

*VGNGRQTV*

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This collection consists of a critical preface exploring the similarities between serialized comic books, realist fiction and the author's own writing. The principle discussion concerns continuity, the connecting tissue between ancillary works of fiction, chronology, the function of time in the narrative of related stories, and the function of characters beyond the stories they inhabit. The stories within the collection revolve around an eccentric ensemble of suburban youth whose demoralized and violent actions are heavily influenced by defining moments of their past.

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PART I

WRITING BEYOND THE PAGE: CONTINUITY, CHRONOLOGY AND  
CHARACTER IN *TELEPORT*

## Introduction

I have come to recognize within my literary preference a seemingly incompatible affinity for both comic books, a largely juvenile medium with the goal of stimulating and entertaining its readers, and literary fiction by authors generally considered to operate in high-minded realist and naturalist genres, books characterized by their introspective characters and social gravitas. The subject, presentation and desired effect upon the reader of these two genres could not be more dissimilar. Why then do I feel equally invested in both modes of storytelling? How are both of these narrative structures able to provide such engrossing fiction and create characters that linger well beyond the final page? Many of which, I would argue, have invaded and, quite possibly, shaped the cultural zeitgeist in which they exist. Modern superheroes like Superman, Batman and the Hulk, have made, in a relatively short time, an indelible mark on American culture. It's similarly hard to imagine a world without the nineteenth century's motley group of heroes, like Dickens' sympathetic orphan, Oliver Twist, or Flaubert's tragic protagonist, Emma Bovary. More importantly for the subject of this preface, these two outwardly distinct genres have invaded and shaped my own writing, their similarities coloring my fiction with their inexorable characteristics.

## Continuity: World-building with Character and Setting

I have always been a fan of sequential storytelling, my first foray into literature being a collection of the Calvin and Hobbes newspaper strip, but my first sincere passion for fiction came from comic book superheroes, and, more importantly, the expansive shared universe of Marvel Comics. I became infatuated by the notion that each character's story extended far beyond the confines of the book in which it was published. Because these stories existed in a broad, all encompassing diegesis, each event had potential ramifications that could have lasting effects for years to come, both on the reader's interpretation of the character and all of the publisher's auxiliary titles. For example, one of the most transformative moments in Marvel continuity was the death of Spider-man's girlfriend, Gwen Stacy, in *The Amazing Spider-Man #121* (June 1973). This shocking catastrophe has had lasting, intrinsic repercussions for the character, affecting his personality and relationships in the subsequent decades of Spider-man stories. The weight of this kind of extended fictional world was similarly felt when Reed Richards and Sue Storm were married in *Fantastic Four Annual #3* (1965) when a horde of Marvel's heroes and villains were gathered together in a single issue. Stories in the comic book continuities aren't bound by the book's title or time of publication; Dale Jacobs put it this way:

...Marvel (and, I think, to a lesser extent DC) sought to create a coherent universe in which events in one title affected the events in another title. Spider-Man might team up with Thor in an issue of *Amazing Spider-Man*, but the conclusion of the story might happen in *The Mighty Thor* (190)... The concept of continuity, so important to the fabric of Marvel comics and to the creation of a shared canon of texts among readers, was simply a given in the Marvel Universe; as a reader you were expected to know what

happened and was happening not only in the book you were reading, but in every other title as well. (191)

Although, primarily used in comics as a marketing gimmick to get readers to buy back issues and lower selling titles, this kind of world building in fiction contains a contains within it enticing opportunity for the author. It gives a writer the ability to draw upon the reader's previous knowledge to add depth and meaning to recurring characters, settings and events.

This type of shared universe, although not a staple throughout Realist fiction, can be seen in some of the most prominent authors of the genre, most prolifically, perhaps, in *La Comédie Humaine*, by Honoré de Balzac, a series of ninety-five short stories and novels, in which characters reappear again and again, weaving in and out of the fiction as the author allows, bringing with them the collective experience the reader has developed within the framework of the series, "to most English readers he is, though a big figure in the history of the novel, still largely *terra incognita*. And yet any admirer of Balzac will tell you, as [Henry] James does, that no single novel can represent him and that he has to be taken in large doses" (Gervais 1). It is the connections formed within the continuity of his work that constructs the deeper significance throughout.

This continuity is just as important, perhaps more so, when considering setting. After all, for characters to inhabit the same story, they must also inhabit the same space. This tendency to create unique and memorable locales that span an author's creative work is much more common in the genre, and accomplishes much more than providing a common ground for the characters to walk on. When taken in the context of continuity, these places attach themselves to the reader and transform the work's subjects and theme, providing additional tools with which they can be interpreted. Take for instance Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. Joseph Urgo states:



Yoknapatawpha, I suggest, refers not to a place but to a defiance of place, a defiance which may erupt anywhere where paradise is challenged. The map comes into existence not simply by encountering life's cosmic significance, but by *countering* it with something else, by probing, sharing or revealing the deeper existence led by people who are at once rooted and transcendent. (643)

Urgo inextricably entangles the very being of Yoknapatawpha with Faulkner's characters and, more so, with the shared, defining characteristic of these characters: the "deeper existence" that motivates them and provides the reader with a unifying understanding of their being. Urgo alludes to Yoknapatawpha as a "defiance of place," a concept that provides weight to the importance of such ambiguous fictional settings. These areas are not made of brick and mortar but, rather, the experiences within the text.

It is for this reason, although dispersed among exclusive and independent novels, that scholars have so often and so easily coined the phrase, "Dickens's London": "the very phrase 'Dickens's London' seems to deliver itself as a hieratic title, already armed with defensive and bullying quotation marks, marking off the subject of the city as one of which we can no longer speak" (Wolfreys 142). Wolfrey's remark here points to the pervasive nature of setting, when it's defining characteristics are repeated across many works of fiction. It is within this *modus operandi* that Dickens thrusts his colorful character: Oliver Twist, Pip, and David Copperfield, notwithstanding their character similarities, are tied together through their interaction with the larger character of Dickens's London and the expectations of a reader who is knowledgeable of this environment.

In the same way, the contemporary realist, Irvine Welsh, utilizes the aforementioned methods of Balzac, Faulkner and Dickens when constructing the universe in which the majority

of his novels and short stories reside and has been the most prominent influence in my own writing. Welsh's characters inhabit a subsection of Edinburgh, the port of Leith, marked by downtrodden housing schemes and a violent, testosterone driven culture representative of Scotland's disenfranchised working class, and although ancillary locations are common throughout his stories, the majority of his characters have ties to this area. Like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha county, Leith takes a prominent position in the minds of readers, influencing the decisions of the characters and the interpretation of their actions. Leith exudes a menacing danger, a portent of bad luck, bad dealings and the bad men who deal them. Leith, to many of Welsh's characters is a place to escape, a haunting place that taints their identities as much as it taints their dialect. This is most evident in the character of Mark Renton who, in his famous expository in Trainspotting says:

Ah hate cunts like that. Cunts like Begbie. Cunts that are intae baseball-batting every fucker that's different; pakis, poofs, n what huv ye. Fuckin failures in a country ay failures. It's nae good blamin it oan the English fir colonizing us. Ah don't hate the English. They're just wankers. We are colonized by wankers. We can't even pick a decent, vibrant, healthy culture to be colonized by. No. We're ruled by effete arseholes. What does that make us? The lowest of the fuckin low, the scum of the earth. The most wretched, servile, miserable, pathetic trash that was ever shat intae creation. Ah don't hate the English. They just git oan wi the shite thuv goat. Ah hate the Scots.

In this speech Renton is effectively summing up the conclusions Welsh has already laid out for the reader. Begbie, as much a part of Leith as the pubs and schemes, is an institution in and of himself, a representation of the violent negativity permeating the region. Renton at once distances himself from Begbie and associates himself with him, along with all "scots." Together,

they are “failures in a country ay failures” and they have no one to blame but themselves. The self-loathing and self-destructive nature, evidenced above, plays itself out throughout the drug-use and physical brutality of the novel’s plot and well into the characters and plot of Welsh’s other novels where Leith is a prominent location.

