciding against both.

The apartment was the same shape as Jamie's office, and like his office it was designed to accommodate activities intended for a larger space. The four feet nearest the back wall

impersonated a kitchen, twenty four foot-square stick-on tiles applied in two equal rows alongside a miscalibrated stove and a shallow sink. The couch had been his mother's, as had the coffee table, the bookshelf, and the lion's share of Jamie's housewares and home goods: the television stand, the good and the bad china, even the knickknacks in the built-in —mostly decorative flatware depicting tourist destinations that neither he nor Mrs. Deeds had ever visited in person.

He thought about moving the stacks of clean and dirty clothes, his tools, his record collection. But organization was counterproductive for Jamie. Stacks and shelves and alphabetizing worked like camouflage, so he opted instead to leave things where they were. For him, the floor was a very low shelf, and that functionality gave him some small pleasure.

He could tell from her knock that she was drunk. The first was too soft, the second far too loud, no rhythm at all. When he opened the door, she was gripping the frame, swaying, her possessions spilled out across the threshold onto the hall carpet. He brought her and her things inside and helped her to the plaid couch. Leading her into the room, he found that her skin was hot, the flesh slick to the touch.

He said, “Can I get you something to drink?”

She smiled as her eyes fought in their sockets to find him. “That,” she said “would be wonderful.” The last word spread out like a river. He went to the kitchen, started wrestling with the ice tray.

“So,” said Charlotte, “Listen. Fifty is a fair price and we both know it or I wouldn't be here. But I am in a...peculiar situation, and I should think haggling is beneath us both. So why don't we just call it twenty and be done with it.”

His breath caught in his throat. He'd never paid for sex before, but then again the price was remarkably fair. And she was also right that haggling in this situation was certainly worth

avoiding. But he needed to think. “Twenty?” he heard himself ask.

“Come now Mr. Deeds, we both know it's worth twice that.”

It, he thought. He wondered how often she did this, and only then realized what she was talking about. “Oh,” said Jamie, and he briefly considered emptying his savings account to save having to explain himself.

“It's not really the lamp I'm interested in,” he told the whiskey bottle. He thought that he heard her turn to stare at him, imagined her with a loose and drawling smile. His face flushed.

He made his way to the couch, but found her slipped over, eyes closed, oblivious. He set the drinks down and tried to rouse her by brushing her cheek. Her shallow, regular breathing didn't change, even when he shook her shoulder. His eyes wandered to her chest, rising and falling with her breath, a surprising drama to the whole business. He wanted badly to touch her, and his hand raised slightly, moved in her direction, then froze. His mind flooded with thoughts of how late it was and the corporate fraternization policy. It bothered him significantly that morality, as he perceived it, seemed to have nothing to do with his restraint. He brought her a blanket.

The next morning he stumbled through his morning routine. He startled himself when he saw Charlotte, cocooned in the orange afghan, snoring in the early light. It didn't seem right to leave her there. It took only the smallest amount of imagination to see Charlotte emptying the house, taking the toilet brush and the mustard in the fridge, not to mention his savings in the alligator cookie jar, waddling down the street with it all, cramming it on to the Downtown Express. But the light through the window feathered across her face, and he noticed her round full lips, how they seemed to pout even hanging open. Jamie liked how casual she looked, liked she belonged on that couch under the knit orange wool. Besides he was late already.

He worried the whole day, but not that she would rob him. Somehow, coming home and

finding everything gone would be manageable. He was more concerned that everything would be exactly as he left it except for her. He pulled her file looking for a phone number, but none was given, so he leafed through her resume. It listed enough experience to make her ten years older than he thought she looked. If this was true, and most resumes Jamie looked at were not, she had a college degree, had worked as a bank teller for years, then a waitress, then as a temp with another agency. He called his own number twice. When the machine clicked on after the fourth ring, Jamie hung up before he had to hear his own voice. She's there, he told himself, she just doesn't want to answer a stranger's phone.

From the hall outside his apartment, he could smell hot metal, something uncomfortably organic like wet earth. He heard the playful swaying of a jazzy clarinet, and he opened the door to Charlotte, who had her back to him, busy over the tiny stove.

“Well hello there,” she said, turning from a smoking skillet. Her hair, washed and conditioned, rolled in soft waves down her shoulders. He noticed that it wasn't just brown, but casually reddish, something like very expensive wood. She had on earrings, over-sized jiggling golden triangles, and a brown floral dress that clung to her less flattering proportions but that forced her breasts together, creating a thick black line between them. She was smiling, wearing his mother's apron, holding a spatula, the other hand against her hip.

“Dinner won't be ready for another minute,” she said. “Why don't you make yourself comfortable?”

Jamie sat down on his own sofa, looking around the room, noticing casually that she'd ruined everything. The comic books and magazines he had stacked on either side of the sofa were missing, as was his tool set, which should have been spread out on the floor next to the television stand. You cleaned, he said.

She smiled over her shoulder, the big earrings swinging like a pendulum in a hall. “You're supposed to say thank you.”

He apologized to his hands, took a deep breath, realized that the apartment was filling with acrid smoke.

“Come and get it.”

She had set a place for each of them with his mother's fine china, pink with golden rims and hand painted roses and tulips. He had never eaten on these plates in his life—to his knowledge they may have never been used for their nominal purpose. He stared at the soft painted center of his plate, the bright strokes meant to suggest pistil and stamen. Charlotte set down something square over the flower.

Bon Appetit, she said, pouring wine from a jug into a pair of coffee cups.

Hoping he sounded curious and excited, he asked what it was.

My specialty she said, picking hers up and taking a bite from the corner. She chewed with relish, but the food made a crunching noise between her teeth.

He decided that the outside was almost certainly bread, and that the yellow oozing out over the china was a cheese. He took a bite. The outside was burnt, but the inside was cold to the tooth. There was an uncomfortable smoothness punctuated by chewy flecks that clung to the top of his mouth. He looked into the sandwich, and saw that the flesh of the burger was dark paste studded with largely whole pinto beans.

“I guess I should have told you I was a vegetarian,” she said.

He realized she was watching him eat, tried to smile as he chewed. He took a large sip of wine. He said it was great, asked again what it was.

“Oh well, it's mostly beans if you can believe that, and I use egg to hold it together.”

Jamie fought the urge to pick at his teeth, took another large bite, tried to imagine what enjoying this would look like, the bean and the pasteurized prepared cheese product that pooled in the space between his lips and gums. She took his single-mindedness as a compliment, and politely took up the slack in the conversation. Charlotte could talk easily for long stretches, seemed to prefer soliloquy, rambling from folk music to politics to anecdotes taken from movies to mildly bragging about her education. When she related a conversation, she took on both characters, whipping her head from right to left as she switched from one speaker to the next. At first she was hard to follow, but then he realized that there was a sort of pattern to it, in that she tended to repeat certain words and phrases like choruses. He didn't interrupt her, only nodding and chewing dutifully, drinking mug after mug of the oily wine.

After dinner, he scrubbed while she rinsed and dried. Their hands touched idly as he passed plates and pans from one sink to the other, and Jamie imagined this a repeatable situation. He wanted badly to brush his teeth, and she had already told him the same joke twice that night, but Charlotte could be a nice girl, a justifiable addition to a benefits column.

With the dishes finished, she sat on the couch and Jamie boldly sat on the cushion directly next to her. He left his hands clutching his knees. Charlotte turned towards him. He asked her if she had a place to sleep.

Charlotte's brows bent down, she inched away from him on the couch.

Jamie felt the wine clouding his thought train. He reached for her hand, but she pulled it away. His pulse throbbed in his temples and wrists. He looked down at his shoes with his cheeks in his hands, the beans and wine tumbling in his gut. "You could stay here," he said.

Charlotte took his head in her hands, pulling him forcefully to look at her. He noticed she had on a good deal of makeup, and then she pressed her lips over his, forcing her tongue



between his teeth.

Afterwards they lay in the dark, her head on the thatch of his chest hair. Jamie felt oddly sober, shocked straight by the foreign sense of pleasure. He stroked her hair. She spoke in soft, low tones, and he had to lean in to hear that she was talking about the lamp. She told him about pull strings, and claw feet, and the way that the artisans didn't use mechanical grinders but instead shaped each fragment by hand from broken shards. The pattern on the lamp was particularly obscure, made for a scant few months 105 years ago.

It was said by some to be the pinnacle of the work of a known genius. The delicate pattern, more like weaving than welding, both made and broke the lamp. They found their way into the drawing rooms and parlors of the last of the Victorians. But the intricate design that made them so desirable also proved their downfall. The greatest craftsmen in the world could only hope to reproduce the design, more solder than glass, once in four tires. Even those successful attempts lead dangerous lives—too intricate to live in the real world. Less than five percent of the shades left department stores fully intact. Despite the intense demand and a considerable markup, the lamps could not be made profitable, and so they were discontinued soon after they began. So rare were these lamps now that they had no true name of their own, were known only by what they were next to, called 'Transitional' or 'Prefloral.'

He felt sleep pulling him down and in, but then she rolled over. Her weight pressed against his side. “So how did you get to be the only single man in the world with a commemorative plate collection?”

They were his mother's, he told her.

She burrowed deeper into him. “My mother died; she burned our house down. That lamp is the only thing of hers I have.”

“My mother isn't dead,” said Jamie. “She started swearing at kids in the street, calling the cops on the garbage truck. She's in a long term facility now.”

Jamie felt her eyes on him in the darkness, and he fought to think of something to say, a sweet thing. But he decided he'd progressed enough to day, and so he focused on the ceiling until he no longer knew if his eyes were open or closed. As Jamie drifted off, he felt Charlotte pulling away from him, moving to the other corner of the small bed.

The next morning Jamie snapped his alarm off before it rang. When he got out of the shower, he found Charlotte making coffee in his bathrobe. He kissed her while he was putting on his tie, and she smiled. He told her that she thought she should get the lamp appraised, that if it was real it could be worth far more than she thought.

When she agreed and he'd told her where the antiques shop was, he walked to the cabinet and took out the cookie jar, removed the stack of twenty dollar bills. He counted off a few, then stopped, rippled quickly through the stack, his lips forming numbers.

“Oh honey,” said Charlotte. “I should have told you earlier, but I needed money for the groceries for last night.” She wouldn't meet his eyes. “And you did say you liked my new dress.”

A sick dark feeling crept over Jamie. Charlotte looked as though she was on the verge of tears. He thought about the previous night, and the window at work, and her lamp. He walked straight to her, put her hand on his cheek and kissed her. “Don't worry about it.”

He set the money she would need on the counter and gave her the number for the antiques shop. He left for work. He felt good about his decision all the way to the parking lot. By the time he was entering the expressway, he heard his mother's voice, not quoting a proverb but screaming without words like the last time he'd seen her at the nursing home. He doubled back to the house.

He ran up the three flights of stairs and found her washing his coffee mug. She looked over

her shoulder at him, hair hanging in her face. She was beautiful in profile. He was wheezing from the stairs, red in the face. He started to pant an explanation.

She poured him a glass of water and waited.

“I didn't, I couldn't—.” He realized he didn't know why he'd come home at all. Somehow, he was sure that the house would be empty, that Charlotte and the money would be gone. But she was here, still. He felt the tightness in his chest release, and he sat on the couch. She came to him, sat down and took his hand.

“It's work, isn't it?” she said. Her eyes were bright and large. Not knowing what else to do, he nodded, and let her pull him to her chest. “You don't have to go back,” she said. “It's okay.” He relaxed into her, felt the heat of her skin, the softness of her body. She watched over him and dragged her finger across his temple in a lazy circle. She was right. It was okay. It had to be. The sense of nervousness that had been billowing over him for what seemed like forever drifted away. He reached up and kissed her once, then retreated back to her chest, curling his legs on to the couch.

They stayed that way until the phone rang. Jamie jumped at the sound, walked over to the small wooden phone table instinctively. But he knew that it was his secretary calling and he decided not to answer. But he also knew that once the machine picked up, she would call again, and then perhaps his regional manager; he knew they would leave a message each time, first concerned and perhaps then angry. With a sigh he reached for the table.

He stooped down behind it, unplugged the phone at the wall, cutting it off mid-ring, dampening the echo.

Then, since he was next to it, he reached over and plugged in Charlotte's lamp, which was near the phone table along with the rest of her possessions. They would find places for her

things, he thought. He turned the switch on the lamp. Light cascaded across the room in a dozen shades of brown and green and gold. The tiny slivers of glass shimmered like jewels underwater, throwing dancing shadows across the sacks of Charlotte's belongings, the threadbare carpet they sat on, across Charlotte. The light filled the apartment, added cheer to the peeling wall paper, made the room seem warm and cozy and crowded.