Throughout Welsh’s books, his characters intermingle and change points of view. Minor, supporting characters in one chapter, will narrate the next. A character only rumored about in one book will show up as a villain and threat in another. This is seen over and over again in Welsh’s writing, the perspective of the reader made three-dimensional by the rotating perspective of the characters. We are given several entry ways into Welsh’s world, a continuity that is at once alluring and alarming, much in the same way as it is used in Marvel’s comics. When reading a novel by Irvine Welsh, you know that at any moment, the psychopathic Frank Begbie could show up and wreak havoc on the vulnerabilities of the protagonist, in the same way that the evil mastermind Doctor Doom might appear in any of the books published by Marvel. This aspect of fictional worlds, although dependent on a reader’s foreknowledge of previous work, creates an investment and a dedication to the fictional world that can take precedence over its contribution to the work it appears in. One of my favorite crossovers of this type happens in Welsh’s sixth novel, *Glue*, in which the primary cast of *Trainspotting* unexpectedly shows up at a football game being attended by the novel’s protagonists as teenagers, years before they embarked on the path of heroin addiction that led them to their original appearance in Welsh’s debut book. This appearance does something unique to a group of stories operating a continuity of this fashion; its primary focus is to enhance the world first – its involvement to the current story is secondary. The reader is given a narrow look, as through a keyhole, into formation of these characters, and allowed the freedom to draw conclusions based on what little information

they are given. In this situation, one is hard-pressed not to compare and contrast the behaviors of the adolescents to those of the young adults we know so well. These moments of interconnectivity entice curious readers and give them the opportunity to participate in the creation of the fictional diegesis.

It is with this in mind that the characters and locations in *Teleport* have come into being. Each story is meant to build upon the last and add context to the larger canon in which it exists. Because Aaron has been to Teleport in previous stories, his relationship with this space should be apparent to the reader when he returns in the story “Intelligently Maligned. Teleport becomes defined by the actions that occur there; it becomes a place of transformation, its essence ingrained in the people that inhabit this space. This is crucial to the understanding of Aaron’s character in the larger framework and can be read alongside the interpretation of his actions. In “The Highlands,” Teleport scars Aaron in a way that is, at the same time, liberating and tragic. Aaron loses a friend and embarks upon a new journey. It was my aim to use *Teleport* in the exact same way in “Intelligently Maligned,” a place that can represent the sacrifice one must endure in order to start a new beginning. Each time Aaron decides to change something in his life, he must first go to Teleport to shirk off the trappings of the past. First it is his television, a distraction that keeps him from writing; next, it is his writing, an activity that allows him to wallow in thoughts of his own demise and is detrimental to his state of mind. By echoing the climax of “The Highlands” in this way, Teleport is meant to emerge as more than a symbol. It is a force in the story and in the lives of the characters, influencing the direction of the plot.

Another setting in *Teleport* that has this same kind of continuity is Dave’s Dive. We are first introduced to the bar in “It Must Be High or Low,” where it is established as a setting where people go to “throw off the shackles of their inhibitions”, a place where outside rules do not

apply and people are free to act upon their base urges. This place is marked by graffiti, offensive language and crude political statements. It seems to operate outside of all practical business procedure (hosting illegal card games, serving drinks to minors) and, as a result, is always crowded “well past any occupancy restrictions set by the state’s fire marshal”. This unrestrained aspect of the setting takes on a malevolent tone when it appears in “Now That It’s Done.” We learn in the story, that Kyle, whom we already know has committed a murder, passes by the bar each night on the way home from work. Kyle is an extremely introverted character, self-conscious and ostracized by his deformity, and is thus deeply disturbed by the socialization and loose frivolity he sees each time he passes it. Each night, he is tormented by the people he sees leaving the establishment who are able to shun their reticence and enjoy themselves without embarrassment, particularly the character of Candice, whose name appears in several stories offering a glimpse of the promiscuity so reviled by Kyle. In a way it is because of his proximity to Dave’s Dive that he loses control himself, becoming obsessed with Candice, following her home one night and remorselessly murdering her. This connection between Dave’s Dive and a lack of restraint is portrayed unobtrusively, highlighting the setting’s position in the larger work rather than taking the spotlight.

Another aspect of continuity, particularly prevalent in realist, and specifically Naturalist writers, is an exploration of the generational aspect of characters: how one character is affected by the life and experiences of his or her predecessors. The best example of this, perhaps, is the *Rougon-Macquart* series, authored by Emile Zola, in which the lives of generation after generation of women are explored, accumulating literary relevance as the series continues. “Zola’s generational leap from Adelaide to her great grand-daughter illustrates his desire to prove that ‘L’heredite a ses lois, comme la pesanteur’ [Heredity has its laws, as gravity]”

(Hennessy 4). This statement illustrates the power that hereditary connection has over characters in fiction – that, despite the leap from Adelaide to Nana, the actions of the former impact the latter: the decisions that Adelaide makes are carried over to Nana by the reader; her existence (regardless of whether the reader has been exposed to all twenty novels) is decorated by the things that came before, by the frivolous, tortuous life of her mother, Gervaise, in *L'Assommoir*, or the family's unconventional matriarch, in *La Fortune des Rougon*.

This portrayal of hereditary narrative – having the plot of multiple stories inherit the traits of those that came before – led me to further explore the formational moments in both Aaron and Kyle. Aaron has always, in my mind, been a character of intense emotional upheaval. He is a character that continually lost and lashing out when he feels that he is not in control. But where did these feelings of inadequacy come from? Why does he feel such a strong desire to prove his manhood, to resort to drugs and violence? I found the answers to these questions in “The Dog,” a story that not only establishes the Bildungsroman that shapes Aaron's later decisions, but created a family for Aaron, feelings of tumultuous love and hatred that permeated his stories to follow. To elaborate, Aaron makes a conscious decision in “The Dog” to kill the eponymous animal, despite the fact that this goes against his every base impulse. This is evidenced by his inability to fire the gun. He is “horrified by the idea of shooting the dog,” but, later, craving the acceptance of his father, craving the simplified family life that seemed lost, he kills the dog in a much more inhumane way, bludgeoning it to death with a fire poker. The last line of the story states, “I wasn't proud of what I had done, but I was proud of myself – the acknowledgment of this very contradiction, perhaps, a recitation of my first steps into manhood.” This line is meant to linger with the character as he appears throughout the collection. He is a character who is willing to deliberately do wrong (run away from the death of a friend, cheat, steal, commit

violence, commit suicide) as long as, no matter how naively, he thinks the outcome will be in some way beneficial or justified. But, this one event affects the entire family. As Jimmy and the father appear in subsequent stories, we are able to encounter them, not only through Aaron's perspective, but through the lens of the story. For example, Aaron only ever sees Jimmy as a baby. In "Intelligently Maligned," we see Aaron bringing Jimmy comic books, this gesture being the only surviving aspect of their relationship since Aaron left home, and whereas Aaron sees something infantile, Jimmy sees them as art, something to be studied and copied, practiced again and again. The age difference between the two boys creates a distance between the two that remains unresolved until "The Guardian," where Jimmy inherits the role of patriarch in the family structure.

A similar parental continuity is explored in the characters of Millicent and Kyle. But, unlike "The Dog", "Wouldn't It Be Nice" is strictly Millicent's story. The chief concern of the story is Millicent's feelings toward her newborn son and how these incredibly possessive feelings of ownership and protectiveness, lead her to unintentionally harm her child. The trauma that takes place in "Wouldn't It Be Nice" is physical, but the ramifications of Millicent's actions, played out in "Now That It's Done," are extensive and impact Kyle emotionally, shaping his perception of himself and the world around him. In "Now That It's Done," Kyle is presented as a deeply scarred character; his deformity is an outward projection of a much more profound psychological injury. Similarly, the cause of this injury is representative of a deeper flaw in Millicent. The act of dropping Kyle less formative than the overbearing neediness she expresses toward him, the desire to dispel the outside world from their relationship and keep him entirely dependent on her alone. Knowing these details about his mother and the relationship that exists between them, the reader is able to then apply that knowledge to the actions and feelings

expressed by Kyle as an adult. We can see his bitterness toward women who don't value him like his mother does, the loneliness he feels, his mother being the only relationship in his life, and the irony in the story's final line: "He used her phone to call his mother, the phone ringing for what seemed like ages, and when she answered, he said, "Thank you." The gratitude Kyle expresses stems from the realization that the woman he murdered was just as lonely as he is, and it causes him to value his mother's love, his one source of human connection, all the more. The two stories work together in a way that creates a cyclical resonance when you consider the way Kyle's realization fulfills Millicent's selfish desire.