## Profile in Courage

Lee Harvey Oswald crashes into the bar, his eyes scanning frantically from face to face. He wears a revolver in a side holster, his pocket bulging with ammunition. The expression on his face is double-sided; it's obvious that he takes himself very seriously, and yet there's something clownish in the way his eyebrows knit together as he peers through the smoke. Lee finds what he's looking for easily—I'm not hiding. I'm sitting at the far end of the bar, sipping a daiquiri because they're my favorite drink, even though I can't stand them. Lee approaches from behind, his hand twitching at his side. He pulls up the chair beside me.

"They've done it, Jack," he says, and slaps a piece of yellow office paper on the bar. He starts talking too fast, saying the word really a lot, asking me if I can believe it.

I tell him to calm down, and I order Lee a beer. "Don't worry," I say, "Time and the world do not stand still. Change is the law of life."

This calms him down; it always does when I talk in quotes. That one was from a speech I gave in Frankfurt on the 25th of June, 1963. Of course I didn't give it the first time, that was Jack Prime, the original President Kennedy. But my wife Karen and I, we took a vacation to Germany last year, and I snuck away while she was sleeping—we have a no work on vacation rule—and recited it, same exact location. The original Assembly Hall at Paulskirche had been demolished, but I got as close as I could, and I still said every word. It wasn't quite right, but I felt good about it, even though Karen found out later and was pissed or maybe none too pleased, as Jack prime might have said.

Lee seems cheered up a little, he's taking it better. He's ordered a second beer, and he's drinking it in quick successive gulps, but that's almost par for the course by now. I know I'll have to take him home, come get him in the morning, make sure he clocks in on time. He's getting to be

a handful, but since Cathy left with the kids, it's been hard to tell him to stop. I try to feel better that Lee feels better, but we're both getting laid off next month. I want some quote to cheer me up, but all that comes to mind is this: There are three things which are real; God, Laughter, and Human Folly. The first two are beyond our comprehension so we must do what we can with the third.

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At the Grassy Knoll, it is always November 22, 1963. It is also almost always about to be 12:30; shows run four times a day, always on the half hour. Perhaps because of the sheer weight of repetition, many of my fellow employees don't take their jobs seriously. I'm not talking about any of the principal characters of course. The Conallys, Jacqueline, Lee, Zapruder—all extreme professionals. But it's difficult to find proper extras, people willing to play the part of say, John Darnell, a reporter in the passenger seat of the Chevrolet convertible 17 cars behind the front of the motorcade.

In the old days, when we were still historical reenactors and not Hollywood cast-offs in old suits, there was a method behind this. The man who was playing John Darnell would go deep. He would know that Darnell worked for WBAP, a radio station that was not from Dallas, but from Fort Worth; he would know that even then radio was losing its audience and that John's job was perpetually in doubt. He would know that people from Fort Worth are almost always uncomfortable about being in Dallas, and he would let these things hang on his face as he sat in the topless purple Chevy, sweating in a four piece suit.

The reenactor would have been to Darnell's house, interviewed his grandchildren, asked if he could try on Darnell's wedding ring. He would have spent hours scouring antique shops and online auctions for just the right pair of vintage Crosby square-toed loafers—in taupe. When

he got out of bed in the morning and put those loafers on, he became John Darnell. He ate John Darnell's breakfast, fantasized about John Darnell's wife, wondered about John Darnell's stock portfolio.

We had a word for this: period rush. Being in the right place, riding in the right car, wearing the right underwear. If you did it all, and you did it right, I really believe that some part of you gets to travel through time, and this is beautiful—the crowds prove it.

The people in the audience— the thousands who pay to sit in auditoriums hidden behind the hollowed faces of buildings, the ones who pay even more to watch from the crowd on the sidewalk, the athletes and statesmen who watch from the Texas Book Depository or the Grassy Knoll itself— none of them would ever know about John Darnell, his wife, his stock portfolio. But when that 18th car rolls past the unseen amphitheaters, someone amongst the thousands of gaping, crying tourists, sees a tired middle aged man ride by in a car with no top, holding his head in his wrinkled hands. Someone will see and for them, that is what makes it worth the lines and the fifteen dollar bottled water.

But now management hires temps, tourists, bums—anyone willing to stand in the sun for just above minimum wage. Now, the extra who sits in John Darnell's seat (who doesn't even think he's John Darnell) does not slowly weigh his head in his fingers, does not shed a single tear— wondering if his stocks will be okay and if this means he'll have to spend more time in Dallas. Instead, when his car files by the stands and the Book Depository, the extra in Darnell's seat stares straight ahead, wearing sunglasses that haven't been invented yet. His head tilts slightly to the left. He yawns.

I understand managements' position, I really do. The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy is a story that takes thousands to tell. Motorcade participants, passersby, children to wave

tiny American flags long after everyone else is screaming and crying. Prop managers, tailors, museum guides, concessionists, valets, a full battalion of production assistants. Some sites, like the Battle of Little Big Horn, have resorted to using scaled down armies, not being able to afford all 1800 Sioux and Arapaho. Now, Custer is swarmed by a measly 200 souls. Where's the sense of impending doom? How can anything less than the truth reflect scale, disaster, tragedy? Plus I hear attendance is way down.

At Dealey Plaza, everything is real, we make sure of it. The crowd has the right number of people. The sky has the right number of pigeons. When Jacqueline (she hated being called Jackie) climbs out the back of the 1961 Blue Lincoln Continental Convertible to clutch at a piece of my brain, her thighs contact the steel in just the right place—we measured with lasers. Though no one can hear her say it but the four of us, Nellie Connally still turns around every time, and with the same practiced professional smile tells me “Well Mr. President, you can't say Texas doesn't love you.”

The realest part of everything is me. I am John Fitzgerald Kennedy, born May 29, 1917, died November 22, 1963, and four times a day for the last fifteen years. I was the Commander of PT-109. I won the Pulitzer Prize for a book that I only wrote half of. Ich bin ein Berliner. My eyes, thanks to contacts, are a subtle greenish gray, a color you can trust, eyes America can believe in.

Every day, when I get to work, I watch the Zapruder film projected on the wall of my trailer. I watch the original—grainy, poorly framed, shot from an awkward angle. I watch the slow motion version, enhanced, zoomed, magnified. I watch the smile run away from Nellie Connally's face when she pulls her husband into her lap. I flip silently through each numbered frame. I have every twenty-sixth of a second committed to memory. At frame 189, the first shot hits, I turn, put my



hand to the hole in my neck. In frame 313, I have a right side to my head. Frame 314 is a pink cloud, hanging in the air between me and Jacqueline, and I slump down, and to the left.

I flip back and forth between the frames. Head. Cloud. Head. Cloud.

As you can expect, I am quite the celebrity. Newspapers interview me, and the first question is always “What’s your real name?” In a practiced Boston brogue I explain. I am three generations in the making. My grandmother was interviewed by the Warren Commission, swore all along that there were four shots and not three. My mother had this for a bedtime story every night, heard grandma drum out the rhythm time and again, three quick taps, an aborted pause, a fourth bang. She claims that my father, whom I never met and she never spoke about, was named Kennedy. Why wouldn’t I be John Fitzgerald?

I think of Mom everyday as I round the corner from Houston to Elm Street. I look into the crowd, see my grandmother dressed in her work uniform. I wave to the left, Nellie reminds me that Texas loves me, and then the shots ring out. No one knows for sure whether it was the first shot or the second that enters my shoulder, exits my neck, proceeds to maim the governor. Lee and I have decided that it was the second, and that’s when the blood starts to gurgle from the special effects device. Then the third and fatal shot—the blood pack beneath my second scalp explodes all over one of the seven identical pink Chanel suits that Jacqueline wears throughout the course of the day.

When the car rushes out of view, supposedly on its way to Parkland Hospital but really headed back to the staging ground, the crowd is in tears. What they see, what they hear is real—real enough to keep them coming and coming. We do brisk business in season tickets; some are there every day, and I’m told these are the ones who cry the loudest.

Critics wonder if Lee Harvey Oswald is truly a necessary component of the re-creation. After all, the show ends long before Lee is even discovered; I am receiving last rites by the time

that Oswald is spotted in Oak Cliff. Couldn't we just play a recording of three (or four) shots from a high powered Italian rifle? Would anyone know the difference?

I say that without Lee, there wouldn't be a show at all. Everyone else, the passersby, the spectators, the Connallys, Jacqueline climbing on the trunk, we are all just reacting. Lee is the one changing history, changing the lives of the spectators. Just like the first time, Lee is the true star of this show.

Thus naturally we hired the best Lee Harvey Oswald in the business. He taught himself Russian, lived in Minsk for 30 months in a square apartment with blank stone walls. He shot himself in the elbow just to get the scar that no one know about. He called his wife—now his ex-wife—Marina even though she hated it, forced her to take pictures of him holding weapons and antique leftist newspapers. But above all, Lee is a fantastic shot. He spends an hour every morning on a firing range with his Carcano M91/38, squeezing bullets into the center of a moving target. Professionally, he only fires blanks, but I for one take comfort in knowing that the third of those blanks is always directed precisely one and one half inches above and behind my right ear.

364 days out of the year, Lee is never seen by the crowds who are there to watch him work. Perhaps a few think to look up, to see the slant of the barrel glinting against the noon sun, but most have their eyes glued on my practiced smile, Jacqueline's pouty wave.

Every "real" November 22 though, we only do the show once, but the whole thing is available on pay-per-view. The Governor and I are raced to Parkland. Oswald runs through the streets of Oak Cliff, changing from a bus to a taxi, stopping by his boarding house, leaving as soon as he arrives. He runs for the Texas Theater, which the company rebuilt when they bought Dealey Plaza. Lee takes the fifth seat in the third row as the voice of Audie Murphy explains that what he is about to witness is the story of one soldier, lost in the pursuit of glory.

Or at least, that's how it used to be, before today, and the little yellow memo they put in everyone's box. I had read the letter already, but I make a show of rereading it. Lee is muttering into his beer mug, scratching the back of his hands. He's twitching like a pile of barb wire in the wind. And who wouldn't be, if they'd just found out that Pepsi was holding a nationwide contest, the winner of which gets your job for a year. Find the Golden Rifle or the Golden X, be a part of history. We should have known this was coming—they'd been raffling off "live history experiences" for months now. But letting fans sit in the back of the motorcade was different from letting them get shot in the head, letting them fire that shot.

Maybe it's just the weight of history, but even though I'm getting it too, it's Lee that I feel bad for. I have a legacy of sorts, a face people recognize. My agent is already working on a speaking tour of sorts. I could do book signings, maybe open a mall or two if things got tight. Karen wouldn't stand for it of course, would want me to get a "real" job. She hasn't been too understanding lately, keeps sleeping at her mother's, but still. Where but besides me was Lee's place in this world?

As I often do when I'm lost in life, I think on my namesake. What would John F. Kennedy do? For once, I really don't know. Jack Prime never got fired, never lost an election. Failure was something I had no reference for. I make a move to touch Lee, hug him or give him a buddy punch to the arm, but it just doesn't feel right. I say, "Listen, we're gonna get through this, man."

Lee stiffens in his chair. "Your accent, Mr. President." And he's right, I did drop the accent. And after all this time, it turns out I've missed saying the letter r. It feels good. I push the sugary daiquiri away, and call to the bartender, order a double bourbon, and that feels good too. I turn to Lee. "To hell with it, man, to hell with this bullshit. Lee, what good has the assassination ever

done you, done for either of us?”

He pauses at that, sits back down, so I keep going. “We work six days a week. Karen's probably divorcing me if I don't get a haircut or something. We never even had any kids; you don't get to see yours anymore. Cathy left—”

“Marina.” Lee is looking into his beer, staring down the long glass neck. His hands have stopped twitching, his left eye is closed.

“Cathy. Your wife's name was Cathy.”

He closes both his eyes now, shuts them tight like he's trying not to cry. “If she won't even pick up the phone for me, I'll call her whatever name I want.”

I finish my whiskey, let the caramel taste of it sit on my tongue. I try to tell him I'm sorry, that I didn't mean all that.

He tells me to stop talking without my accent.

Just like Oswald the first, our Lee is a small man, and even with the beer in his hand and the gun shot scar on his arm, he looks like a child in his shirt sleeves. I want so much to help him, to do what a good friend ought to. But he doesn't want a friend, he wants a president; he needs a leader. He needs a good quote. But I'm not sure what to tell him, whether he needs to hear that Truth is a tyrant, or that it is the only tyrant worth serving. I don't know how to save him, but I know my wife expected me home half an hour ago, and that traffic might be vicious, so I turn to him and say “A man may die, nations may rise and fall, but an idea lives on.”