## Chronology: Writing Between the Lines

Because these short stories are presented separately as fiction that can operate individually or as a collective whole, achievement of a continuity with the reader is largely dependent on what is not written, on the spaces between stories and the changes that occur “off camera”. Here, I will refer, again, to Comic Books, for an adequate comparison. The Comic Book as an art form operates by presenting a sequence of images and text that are read linearly and separated by a “gutter”, a blank space between pictures that the reader must traverse in order to follow the story. In one panel, Spider-Man jumps off of a building, in the next, Spider-Man lands on the ground. The reader is forced to assume that Spider-Man has fallen, that time has passed and that he has passed through a linear distance. None of this is represented by the artist, but by framing the event, the story has been written without ever being attributed to the page. In *Narrative in Comics*, Pratt describes this intuitive leap by the reader this way: “for now, I shall use ‘closure’ to refer to the mental process whereby readers of comics bridge the temporal and spatial incompleteness of the diegesis that occurs in the gutters between panels, thereby participating in the creation of narrative” (111). In this statement, Pratt charges the reader with the responsibility of forming the comic’s narrative. They are participating in the imaginative process, but, I would argue, that it is the writer or artist’s responsibility to author even these unseen gaps. Pratt, interpreting Scott McCloud, continues:

a comics artist must shape the story by ‘deciding which moments to include in [each panel] and which to leave out,’ as well as by ‘choosing the right distance and angle [from which] to view those moments – and where to trim them.’

By selecting one image rather than another, an artist can give the reader cues, drawing attention to the particularly salient aspects of the story...An artist can leave

irrelevant objects out of the picture and make the relevant ones stand out to varying degrees by emphasizing their size within the panel. (113)

The same effect can be achieved by an author operating in this same fashion. For example, at the end of “Wouldn’t It Be Nice”, we know that Millicent has dropped Kyle and has injured the infant. We leave this story not knowing the extent of his injuries or what repercussions it has on the baby, but when we are introduced to Kyle again in “Now That It’s Done”, we are forced to assume that his physical deformity was caused by this fall. This intuition is caused by the framing of the negative space between these two stories. Because Kyle’s injury is the last thing we see in the preceding story, and one of the first things we see in the latter, the reader associates the two – the only common tie being the acknowledgement by the author that these two people are the same character.

Similar intuitive leaps must be made by the reader when analyzing the character arch of Aaron in the collection. Each story is written with a distinct jumping off point in mind, a moment meant to propel the character into the next story. In “The Dog,” this moment is wholly internal, a coming of age that marks the trajectory of Aaron’s inner life, so that when we meet him again in “The Highlands” we are familiar with the psychological struggles that distress him. The next leap, is a physical one, one chiefly concerned with Aaron’s status in the diegesis and much more clearly related to the ‘closure’ Pratt attributes to comic book readers. We see Aaron leave the story on a train, traveling to an unknown destination, and are therefore made to assume, as he emerges in “It Must Be High or Low” that the college town in which he resides was his destination. This connection is made more poignant by the description of Aaron as a “university rat”, a run-away, panhandling for his subsistence. Seeing Aaron in this new environment is a logical next step for the reader and aligns with the path set by the previous two stories. The

reader can thereby infer his emotional state and understand what led the character to live in such a way. Without these invisible ties, Aaron can still exist within the story, but his character traits must be interpreted in a different way. The continuity of the stories transforms what, on the surface, would be considered enigmatic or eccentric into qualities and motivation that imply a greater depth, a substance that, although provided by the author, is, in principal, created by the reader's imagination.

## Character: Anamorphic Tradition

Lastly, as each story contributes to the continuity of the larger collection, so too does the collection itself contribute to a larger literary tradition, particularly the forms and styles apparent in works of authors attributed to the genres of Realism and Naturalism. One of the hallmark distinctions of literary Realism, is a single minded focus on character as the means of communicating a larger message. In this way, the characters in *Teleport* take center stage, their desires and torments, their relationship to the world at large, makes each a conduit of a greater, although ambiguous, human truth. In reference to Realist masters, Balzac, Dostoevsky and James, Ilya Klinger uses the term ‘anamorphosis’ as a description of one of the ways in which this is accomplished. She defines ‘anamorphosis’ “as a truth discourse in narrative fiction [that] refers to the process whereby an illegible textural instance, something altogether incomprehensible to the hero, emerges as the very truth-object for which the hero had been looking elsewhere” (296). In her article, “Anamorphic Realism,” Klinger presents three examples of this kind of self-deception, an inherent obliviousness in Realist protagonists – one example from each of the aforementioned authors, but rather than repeat her references, I will provide one that I find mirrored in *Teleport*: Sydney Carton from Dickens’s *Tale of Two Cities*. In the character of Sydney Carton, Dickens establishes a character whose position fits perfectly into Klinger’s description, a man confronted by his physical double, Charles Darnay. Carton is envious of Darnay, and is beleaguered by the differences between them. He longs to be Darnay, an existence he sees as an impossibility, and accept the love of Lucy Manette, but his redemption does not manifest in the novel until he realizes that he can be Darnay and sacrifices himself by assuming his identity. It is the realization that they can be, in essence, the same man, that emphasizes the persona of Darnay, as Carton’s “truth-object.” There is a similar epiphany in

“Now That It’s Done,” in which Kyle is blinded by the apparent differences existing between Candice and himself. He sees her only as the Other, a being completely outside of himself, a person wholly unfamiliar, and an object of his contempt. His moment of self-actualization comes when he discovers they are mirror images of one another, both desperately alone.

Aaron also serves as an example of a character that operates within the framework of this Realist tradition. Klinger describes these characters as “all, to a greater or lesser extent, willing exiles...What dominates the progress of [these characters] through their respective narratives is not action but knowledge, self-knowledge and solitary self-fulfillment” (309-10). In other words, the plot is secondary to the character’s absolution from personal conflict, the resolve not of the character’s condition but of their crisis of introspection. In each chapter of Aaron’s progression through the series, he learns more of himself, he is forced to recognize a flaw or strength within his persona, one that catapults him through the collection, the most evident being his personal revelation in “The Dog.” This moment fits into Klinger’s portrayal as she eloquently describes “that ascension to sober-minded adulthood essentially involves learning to deceive, intrigue, and manipulate, albeit ‘for love’” (312-3). Aaron is a testament to this kind of Realist bildungsroman, a man who with each cataclysm within his being, learning more, in tandem with the reader, about who he is and of what he is capable.

By modeling my stories on such dissimilar interests, I have been able to realize techniques within my fiction that I find infinitely fascinating. I have striven to evolve the characters within this collection to a state of being that echoes models of profound introspection found in the Realist authors I have discussed. Looking to different mediums of art, specifically analyzing the methods of narrative within the world of comic book storytelling, has given me perspective into how the words I don’t write can help me actualize my fiction as much as the

ones committed to paper. And, most importantly, by adding these techniques into a larger goal, a continuity aiming to make each line resonate far beyond the confines of the story in which it exists, I have been able to sew together the continental pieces of imagination into a whole that exists beyond the page on which it is written.

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PART II  
TELEPORT



## The Dog

I'd had my bag packed and ready to go for about fifteen minutes and had been daydreaming for the last hour. In my dream I wore a mask and carried a gun and drove a car: a fast one. There were sirens on my tail and I when I turned the wheel my tires screeched, the sort of noise that made pedestrians stop whatever they were doing and look in my direction. I swerved and slid across the asphalt, fishtailing through fruit stands and hurdling over barricades with the aide of unseen ramps. I tried to remember what crime I had committed (Robbed a bank? Vandalized some priceless piece of art?); I decided it didn't matter, the crime was never as important as the get-away.