His eyes are watery at first, but then he nods. I don't know what he's nodding about, but he seems settled by it, so I hug him, tight but brief, and then walk out of the bar.

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Today is November 22, 1963, and it is nearly 12:30 p.m. I am watching the film again, practicing the placement of my waving hand, the angle of my wrist—like every other day. There is a knock on the door.

“Are you John Fitzgerald Kennedy?” asks a man in a fanny pack with a glossy eight by ten of Jack Prime and a pen in his hand. Fans shouldn't be here, I ought to call security, but instead I nod. He hands me a brown manila envelope and walks away. It's what I thought it is; Karen is leaving. I pick up the projector to throw it into the wall, but I can't do it. I can't even blame her. I sit down, pour myself a glass of whiskey from the bottle I've been keeping in my dressing table. But I don't drink it. I can't. Today is important; it is November 22 outside of Dealey Plaza as well. Today is the long show, the once a year spectacle that is Lee's great triumph. People are looking up to me, especially today. During the telecast, they will announce the contest winners.

I style my hair, spend ten minutes making my suit coat ride up on my narrow shoulders, and then step out of my trailer and into the staging area. As is my custom, I walk the length of the motorcade, nodding at fellow reenactors. I try not to take more time than usual. I climb into my topless Lincoln Limousine.

As every clock in 1963 strikes 12:30, Nelly Connally looks at me and smiles. She is about to say “Well Mr. President, you can't say Texas doesn't love you.” But before she can, we hear a loud thump followed by a familiar bang. But it's far too early, and all four of us turn to look at the trunk, where a hole the size of a half dollar has just appeared, a wisp of smoke trailing out of it. The first thing I thought was I guess Grandma was right.

The governor and his wife both dive for the floorboards. This, I think, was Lee's intention. I feel almost certain that if I ducked too, that he wouldn't even bother firing again. He's not a murderer after all, just a reenactor, bringing the past to the present. I don't want to die.

But I feel like I owe it to Lee, like I owe it to the crowds, like I owe it to the real Jack. We must think and act not only for the moment but for our time.

Without thinking it, I know that when they realize what's been done, they'll find Lee in the theater, standing on the spot my mother pointed to, his hands behind his back. Attendance will skyrocket, and they won't need contests. They'll leave everything alone, and they might even have enough left over to hire real reenactors again, to put John Darnell back in his seat. Things will continue the way they ought to for years to come.

Lee fires a second time, missing intentionally, then again—this one slicing warmly through my back and neck.

My heart crashes in my chest. For the first time in a dozen years, I cannot remember the Zapruder film. I cannot remember my accent coach, or the time in the tanning booth, or the fact that I have done this before, more times than anyone I know can count. All that fades away, and what's left is a hardworking man from Massachusetts, trying to make his family and his country proud. I smile at the crowd, smile as wide as I can. I wave. Jacqueline, that angel, stays with me, smiling through the tears while the Conallys cower in the floorboards.

I am afraid, as I know that Lee must be, as both of them must have been that first warm November day. I nod a little, as the blood spurts from the hole in my throat, knowing that I'll never hear the third bullet coming, and I think, pleasantly, that the courage of life is often a less dramatic spectacle than the courage of a final moment, but is no less a magnificent mixture of triumph and tragedy.

## Henderson Street Bazaar

There were eight large crates of baby bottle nipples near the hearse, well over 300 nylon backpacks, three table saws, an antique ice box painted a garish purple, and my dead father. They had put the coffin more or less where the old man would have stood and haggled, had put a picture on a stand next to the box with a small cardboard sign that read “Big Dan's Last Deal. 1949-2012.” Naturally, the two gentleman from the funeral home were horribly uncomfortable, unsure of where to stand or to whom to offer their condolences. Theirs were the only neckties in a mile in any direction, excluding the box next to the stack of frying pans. It was not yet 9 in the morning, and already eighty five degrees on the asphalt, baking the smell of brake fluid out of the tar. I wondered why I didn't remember the heat, the way it came up through the soles of your shoes.

I was jealous of the undertakers though, because they had a good reason to be uncomfortable. I had memories of being a little kid, calling out tires, tools, TVs, and toys—Big Dan's got it all, while the disinterested crowd shoved and poured past. This used to be my home, even if I hadn't been back to *la pulga* in five years, not since I'd started school back east. In a Spanish conversation and grammar course, I'd learn that *pulga* meant flea, that an open air market was *un rastro*. I had told him that over the phone, and he'd said “So you're the Mexican now?” That seemed like a long time ago, before the two heart attacks, and the coma, sleeping in the hospital room up until last Tuesday, before going back to Dad's house, wondering if my car was safe parked on the street. Thankfully, the arrangements had all been made in advance, everything was taken care of. All I had to do was run the spot, which should have been easy, but wasn't.

The only ones who didn't seem at all uncomfortable were the customers who milled around sifting through boxes of candy dishes and canteens. If you could believe him, Dad hadn't missed a

weekend at the Henderson Street Bazaar since I was born. Death, it seemed, was nothing next to thieves and hurricanes. The very regulars stopped to pay their respects. One man, at least fifty, all beard and grizzle, reached into the casket and shook Dad's dead hand.

Sitting there eighteen feet away from him really wasn't a problem. After two weeks on a breathing machine, now he looked at ease, appropriately comfortable in the t-shirt and jeans he'd insisted on being dressed in. The problem was everyone else. Dad always made a point of walking the perimeter but I felt pinned to the folding metal chair that I'd grabbed last minute before pulling out of the yard. From all directions, strangers kept putting objects in my hand and asking how much I wanted for them. I didn't know how much a used handsaw was worth. I remembered vinyl records costing fifty cents each, but when I told that to the twenty year old with the mustache, he bought the whole box without even looking through it. Had the market on Perry Como appreciated significantly? Did inflation have an impact? I didn't know.

For years, this had been a running gag with Dad—how they wouldn't be able to keep him from turning a profit even after he was dead. Somehow when I'd thought about it, there was more funeral to the whole ordeal. I thought having my dead father in a polished pine box would slow business down. But people walked up just to see if it was real, then seemed to get sidetracked and started rummaging through a nearby bin. This, it occurred to me, was no accident—he had planned it this way. I knew it.

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Dad grew up the fifth of sixth in Southtown San Antonio. He'd lost two uncles in World War II, three cousins in Korea, a brother, two neighbors and a little league coach in Vietnam. Mexicans made better targets, they said, especially in the snow. Even those who dodged the draft



because they were lucky in age or the lottery or polio still stood a strong chance of dying young. There was Uncle Paulie and the dance hall, Ernesto and the transformer. According to Dad's calculations, a man in his family couldn't get better odds than 7 to 2 against on making it to 40. Those who did, and who also avoided the bottle, the track, other men's wives—12 to 1 they were working for the plant or the railroad or the steel mill. Dad used to belabor this part of the story. He would count out the uncles and the cousins on his fingers, work the long division on a gasoline receipt. Once you counted in the diabetes, 2 souls in 50 found a way out of Southtown. One of these was him.

The phrase 'out' here is relative. There were no curbs on our street, even though we lived in the very heart of the city, and we parked Dad's rusty pickup inside the fence every night. But we owned the place and the neighbors never said anything about the stacks of folding chairs in the front lawn. Dad would tell me that he didn't get up feeling tied down, and when he said it I think he was telling us both.

Dad had been interested in my education from the beginning, and would bring odd bits of his work home to me. He would make me close my eyes and stick my hand out, then give me a fragile book with the pleasant scent of rot, or crackling maps describing countries that no longer were, intricate vases and sculptures, a gathering of hood ornaments from Chevies model years 56-62, caseless blender innards, the taxidermied head of a ground squirrel mounted with the antlers of a twelve point buck, 400 pounds of slinky. The side of his work trailer read "THERES NOTHING BIG DAN DONT GOT." I knew the grammar was wrong long before I realized the sign wasn't true.

Whenever he brought me something to look at, he would watch closely while I poked and prodded at it, pushing buttons and levers, trying to figure it out, what the trick was. He always

waited till I gave up before telling me where it had come from, and if he could he would add a lesson. That's honest cheetah, Daniel he told me, holding out a spotted throw rug he'd gotten at a lot auction. I was watching on TV where they don't have an ounce of fat on them. Not one ounce. I don't know how, but I always knew to wait for him to tell me about what he brought home for me, even if I knew what it was.

The phrase 'brought home' is also relative, as most of what he showed me had come from behind the house. Dad called all his junk 'profit', and in addition to the two profit sheds and the profit bus, he also had profit laid out across what survived of the lawn, the porch, and the corners of our small house. Good thing your mother's not around, he would tell me, rest her soul she would never tolerate this mess. But no matter how much there was, everything was neatly organized, neat enough for him to be able to find anything he needed without having to dig. You have to know what you got, he said, that's always the first thing.

Every Saturday, he would get out of bed at 3:30 and start loading the trailer. The sound of the scraping and grunting would wake me up, and I'd join him, help him with the bigger items of the day. By six I was making breakfast, and by seven we were pulling in to spot P-38 *at la pulga*, the flea market just north of downtown. The Henderson Street Bazaar was right next to the river, land too low for anything permanent. Someone had arranged for a forty acre pour of cheap aggregate concrete, and someone else had built large metal shades over half of it. The spots under the shade cost three times as much as the ones like ours, half a mile from anything except the back fence and the stink of the silt-choked river. Dad was convinced that merchants willing to pay a hundred and fifty dollars so as to not have to hang their own tarps weren't worth dealing with. Even though we did as much shopping as we did selling, we never went under those shades. We weren't avoiding them, so much as there was nothing there we needed.

Shade was just part of Dad's overarching theory on commerce and enterprise. He felt that price tags were ruining American business, as only a fool of man could think of just one price. Hagglers, he told me, you start high, let them think they got you one. But you take those collector types, they won't buy anything less you act you like don't know what the hell it is, let them think they discovered it, saved it. Always let those guys make an offer, they'll pay you twice as much. I remember once I watched him tell three buyers in a row that a glass skull was two hundred dollars, only to sell it to a mousy woman with no chin for a twenty dollar bill. Now she, she knows how the hell to use that damned thing, he said as she walked away clutching the skull close to her chest. Six to one she still has it twenty-thirty years from now.

When not in the throes of commerce, Dad did his best to make the flea market educational. He would say a letter of the alphabet, then I would recite all the things we'd sold that day that started with that letter. Pliers, pipe wrench, poster, power drill, poker chips, paint, painting, paint mixer, paper mache Lou Abbot mask. When I got a little older, he switched to asking me my times tables, and what was the capital of Nevada. If I got three in a row, I could ask him a question, but no matter what I asked he always said "Oh that's easy, it's" and rolled out the answer without thinking another second. I learned later on that there is no Canadopolis.

Money was something we never really talked about it. I knew we had some—Dad almost always had a pile of folded cash in his back left pocket for work reasons—but I also knew that we never shopped at stores for anything but cold food. Everything else: clothes, canned goods, furniture, flatware, all of it was second hand, overstocked, misprinted, or casually stolen.

But despite the extra cost, Dad sent me to the parish school at Immaculate Heart, probably because it was close enough to walk. It was a somber school in a brown brick building run by a cloister of nuns who all seemed to have more than one name. My eighth grade year, they pulled all

the boys out of religion class and filed us into the auditorium. A white man with silver hair and a tan suit was on stage, standing next to a sandwich board with a fancy logo and the words “St. Stanislav Academy: A Private Preparatory School for Boys.”

We sat in the stiff creaking wooden chairs and listened to the recruiter tell us that the school was in the foothills of the Smoky Mountains, that there was a fishing pond, a swimming pool, and a bowling alley. Students could live in semi-private rooms where they had their own phone lines. They played lacrosse. It sounded like life in a deodorant commercial. At lunch that day, we took turns making fun of the guy, who had this intentionally refined way of talking, like he made a point of saying confectionery instead of the baker's.

That afternoon on the way to an auction I told Dad about the slide show we'd seen, with the old buildings that look like castles, and the rolling terraced hills. To me, it was funny, and I even started trying to do the recruiter's accent. I kept waiting for him to laugh. Instead he asked me if I wanted to go.

I didn't, but instead of saying no, I said I wasn't sure. Three to one a place like that costs way more than its worth in the long run anyways.

“That's mine to worry about son, not yours.”

I still didn't think Dad was serious, didn't think it was possible. I knew that the capital of Tennessee was Nashville, but I had never been there, never been much further than the monthly swap meet a few hundred miles outside of town. The whole idea of Tennessee, of school away from home, of not living just east of the interstate—it was a dream I'd never thought about having, too strange to be wonderful. But I looked over, and Dad had the same face that he used to get when he brought me stuff to look at, which he had hadn't done in years. I still think though that if I'd known, I would have begged off.