My teacher closed the day by giving us our assignments for the following Monday, and, when dismissed, I ran for the door, pushing my way through a crowd of elbows and shoulders as I sprinted down the hall; the whole lot of us were smiling. I reached the door first and pushed as hard as I could. It swung outward slamming against the wall on the opposite side with a loud slap.

Outside, the sun was out and the air felt chilly. The leaves had yet to fall, but they reddened at the tips. Halloween was fast approaching and my costume had been coming along quite nicely. This year my mom was helping me make it and I couldn't be happier: she was great with that sort of thing. "Details," she'd say, "The magic's in the details." The details this year were a blister, one that looked wet and squishy that I'd place above a blackened eye, and a mouthful of rotten and blacked out teeth. Our kitchen table was covered in sores fashioned out of rubber cement. We laid out newspaper to keep the glue and paint from scarring the wood. I already had plenty of torn clothes. "The secret to a really great zombie is the walk. The walk is what sells it."

When my walk home had taken me far enough from the school to avoid any other students, I started practicing my zombie walk: arms shot out at odd angles, my joints held rigidly straight. I shot my legs out in jerky, uneven strides and allowed myself a few groans of mortified agony before losing my composure to laughter. I pulled my backpack tighter and began to run along the well-worn path that marked my daily route -- spurred on by an unending well of energy, that only the young may tap.

As I made my way out of the neighborhood in which the school resided and watched the houses begin to spread out, giving way more and more to the broad oaks that made up the lush, brilliantly green pines of my small town, I allowed myself to slow. I looked from my left to my right and noticed that if I squinted my eyes, just a little, the houses were indistinguishable from one another. One might have a painted rail or reddish shingles, but if you squinted, just a little, their uniformity was unavoidable. The flat and freshly cut lawns, the wide, painted garage, the plethora of windows trimmed inside with colorful curtains – I let my eyes wander to the top of the pines and the fluffy oaks interspersed into the horizon and it seemed to me like the trees had more personality.

I sped up again when I saw the bridge because I knew I was getting closer to home. The small wooden walk-way looked like my dad might have built it by himself: nothing more than a few two-by-fours nailed together, the planks lain sloppily, unevenly spaced, across the boards. To me this small bridge was some kind of magic gateway, providing passage across the small river that separated my neighbors and me from the rest of the town. There were other ways to get across, of course – several. But, this one stands out in my mind as special, if only for the reason that I was the only one I had ever seen use it, and I used it every chance I could get, even if the water did come up over my shoes when it rained.

When I got half way across, I stopped to stand on the railing, putting my stomach on the hand-rail and leaning out as far as I could without losing my balance. There were little bugs gliding across the surface of the water below and a big, fat toad was kicking its way to the opposite bank. I leaned my head back, collecting as much saliva as I could, then shot my head forward and spit as far as I could. It landed about a foot away from the toad, causing a ripple just large enough to make it change its course. I smiled and resumed my walk, feeling like an intrepid explorer charting never before seen wilderness. I let my mind wander, immersing myself into this new fantasy: I carried a rifle, my moccasins treading silently through the underbrush; a bear, bigger than a car, crashed through the trees and stood on its hind legs, unleashing a ferocious roar before I turned and shot.

The dream evaporated as quickly as it had emerged as a dog pounced onto the trail from a crowded clump of trees, its sudden appearance so similar to that of the bear's that I started, my shoulders involuntarily hunching in surprise. It seemed to dance in a circle, snapping his teeth together at a butterfly that seemed like it was trying to politely ignore him. I walked forward cautiously, ready to turn and sprint away if he showed the least sign of aggression. When he noticed me, he casually forgot about the insect and trotted over to me. He writhed with excitement, flopping onto his back then springing back to his feet, then back onto his back, begging for my touch.

He didn't look like any dog I had seen before – definitely not like the small yapping pets my friends owned. This dog was big. On all fours, his head came over my belt, but he was skinny and his ribs looked like they were about to rip out from the thin, paper-like skin covering his sides. He had a dirty, red collar around his neck, but no tag identifying an owner. His fur was of a similar color: dark brown with a reddish tint, with large black patches on his head and

back. His head looked huge compared to his slender legs and torso – his snout, long and pointed. His wide, floppy tongue lapped continuously at a stream of snot that drooled down his upper lip. I bent over cautiously and ran my hand through his stiff, greasy fur. Instinctively, I smelled my hand and gagged, and decided to keep walking.

He pranced beside me, panting and looking up at me with his dark brown eyes. They looked like huge pools of muddy water. His lower eyelids sagged and gave his eyes a look of bewildered sadness, completely at odds with his grinning mouth. I tried to shoo him away with elaborate hand gestures, silently communicating that I didn't have any food to give to him (I'd already eaten my lunch, and I was saving my candy bar for later). He didn't seem to understand and circled me, sniffing the ground and rubbing his head on my legs as I continued to walk. Every once in a while, something would catch his attention and he would bound away through the trees (probably looking for some small animal to eat) then return to my side, sniffing frenetically at my sneakers.

When I reached my front gate, I, again, tried to tell him to go away – my dad didn't allow animals at our house. The dog just started, unconvinced. "It's true," I said, "I'll get in trouble." I pushed open the gate just enough to squeeze my body inside, but the dog managed to wriggle his head in after me. I held the gate in place pushing against his shoulder as he shoved forward and writhed, trying to worm the rest of the way in, until he whimpered as if I was hurting him. I let the gate swing forward and he raced past me, running huge circles around the backyard. I tried to grab him each time he passed me, but it was a fruitless effort and I never did more than graze his fur as he streaked by.

I opened the gate and walked to the side of the house to make sure that my dad's station wagon was gone, then tiptoed to the kitchen window and peeked inside – no one there either.

The dog, apparently tired out, sat down next to me panting. He rubbed his head against my blue jeans and whimpered. I crouched down beside him and scratched behind his scabby ears. I watched his ribs expand and contract at his side, as he breathed laboriously. If I didn't give him something to eat, he might fall over dead right there – then my dad would definitely know I brought a dog home. My dad had rules – and I followed them as best I could. That was the way it was in the Eckson house. I looked down at my watch (a plastic digital designed for a female jogger) that my mom had passed down to me. It was a quarter passed four; my dad wouldn't get home until six. If I were careful, he wouldn't know.

I walked back around to the front of the house with the dog (as ever) at my heels. I crouched down and wiped his feet with the square of carpet we used as a welcome mat, then grabbed his collar and opened the front door, leading him to the pale yellow refrigerator that I had covered with pictures of Dracula and Spider-man. “Are you hungry?” I asked in a high-pitched, baby-voice, as I reached inside and removed a package of sliced turkey. I fed the dog slice by slice and laughed as he gulped down each piece in a swallow. “Yeah, you're hungry.” As I fed him he seemed to get hungrier, lifting himself onto his hind legs, then jumping, to snap the meat from my fingers. “Whoa, boy,” I said, “Slow down.”

We'd almost finished the entire packet before I heard the front door swing open. Thoughts dashed from one my ears to the other, none in the middle long enough to be coherent: Who's home? What are they doing back so early? Why aren't they at work? What am I going to do?

I threw the remains of the turkey back in to the refrigerator and grabbed the dog's collar. Tugging him stubbornly behind me, I managed to drag him through the back hallway and up the stairs. If I left the way I'd come in, I'd be seen for sure. One bark and I was a dead man, but

somehow I was able to force him into my room and close the door without being caught. I waited a moment outside my door in anticipation, but the dog remained silent. I guiltily sulked down the stairs and into the living room where I was met by a trio of red, swollen faces. My whole family stopped to look at me: my father obviously furious, my little brother, Jimmy, looking like he had been crying and my mother, looking like she was about to start.

“What are you doing home?” I asked, then kicked myself for sounding so surprised.

“I live here don’t I?” my dad fumed. I knew better than to answer.

My mom, now struggling to hold onto my brother while he wriggled, asked me to take him to his room upstairs. He was only two and a half, but it was obvious he knew they were fighting as well as I did and he didn’t give me any trouble as I led him upstairs by the hand.