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A tiny woman with designer eye wear, hair left to gray in wide chunks, walked up to the stand. She's probably older than Dad ever was. "You must be his son," she said. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

I shook her hand when she stuck it out, and because I wasn't sure what else to do, I held on to it. She didn't try to jerk away, let her hand sweat into mine. She took it to mean to keep going. "Your dad was a great man."

I looked her in the eye. The thing was she was right, Dad was a good man. But if she knew him here, then she never met the real Big Dan, only the face he wanted her to see, the face that made her buy whatever it was he needed to sell her. Part of me wanted to say something dark and shitty to her, and I could have too. This was a one day affair. Dad would be cremated that evening. In a week I'd be back in the lab in Terre Haute. If there weren't any hitches selling the house, I might never come back at all, not just the flea market, the city, maybe the state. It all felt so hollow, all of it.

But I couldn't just say thank you either, so I walked off into the crowd, the woman calling after me. The aisle was moist with traffic, and I let the flow of the crowd push me away from all of it. When I got to the end of the row I turned right, toward the covered part of the market, where I'd never been and never seen dad go.

Out in the sunshine, people sold whatever they had on hand, but here most of the stands seemed dedicated to one specific purpose or another: Jewelry repair, fabric by the bolt, glass bongs, an entire double site with nothing but plastic trash bags full of white socks. There was a tingle of sleigh bells in the distance, and I saw an old man selling coconut ice cream bars to a pack

of hopping children. It didn't smell the same without the heat, and the crowd walked faster, like they had someplace to get to.

Sandwiched between a tire salesman and an on-site auto decal installer, there was a small table with a bright red cloth over it. It was covered in tiny fountains fashioned to look like dripping faucets and beer cans pouring themselves forever, held up by nothing. The idea behind them was simple, they had a clear feeder tube that ran from the base to the can or the spigot, hid by the water itself. But for a minute there, maybe because there were so many in one place, it seemed impossible and in spite of myself I waved my hand over the table to check. I picked up the nearest one, which looked like a can of Pepsi; it was light for its size, and had a tiny orange price tag. \$25. I stood there looking for a minute, planning on buying the thing anyway, but no one came to take my money so after a few minutes I had to walk away.

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The entire town of Abbey, Tennessee—home to St. Stan's—is smaller than the rail yard a few miles north of my house. The town has no police department, no post office, no street signs, no street names, no established speed limits. At home, downtown means gridlocked one-ways and panhandlers; downtown Abbey has two gas stations, a barber shop, a self-storage facility, and a gear factory. There was nothing here—vast, empty, wasted space—and the grass that filled the gaps in made the air wet with life, hard to breathe. Still, the town had a way of reminding me of home. There weren't curbs here either, and the locals had a habit of stacking profit around their small prefabricated homes.

But the school was a castle, hewn from stone older than the county. History was buried in the walls like the bones of so many martyrs. The halls were lined in photographs of senior classes dating back to 1890, all of them scowling in uncomfortable neckwear. When they showed us

around on our first day, they made sure to point out where our portrait would go, then they walked us to the cross-shaped cathedral. You had to say mass or scrub the floors to know it, but the crucifix over the alter was double sided, with an unseen gold-plated Jesus, eight feet tall and staring at the organ pipes.

For the first few months I hardly talked to anyone because I didn't know how to speak. Half of the students and most of the teachers talked in a trickle the speed of traffic, let vowels hang in their mouths. They let the words fill up all that godforsaken clean air and open space. The ones that weren't Tidewater Southern were New Yorkers or Ohioans, Taiwanese or German, or from tiny islands in the Caribbean that Dad and I never mentioned when we went over world capitals. But I was the only kid from the ghetto, which was an odd kind of celebrity. When they collected the rest of the freshmen for hazing, they left me alone, sitting in my room while the rest of the class was doing pushups in blindfolds.

There were two kinds of students at the academy: those that were there because it was the nicest school they could afford and those that were there because it was the nicest school that would still have them. We had a reputation for taking the castoffs from the higher end east coast schools, and many of our students treated the place like a prison with tennis courts. The delinquents, unquestionably the richest students, turned out to be the ones least likely to notice that my luggage neither matched nor closed on its own. It was always the ones with the cheapest new stuff who pointed things like that out. All the kids who were on disciplinary probation didn't bowl or fish or even play lacrosse. None of them seemed to care about grades, or haircuts, or whose father was sacrificing what so they could be there. They stood on the toilet seats to smoke cigarettes next to the exhaust fans, and talked about how much they hated the school and its teachers and the food, and it only weighed on me a little bit that they used terms like summer home

conversationally. Even still, they didn't make a deal out of it when I asked what made the trust of dead relatives so important, let me make it into a joke.

Apart from being generally easier to get along with, those kids also had literally more money than they knew what to do with. Most of them had funds disbursed to them every week on Friday afternoon, regular as vespers. And since they didn't have to do so much as cash a check, they spent that money like it was heavy. Like Dad said, I felt the deals calling. I started off small, hitchhiking outside of town to buy Roman Candles at a roadside stand twelve for two, hiding them in my room, selling them for a buck each. By the end of my first term I was doing brisk business in Playboys, Lucky Strikes, and pints of Mellow Bourbon.

At first this was just a side project, something to pass the time in study hall. But it paid well, gave me enough money to go home with my new friends without having to beg Pops. I could buy new clothes. a suitcase with a working latch. Make no mistake, Dad would send me anything I asked of him, even cash if I could tell him what it was for. But now I could be the guy springing for pizza. My new friends never seemed to notice, but I liked it, liked feeling the stack of bills push into my hip when I sat. I liked the way the money made me my left shoulder dip even when it started to hurt my back.

When I came home for Christmas break that first year, Dad didn't mention the things I bought myself, which was strange. But he was probably just busy asking me about the school, and my classes. He wanted to know what I'd learned, particularly biology. He asked me "Those power plant things, what'd you call them?"

I told him.

"Right so the mito-hooties, what kind of fuel d'they burn?"

I told him I didn't know. Then silence hung between us until he thought something else to



ask me. If I asked about him, he would nod and mumble, turn the conversation back to me.

That first Saturday, I woke up at nine, alone in the house. He'd asked if I wanted to go to with him the night before, and I had said who wants to get up early on their vacation? I had never been in this house on a Saturday morning, and neither had anyone else, not in fifteen years or more. It was quiet, and the early morning light cast lines of shadow across the weed eaters and hockey sticks and buckets of nails stacked along the walls.

Dad got home after dark. Exhaustion rolled off him like heat, but he looked satisfied, a twinge of a smile. His trailer was empty, and his back pocket looked swollen from ten feet away. After that, on other breaks, I would offer to go with him, but he'd always say no. You're on vacation, he told me. I didn't really mind, but I could never get used to waking up in the house without Dad, alone with his things.

Back at school, my business venture was beginning to get a bit out of hand. I found something to sell to at least half of the student body—it was only a matter of time before someone got caught, got offered leniency in exchange for information. They searched finally halfway through my junior year. The report said that I was running a speakeasy out of my foot locker, that I was in possession of illegal fireworks, inappropriate playing cards, and a bowie knife. I knew for sure they were axing me, so I sold almost everything away. At the end I kept only two large duffels to sit on and a broken guitar to hold.

Emptied of everything, the white walls caught angular shadows. I wished I had someone to talk to. I wanted to say that I felt bad about getting kicked out. But I simply couldn't see how Christian doctrine and the 5th declension should be on the list of things I needed to know. These seemed less likely even than the fat storage habits of cheetahs. I liked the science classes, didn't mind English, but they had science and English back home. Besides everyone I associated with at

school treated getting kicked out as a rite of passage, and none of them even had a decent gig lined up.

I stared out the window, at the snow collecting on the trees and ledges of the building. Even the weather was different. If it ever snowed at home, and it usually didn't, the snow only stuck on grass and the roofs of abandoned buildings. Here the snow ate up the forest and the ridges; the roads would be impassable by morning.

When I looked up, I was Dad was standing over me with his arms crossed, dark wattles under both eyes, like he hadn't slept maybe ever. He slapped me, maybe not as hard as he could have, but every move he made had weight behind it. He slumped down on the unmade bed across from me and his ass squeaked on the plastic mattress. He looked out my window across the courtyard.

“They came to my school too, when I was in eighth grade.”

“In San Antonio?”

He nodded, pointing at the garden four floors down. “They had pictures of this place, that little statue thing with the flowers there. I wanted to go so bad, but Aunt Lydia could barely keep clothes on our backs.”

I looked down at the guitar in my hands. I wished that I could have started playing some song, anything with a flourish to it, but I had gotten the thing only a few weeks ago in a swap, and I hardly knew what I was doing. I gave it a few strums anyway; it sounded bad, but I didn't want to stop once I'd started. Dad reached out and grabbed the strings, made them jangle and buzz.

“Daniel, why?”

“What? No. I was making good money Pops, you wouldn't believe it. These kids'll buy damn near anything, all you have to do is make it seem like there's not much of it to go around.”

Dad reached out and put his hand on my shoulder. His hand was rough, meaty, and his whole arm was weighing down on me, made my shoulders stoop. It seemed like five minutes at least until he moved or said anything, and I felt like it was me who'd driven across two states through the dead of winter. Finally he said, "Listen, I talked to the monks, and they're gonna let you stay on."

The concept wasn't at all unheard of—most expulsion decisions turned out to be financially reversible—but I never thought that I was anywhere near privileged enough for clemency. I still don't know how much such things cost, but it was maybe more than Dad made in a month. I wanted to ask him why he would do that for me, how he would get by now. All I said was, "but I got axed."

He shook his head. "Listen son, you have to graduate from here. You have to go to college."

"Since when do you need to go to college to turn a profit?" I looked at him, and his eyes were wet. He took his hand off my shoulder. "I want to do what you do." I pulled the wad of money I had made from my pocket, maybe two hundred, mostly in tens and fives. "Look, I can do this, I don't need this school."

He stood up slowly like it hurt him, and walked to the door. For a minute, I thought he was going to let me go with him, he was going to give me what I'd asked for again, like when I'd asked him if I could come here, whether I meant it or not. I got up to follow. He spun around and grabbed me by the shoulders, his fat thumbs sitting on my collarbone, pressing in.

"You don't want to sell shit at the flea market all your life son. You don't want to get up in the middle of the night to load a trailer every weekend. You don't want to live in Stop Six and chain your barbecue to your porch every day of your goddamn life. You don't."

And I knew then that he was right, I didn't want to be like him. But I knew also that I wasn't like the other kids at school. Even after two years, I was still getting reminded that wit was a noun and not a preposition. I knew that would never change, that if I had a place in the world, it was at home, at the flea market, with my father. But what can you do with a man like that, with a man who's given everything to make you happy? How do you tell him he doesn't know what happiness means?

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The coffin was unavoidable. It seemed to jut out into the aisle, and everything around it looked not smaller but larger by comparison, more conspicuous. I wanted to see his face. I would say that he looked asleep, but I have no memory of seeing him sleeping. He didn't look tired though, and I thought that that was something. Also, he was the only one out there who seemed comfortable in the heat, which he probably would have gotten a kick out of. I tried to think of something to say to him. Or whatever it was that I wanted him to say to me. There was this feeling like a swelling, like a pressure pushing my skin against the humid air, that had been building up for years. I waited for this to come bubble over, to tumble down. But it wouldn't. I saw the undertakers behind me. They were checking their watches.

When I let them take the coffin, they would wheel it back into the hearse and drive across town, where they would slide the corpse out of the rental and into a cardboard box. They would burn him at a thousand degrees, until his soft tissues had turned to gas. Because he was a large man, this would take more than three hours, and then finally there would be nothing more for the fire to do. The splinters of bone would be ground in a special machine and then returned to me. What I was supposed to do with them, Dad hadn't specified. I closed my eyes, and took a deep

breath, and I smelled sour beer and the denseness of human sweat, which was right, which was the way the flea market was supposed to smell. I let them take him.

It was after six o'clock, and the other sites around me were emptying. The foot traffic in the aisles was replaced by vans and trucks, each waiting for their turn to load up whatever was left unsold. When Dad did this, there was almost never anything to pack back up—he was a master at bringing and doing just enough.

I looked at what was left, the bottle nipples, and the winter coats, the chest of drawers and the mirrors, the dish tubs full of loose sockets, the display case with the dead moths. the other things that turned out to not be worth the effort or the price. I thought about the other two sheds and the bus that I couldn't even get to open. I looked to the spot where the casket had been but that too was gone. And so I looked at the spot where Dad was supposed to be. I wanted to do something that would make him proud, but I didn't know what that something was. The sun was setting, and the crates threw long shadows on the dirty ground. What I was to do with this, his legacy now?

I didn't even know what I had.