Jimmy’s room was next door to my own, and I held my breath, listening for the dog. I prayed that he would stay quiet that he wouldn’t bark. He could shit on my bed, as long as he didn’t make a sound.

I sat Jimmy down on his bed (still listening for any noise from my room) and got him started reading his favorite book, the Five Little Monkeys. “Five little monkeys sitting in a tree,” I read. “Teasing Mr. Crocodile, ‘Can’t catch me!’” At this, my brother wagged his finger, mocking the monkeys in the story. “Along comes Mr. Crocodile....SNAP!” My brother and I clapped our hands together in unison, and he giggled. “Oh no! Where is he?”

Once Jimmy was entertained by his book, I was able to leave the room without him making a fuss. I crept back down the stairs and into the kitchen. I scoured the tile looking for bits of turkey or any muddy footprints the dog might have left behind. Just to be safe, I wiped the counter with a wet paper towel and crouched to clean the floor. I could hear my father in the next room, growling in a voice that was somewhere between a whisper and a shout. The door

that led from the kitchen to the living room was on a swinging hinge and left a sizable gap between its lower edge and the floor. As quietly as I could, I lowered myself down onto my stomach, lying flat on the linoleum to see through the crack. From this angle, I could see my parents from the knee down.

“Don’t you dare!” my dad grunted. He was pacing back and forth as my mom stood in front of the sofa, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. “Don’t you dare try and blame this on me.” My dad stamped his foot for emphasis. “I told you I didn’t want him at the garage. Why didn’t *you* take him to work? You’re his mother for Christ’s sake! You’re supposed to babysit him...not me. You should be here at home making sure this kind of thing doesn’t happen.” My dad turned on his heels and stormed a few paces away. My mom still fidgeted, digging her toes into the carpet.

“I told you, Sweetie, my boss won’t let me have her at the office. Besides, I can’t just take time off. With the garage losing business, I’m making more money than you, and...”

“That’s beside the point!” my dad shouted no longer making the effort to keep the volume of his voice in check. His shoes took two large steps and were now so close to my mom’s that they were touching, toe to toe. My mom tried to take a step backward, but hit her foot on the couch behind her. “You are really something! How *dare*...”

Before my dad was able to finish, a high-pitched scream brought the argument to a sudden halt. My parents stood frozen as the noise trailed off only long enough for Jimmy to take a breath and start again. I got to my feet in a hurry and sprinted toward the stairs, but somehow both my parents zipped past me. Jimmy stood motionless at the top of the landing, his eyes squeezed shut, wailing at the ceiling, the left half of his face smeared with blood.

“What the hell happened!” my father shouted, sounding more angry than concerned.

Jimmy ignored him and continued to cry. My mother swooped him up into her arms and began to rock him back and forth, jiggling him up and down, like she did when he was a baby.

She wiped the blood from his face with her open hand, taking on a kind of calm authority.

“What happened, baby? How’d Jimmy hurt his face?”

“The puppa-dog! The puppa-dog!” he cried. “Mean!”

“What dog?” my dad yelled, “What dog?” Jimmy pointed to the door to my room. In unison, my mother and father looked toward my room, then, as if they had just remembered I existed, turned to look accusingly at me. “Open that door.” My dad said – his voice dropping to its most menacing timbre. “Right...now.” Hesitantly, I walked up the remaining stairs and past my mother, keeping my eyes firmly fixed on the ground. As I passed my father, he shoved the back of my head, causing me to cover the rest of the way to my room in a stumble.

I put my hand on the knob of the door. “I...” I began, then I lost the words, resigned to the fact that the worst had happened and there was nothing I could say to make it better. I opened the door an inch. Immediately, the dog pressed his muzzle against the opening, his tongue lapping through the gap. My dad stepped forward and slammed the door shut again. I wouldn’t have been surprised to find the dog’s tongue lying severed at my feet. He stared at me without saying a word, as if he wanted to kill me. We stood this way for what seemed like minutes as my mom shushed Jimmy. Seeming to gain some modicum of self control, my father began barking orders at my mother, telling her to go clean the wound with antiseptic, to cover it with duct tape, it would keep out infection, that we couldn’t afford another doctor’s visit. He probably would have gone on that way, but my mom didn’t stick around to hear it and trotted down the stairs with Jimmy held to her chest.



“Stay here.” My father stormed off downstairs, leaving me alone in the hallway, the dog scratching at the other side of my door.

“Shut up!” I hissed. “Just shut up!” I could hear my father’s footsteps as he clomped through the house. They faded away, then all too soon, reemerged with the same (all too quick) stride. He reappeared with a long rope in his hand, looped in a tight circle. My heart seemed to have made its way into my brain and was throbbing so intensely I had to clench my fists and close my eyes. He was going to hang me. He was going to tie a noose around my neck and throw me out the window as a Halloween decoration.

Instead, he brushed past me and into my room. In no time at all, he reemerged yanking the dog along by a make-shift leash. Next to my father, the dog looked much smaller than I remembered him. He looked pathetic. It was hard to imagine he could hurt a cat, much less my little brother. My father wasn’t a big man -- he was shorter than my mother -- but he was thick. Despite his soft middle, his arms were muscular and imposing from years of working in the shop. “Outside,” he said, furling his brow as if the sight of me made him nauseous. As I crossed the house I could see my mom, still babying my brother, who was standing on one of the kitchen chairs. They watched as we walked by, staring at me with a combination of accusation and pity. I approached the screen door to our backyard, feeling like a man approaching the gallows...the guillotine...the firing squad...the electric chair.

I walked out the door, my father lingering behind to talk to my mother. I sat down on the steps of the porch and began to tremble. My eyes had begun to water when my dad slammed open the door, still jerking the dog’s collar with his rope. “Follow me,” he said. He began to walk into the woods that lined the backs of the houses on our street, following the same path I had walked earlier that day. Was it really the same day? I felt like a completely different

person. The sun had begun to set, changing the colors of everything its light fell upon. It was as if retracing my steps had created some inverse reality, some black hole that sucked you in and spit out some twisted copy of your former self.

We stopped about five minutes into woods. My dad leaned down and tied the loose end of the rope around the trunk of a tree. Still not talking, my dad grabbed my wrist and led me a few paces away, my arm squishing like a stick of butter in his powerful hand. “You know we don’t allow animals in the house.” My dad looked at me like as if he could see some hideous monster crawling slowly out of my forehead – as if *I* had bitten Jimmy.

“He followed me.” I said, the exclamation sounding incredibly trivial.

“Here,” my dad said, reaching behind his back, “You brought it here...you get rid of it,” and produced what looked to my unbelieving eyes like an impossibly large handgun. “Do you have any idea...” my dad said, “Do you have any idea the diseases that thing might have? The diseases you have brought into our house? He bit your brother for God’s sake!”

My dad put the gun into my hand, the weight of the thing causing my arm to drop to my side. “Hold that thing up!” my dad commanded. I lifted it again, unable to tear my eyes from the dull mass of metal. I’d never seen a real gun, much less held one. I couldn’t believe how heavy it was. Every cowboy and vigilante I’d seen on TV threw them around as if they were light as a feather. It was like finding out clouds were scratchy or that Santa had a sex-life. I began to tremble.

“What in the hell are you waiting for? Shoot the damn thing!”

I pointed the gun at the dog. It stood with its legs spread well past its shoulders, as if it was about to collapse and fall down dead without my help.

“Pull the trigger, Aaron. What the hell is wrong with you?”

My hands were now shaking alarmingly; I tried to send a mental command to my finger to squeeze the trigger, to just get it over with, but it was as if I had lost all control. “I can’t.” I said in a choked whisper.

“What do you mean you *can’t*” My father’s voice was mocking – sarcastic. I began to cry. “Jesus Christ! Don’t give me that cry-baby shit; do as I told you.” I tried again to block everything out and shoot while at the same time trying to hold back my sobs – to just stop crying. I failed in both areas. “A *man* takes care of his responsibilities! A *man* does what he has to do, what *needs* to be done. Do it! Do it!” I don’t know how long my father continued like this. As his words lost coherency, his message did not. I was not a man; he made that abundantly clear. But, his harshness, his bitterness, made it clear that in his eyes I was nowhere close to resembling the innocence and affection one attributes to boyhood. His words began to jumble together as I lost control of my body entirely and fell to my knees. I was horrified at the idea of shooting the dog, and I was terrified of my father’s relentless haranguing, but, more than anything, I was embarrassed at my tears, at my uncontrollable weeping.

My father yanked the gun out of my hand. It disappeared behind his back and he dragged me to my feet. He spoke with a renewed calm, without losing the shame and bitter undercurrent in his words. “Get up and wipe your self off. You’re a god-damned mess.” He stood rigidly beside me as I struggled to my feet, then, grabbing me by the collar of my shirt, started me in the direction of the house. I was still crying, but softly now, and I could hear my father’s heavy feet thumping behind me.

When we reached the house I made for my room, passed my mother and brother, who was now watching television, the left side of his face covered in gauze. I didn’t want to be seen and I didn’t want to them to speak, I just wanted to get to my room and lay down. I was

extraordinarily tired. “Aaron?” my father called after me. I was half way up the stairs and could see the open door to my room. It took every fiber of my will to turn and meet his gaze, to keep myself from sprinting away at the sound of his voice. I stood for just a moment, my hand on the banister, my eyes trained on the steps, then slowly turned to my father. His face had changed. It had softened, his eyes wide and somehow beckoning. There was something strange and familiar about the way he looked just then. He didn’t look like the hard, rigid man I recognized, but there was something familiar about him – some obscure, faded image – a reminder of the man who had held me and fed me from a bottle close to his chest, the man whose heavy hand fell on my back, beating a steady, unalterable rhythm, and brought comfort. He opened his mouth to speak, before his features tightened again, his brow furrowing into a tight, Gordian knot that I remembered much more clearly. He turned his head, fixing his eyes on the television, as if it made it easier for him to speak. “We’ll try again tomorrow.”

I spent the better part of the evening staring out into the leaves of the trees outside my window. I watched a squirrel dart from branch to branch, his movements always quick and jerky, each short distance covered as if in flight from some winged predator. He collected bark and acorns and settled on my window sill to eat these scraps with the same furtiveness he’d shown in gathering them. His jaws worked speedily, continually biting, stuffing his cheeks in frenzy, his hands wringing and turning each morsel in unbearable agitation; scraps fell from his grip unattended. Every so often, he would startle, his tail jumping from one side to the other, his shoulders cringing and his back arching. These frights came irregularly, without any observable cause. I tapped my finger on my knee each time, trying to discern a pattern. When I couldn’t puzzle one out, I grew frustrated and beat my fist upon the glass, giving him a corporal fear and causing him to jump from my sight.

My fist made a hollow sound on the glass, a low thump that reverberated for only a moment like a sound of muted tympani. The sound seemed to echo, a short reverberation that sounded as if it had bounced off of the wall behind me. This didn't give me pause until it came again a few seconds later. It was a muffled sound, a quiet noise that I attributed to the dishwasher or perhaps the washing machine noisily rocking with an uneven load – until it came again. This third time, the noise grew in duration, its tail rising in pitch like a guitar string being plucked, then stretched away from the center of the neck, like a single note lifted from Chuck Berry's famous solo in 'Johnny B. Goode'. I moved in the direction of the sound, walking to my door and placing my ear upon the wood. It began to take shape sounding more like the mewing of a kitten. The sounds began to come more frequently; I opened the door and walked to the landing. From here I could hear it for what it was. I didn't have to see what was happening, my ears described the source more accurately than my watery eyes could ever relate. It was my mother and father. My father struck her and she wailed. I pressed my palms to my eyes and gritted my teeth. It was unbearable. My mother howled.

I ran back into my room, slamming the door behind me and jumped, face first, onto the bed. I wrapped my pillow around my head pressing it to my ears so tightly I heard nothing, nothing but a soft white static hum. I lay there for long time. Again, the passing of time became irrelevant: perception at odds with reality. Would this day ever end?

Finally, I dozed off, and when I awoke, sweating, my room was dark. I crawled off of the bed, discarding the pillow and opened my window. I cracked the door and listened intently to the quiet house, straining my ears for any sign of my parents' previous struggle. There were so many things I didn't understand, so many questions without answer. Why punish my mother? Why not me? I had brought the dog; it was my fault it bit Jimmy. It was my fault it was still out

there, tied to a tree. Then, as if whatever fates had engineered the day had mistaken my effort to hear my mother's voice for desire, I did hear her. She cried out in a phantasmagorical agony, inhuman and surreal. It was like nothing I had ever heard – not on late-night television where aliens indiscriminately abducted unsuspecting pedestrians or in the violent, murderous matinees I frequented on weekends. It instilled in me a fear so palpable I could taste it: bitter and metallic. Had my window still been shut, I might have never been the wiser. I might have gone on this way, wringing my hands, biting my cheeks and my lips until mad, but it was open and when the howling voice reemerged from the dead silence of the night it was unmistakable. It was unquestionably that god-damned dog.

The terror I had initially felt wildly boiling inside me, slowly faded into something much more dependable. It had changed, though not transformed completely, into a simmer of determined hatred. It was that god-damned dog. It followed me home. It bit my brother. It did... I struggled to put the pieces together in my mind. It did *something* to my father, to my family.

Quietly, I shut the window and left my room peeking downstairs to make sure the light was off. I crept down the stairs and through the hall, feeling in front of me for any foreign object I might bump into, while trailing my fingers along the wall for guidance. In the living room there was a dark orange glow lighting the furniture and reflecting off the furniture. I sat down in my dad's recliner and stared at the mantle. There had been a fire that had just burned down. A large log lay burned through the middle on top of two others that were blackened and resting on a pile of glowing embers. It looked like a little war, being waged between two enemy encampments. The coals would pop and jump through the air while small licks of flame flared up in unexpected places. Every once in a while, little pieces of the wood would crumble down

into the ash, like buildings toppling to the ground. It looked as if one firm breath would bring the fire roaring back to the surface.

I let my eyes wander across the brick fireside, then stood up and grabbed the poker. I walked with a soft, even tread to the back door and pulled open the screen. It squealed its familiar whine and I cringed. Slowly, I pulled the door shut behind me, pulling the latch all the way down to prevent any unnecessary rattling. I walked across the porch, rolling my feet from heel to toe, then across the yard and into the woods. I was surprised by how much of the moonlight was blocked by the trees. The farther I was got from home, the harder it was to see. The dog, however, was easy to find – its ceaseless belly-aching getting louder with each step.

When I got close, it ran in my direction and began scratching at the dirt. I stared into its imploring, lamp-like eyes that, in the dark, no longer looked cute. Its silhouette blurred in the shadows, no different than the rocks, the roots, or the piles of leaves that surrounded it.

I began to shake as I had before when I lifted the poker but my tears had long since dried out. Besides, I had promised myself I wouldn't cry. The dog stood panting, still staring stupidly up at me. I brought the metal down, but weakly, hitting it on the back. In a moment, it was on its haunches, growling, snapping at the air in front of it. I had made sure to stand at the rope's end, but its barks were loud and I started to feel frightened again. Suddenly, I didn't feel like the predator, but the prey, the victim of this intolerable illocutionary violence. The most important thing – the only thing – was to get this god-damned dog to stop barking. I grabbed the base of the poker with both hands and brought it down as hard as I could on the dog's head. Blood shot from his eye like a soda that had been shaken before it was opened, rocketing a black spray that shot out in all directions. My face was wet and my shirt was covered in small damp circles, as if I had been running through our sprinkler at home. I had struck it above the eye socket and the

loose skin and bone slumped over his eye like a blanket. I was still barking, drool flying from its mouth as it tried to pull itself free of the rope – so I hit it again, this time my blow landing on his snout. I heard a snap and could feel the damage through the poker – a small thing, something giving way. It began walking away from me, head bowed, zigzagging as it went. I stepped confidently into the circumference of the rope.

When I returned home, I cleaned the poker and my hands with the water hose outside. An unpleasantly cold breeze had begun to blow and the water chilled my hands. I let myself in the house, locking the door behind me. I replaced the poker on the mantle and crouched down on the hearth. I pulled a long breath into my lungs and released it slowly, allowing the air to blow smoothly over the embers that remained. The fire, though small, resurfaced, and I let its warmth envelope my hands. I wasn't proud of what I had done, but I was proud of myself – the acknowledgment of this very contradiction, perhaps, a recitation of my first steps into manhood.



## The Highlands

Chris lived with his grandparents in the Highlands. Well, that's what we called it. Really, it was Stubenner, the unincorporated township outside of the suburb the rest of us called home. The "Highlands" were called so because, simply enough, it's where we got high. Chris, fortunately enough, had access to any number of illegal substances. Fortunately for me, I had access to Chris.

Chris was my best friend, and although that term can mean a host of different things to a host of different people, to me it meant that he was company. Not to say I didn't like the guy, but when you boil it down, that's what he was. I met Chris at a time in my life when I just needed someone my age to talk to – it wasn't a psychoanalysis or therapy by any stretch of the imagination. Mostly, we talked about girls and music and gossip concerning the lives of our mutual acquaintances (who was fucking who, who had weed, who had speed, who was pregnant, and who was going to kick who's ass). Despite the banality of our discussions, I loved them. I could care less about the people we talked about – they weren't real to me – but this endless conversation served as a diversion from the lack of stimulation I felt when Chris was away.

My brother was too young for me to relate to. He was a good ten years my junior and had his own friends to occupy his free time. Most night's he'd hole up in his room, reading comic books or doing homework. Invariably, he'd spend the weekends at a friend's house, watching movies or having campouts. His close circle of friends all lived in the neighborhood; each night (that wasn't a school night), they'd stay at a different kid's house. This merry-go-round of slumber parties and campfires went on for years, but I can't remember more than a handful of occasions when they stayed at our own house. Maybe he felt the same way I did – could sense the change in our father. Maybe it was because we didn't have cable.

I never got along with my father. He was the kind of man that rarely spoke, but he wasn't always that way. I seemed to remember a time when he was affectionate, quiet for sure, but open, receiving. But the change in him was as identifiable as red ink on black and white print. If my father's life (the life I knew of) had been put in front of me, a timeline to be read and analyzed, without effort, without even thinking, I could easily point to the two moments that changed his behavior.

The first was more nebulous than the latter, and I knew of mainly from my mother's account of the matter. She used to reminisce about the glory days of my father's garage: a time when business was at its best, a time of financial gain and security for the, then, newly married couple. They bought a house, the house we still live in today, and they had a child: me. But, as the saying goes, all good things come to an end, and my father began to lose business. Eventually he closed the shop and was unemployed for almost a year, our family living off of my mother's meager nurse's salary. I remember this time well: my father's confident demeanor slowly deflating like a balloon whose air has found some microscopic escape. It was punctuated by fighting between my mother and father; verbal, and sometimes physical, abuse that used to keep me up at night. I don't think my brother remembers any of this; he was too young. Being a fly on the wall to this kind of dysfunction, being voyeuristically witness to this distortion of the man I'd known and loved since birth, made me feel cold inside, like no amount of heat could touch that frozen core in my gut. I remember this time in my life with horror, flat out, unassailable terror. I didn't think the fighting, the screaming, the poorly hidden bruises and broken dishes would ever end, but when it did it was bitter-sweet.

The second turning point in my father's life is much easier to pin down. It was one of those seminal moments that are almost cliché in their tragedy. I understand my father's

response. I understand it completely. He shut down. He was broken. The once quiet man whose explosive temper made me afraid, became an almost perfectly silent man whose emotions were buried deep and packed tightly under miles of expressionless calm. This I understood. One expects a man to change, to react drastically to a trauma. What I didn't understand were my own feelings: the relief I felt when my mother passed away and the fighting came to an end.

I never talked to Chris about these things. The loneliness I felt and bitterness toward my father, were extended beyond my household; it was the entire town, it was everything and everyone around me that received my ire, my loathing. It was this general antipathy that I shared with Chris. Our conversations were always focused on a unifying theme: getting away – away from our families, away from school, just away; the alternatives were never discussed. We had no allusions that things were better elsewhere; it was enough to know that these places were not here.

It was this general desire to escape (ill-formed in our minds as it was) that, perhaps, led us to drugs and gave Teleport its Eden-like mystique. To us, Teleport was the kind of place that seemed tucked away and hidden from the outside world, despite its popularity among other kids our age. To get there you had to walk about twenty minutes along a small trail through a steep, lightly wooded and rocky terrain. Technically, Teleport referred to a small road that ran from a bicycle trail to large amount of land, fenced in with barb-wire, that housed AT&T's satellite dishes, transformers and receiving towers in the Highlands. Generally, to the teenagers in our vicinity, Teleport was a maze of crumbling concrete, beyond this road, that bordered the area where the train tracks crossed over the Trinity River and ran parallel to the communications compound. The river itself was about twenty feet below the train tracks and about a foot deep.

To get to the river's edge, you had to walk down an incline, scattered with debris. To slip on the way down meant a face full of water that smelled like an unflushed toilet.

Chris and I had our own piece of Teleport, just as many other groups of friends had found theirs, a place we spent our free time and got high without fear of being found by adults or harassed by police. It was a large concrete support slab that extended beneath the tracks: a cool, comfortable place to pass the time. It was important to us that this small space be ours and ours alone. Like a favorite chair, that nobody else may sit in. Shortly after finding it, we brought a backpack full of spray paint and wrote our names on the wall.

On the weekends, there always seemed to be something happening at Teleport. Little factions of high-school friends would come down to have a bonfire or bring a date and make out. Many kids would come just to vandalize the place, to spray paint what little unmarked surface remained there or throw discarded items off the train tracks to watch them shatter when they hit the river bottom. There were the remains of microwaves, televisions and toilets littered about the river bank. There were small parties, and it wasn't uncommon to find alcohol and marijuana passed freely among strangers like some communal offering. In the right circles you could find prescription drugs, narcotics or psychedelics for sale and Chris was well known among them. Mainly, these so called dealers were kids no older than Chris or me, experimenting and posturing, playacting the sordid life of the perennial bad boy persona. I never felt unsafe at Teleport. No one ever overdosed and, although there were plenty of fights, no one was ever seriously injured until Chris died.

I woke that afternoon at around three; I ate some cereal and watched some television, killing time until Jim was released from school. I had stopped going a couple months back. Either my father was never alerted or he just didn't care. Around four I left the house and

walked up the road, cutting across the football field to the student parking lot. When I spotted Jim's truck, a beat up Chevy his grandfather had passed down to him on his sixteenth birthday, I let myself in the passenger side door and sat with my feet on the glove box, trying to spot constellations on the speckled, smoke-stained roof of the cab. I must have dozed off, because when Chris swung open the driver side door, it startled me and I shot bolt upright in my seat.

“Calm down, bucko,” he said, laughing, “You weren't beating it in here were you?”

“Shut your filthy mouth,” I said in mock outrage. “You'd like that wouldn't you?”

“Hey, what you do in public in my grandfather's truck is none of my business. Besides, I have something else for you to be excited about.” Chris placed his backpack between us on the console and zipped it open. Reaching into the bottom of the back, under three heavy textbooks, he pulled out a small zip-lock bag filled with chopped, mushrooms. “Look at that!” he said, “twelve grams!” He said this as if I should be impressed – so I was – never mind that I'd never taken shrooms before and had no idea how potent a gram of the stuff could be.

We started off toward Teleport, and arrived much earlier than usual, skipping dinner in Chris's excitement to ingest his latest score. The sun wouldn't even begin to set for a few more hours and we were free to roam around, walking up the tracks while splitting the mushrooms between us. There were never many people there on weekdays, and, unsurprisingly, we had the place to ourselves. We chewed on the bitter, somewhat rubbery fungus as we walked, working our shares between our teeth as long as possible, trying to extract their maximum potency, until they were soaked with saliva and we couldn't help but swallow. Chris said it would be about an hour before we felt anything so we continued our journey along the track waiting for a train.

It wasn't long before we saw one appear around the corner up ahead. Without talking, we ducked into the trees waiting for the head car to pass. We'd never seen a conductor before;

we didn't even know if these big cargo freights needed one, but we hid just the same – better safe than sorry. After a few cars had passed, we jogged along side it, moving a fraction slower than the train itself, then grabbed a rung and hopped aboard. It wasn't difficult, and was an activity Chris and I had grown rather fond of. It felt liberating, clinging to the ladders (nothing more than a dozen metal handles, leading up the side), our feet planted against the flat iron, and, although the train had slowed a considerable amount due to the sharp curve on the other side of compound, it still made my heart race and filled my head with adrenaline. We never rode for long, just across the bridge and into the clearing on the other side. We'd jump off, tumbling as our feet touched ground; then dusting off our clothing, we'd walk up the rails waiting for the next train. Often, another would never show, but, some days, it seemed they never stopped coming.

After dismounting, I felt dizzy and a little bruised. I picked myself up and walked back to the bridge, sitting down in our usual spot, and rested my head against the concrete. Across from me I could see our names, sloppily painted across the jutting strut. I wondered if the conductors ever saw them as they approached, the thick block letters outlined in blaring, uncomplimentary colors.

Jim took a seat next to me and put his against his knees. His back was rising and falling rapidly; he seemed out of breath and his cheeks were flushed a bright pink. "Are you okay?" I asked, beginning to feel my own breath quicken.

"Not really, man. Not really." Chris looked up at me, his eyes swollen as if he were about to cry.

"Dude, what is it? Are you having a bad trip?" Chris barked laughter at this, grinning at my inexperience.

“No, I’m not having a bad trip...not yet at least.”

“What do you mean?”

Slowly, Chris’s smile faded. “I’m leaving, man. I found out this morning. My granddad’s getting transferred. We’re leaving in a couple of weeks.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Chris repeated himself, but the idea still seemed preposterous. “You can’t just leave.”

“I *am* leaving,” he said, “I don’t have a choice in the matter. My granddad...”

“Fuck your granddad.” I shouted. Now I was certainly breathing quickly, my temples pumped and I could feel my anger intensify with each throbbing thump. “You can’t go, what the fuck am I supposed to do?”

“You?” Chris looked at me incredulously, “What do you mean *you*? I don’t want to move out to butt-fucking nowhere, but I have to. It has nothing to do with you.”

“You don’t have to do shit!” My voice rose again and I stood. I was now openly screaming. The thudding in my temples spread through out my body, my nostrils flaring and contracting in sync.

“If my grandparents go, I go. I can’t just abandon them.” Chris got to his feet, crossing his arms across his chest, sulking at my outburst. “Think about how I feel.”

“Think about how *you* feel? I...I...” I clinched my fists and gritted my teeth, I looked at Chris’s stupid, unhappy face and began to lose focus. I wiped at my eyes and looked again, but he was blurry, his silhouette seeming to sway side to side. For a moment I wondered if it was the drugs. Did we get some bad shit? Could mushrooms make you go blind? I concentrated harder, trying to calm myself, then, realized I was crying, my vision distorting as the moisture compounded, then clearing as the fat blobs rolled past my eyelids. I wiped them away and began

again, spilling out my frustrations, the peripheral thoughts that had orbited our conversations for years. I told him how I missed my mother, hated my father, alienated my brother; I told him that I loved him and that I would miss him too much if he left. I opened all doors, as if to let all of the demons inside of me escape: a purge to cleanse the festering bowels of my mind – but the demons remained. I didn't feel better about the situation. I didn't feel relieved; I felt precarious, treacherous. Chris took a step forward, an expression of motherly concern painted on his face like a clown. He opened his arms and advanced, meaning to comfort and console me. I punched him in the nose.

He fell back onto his ass, an expression of stunned disbelief on his face. In harmony, his eyes began to water and his nose began to bleed. We stayed like that, looking at each other, lost in our own thoughts, waiting for the other to say something. Neither of us did. Instead, I helped him to his feet. “You hit like a fucking pussy,” he said, and began to smile: not a wide smile, there was no joy in it, but it was a forgiving smile, a gracious smile. He was bigger than I was, and could have probably beat me senseless, but he wouldn't do that. Instead, he walked to around the side of the concrete embankment and returned with two cans of spray-paint. “I stashed them under a rock.”

We went to work on our names, adding layer upon layer, expanding and warping the letters, until they were scarcely distinguishable as words at all. The sun began to set, moving closer to the horizon and glaring in our eyes until we couldn't see and were forced to stop.

We crawled up the incline, shielding our eyes and looked out along the track. There was another train coming, already rebuilding its speed after coming off of the curve. We stood unobscured as the train began to pass, the side of each car defaced with graffiti similar to our own: indistinguishable names and symbols, spray-painted in extravagantly boastful and



offensively crude slices of color. They were grotesque. In that moment the train became a thing of beauty to me – a silver shell birthed from some unseen mother, racing along a predetermined path until it comes to its mysterious end – defaced again and again, each car that passing, scarred in permanent acrylic. The sun raged behind its metallic body, the light frantically diving through the space between each freight, only visible for the briefest instant. The spoiled cars passed again and again, over and over, and I strained my eyes looking for the caboose, the end to this madness – but it didn't come. Like some mottled snake, creeping inch by inch, the train moved on and on, until at last, in the distance I saw the end; it startled me, as if I expected it not to come, and I began running, sprinting along side the train. I could hear Jimmy's feet pounding the rocks behind me. I saw my opportunity and grabbed it the force of the train's momentum, jerking my arm, jettisoning me forward, my legs dangling until they found purchase on some lower protuberance. I looked back and saw Jimmy, still running, falling behind as three...four...five cars passed between us. Digging the balls of his feet into the dirt, he put on a final burst of speed, reaching out with first one hand and then the other. He grabbed a rail and, like me, rather than jumping, he was pulled off of his feet. His side crashed against the train, causing him to lose his grip with one hand. For the merest second, it looked like he was flying his arms fully outspread like Peter Pan darting off to Neverland, and then, just as fleetingly, he was falling, before being pulled beneath the wheels.

My memory of Chris's death hasn't faded with time, but not because of its morbidity. There was nothing particularly violent -- no shockingly gruesome spectacle I was forced to witness – its simplicity, perhaps, causing a much more lasting impression. I didn't see him devoured below the train; I didn't see much of anything, and in the seconds it took for him to fall, the distance between us had grown exponentially – it could have been dust or water sprayed

to keep the wheels from overheating as easily as it could have been Chris – just a quick cloud of mist bursting into the open air.

I looked for a place to dismount, but by the time my shock had subsided, the trees had thickened and the terrain became uneven and untrustworthy; besides, the train was moving much too fast, to leap now would mean broken bones or worse – had the train been moving slowly, I might have still been too frightened to let go. Instead, I forced my aching muscles to pull me atop the freight and I lay on my back with my eyes closed with no thought of where I was going or what I was leaving behind.

## It Must Be High or Low

“All in boys?” Barry asked, shuffling the cards, “It’s about time I taught you a thing or two.”

I scoffed. “You act like you’re an expert at everything.”

“Maybe I ain’t,” he said, “but I’m a fast fuckin’ learner.”

Barry wasn’t an easy guy to get along with, but he was good for a beer. Sometimes friendships (if you can call them that) are formed this way: each party accepting the faults of the other without evaluating the merit of what little is gained.

“Put out or get out,” he said, sliding a bottle to me from across the table, “words to the wise in women and cards.”

Our poker table was figuratively on its last leg and literally on its last two. One side was supported by the nightstand I had taken from home when I moved out of my parents’ house, the other by Barry’s electric keyboard stand. The surface of the top was warped and discolored by the condensation and spills that had become a nightly occurrence. We could have gotten a new one, maybe one covered with green felt, the kind that allows the cards to slide smoothly along the surface when you dealt. Hell, some nights, my winnings alone would have been enough to refurnish the entire garage. But, our table, wobbly and distorted as it was, had one saving grace: it was big – big enough to seat ten and still play a comfortable hand of poker. The table occupied about seventy-five percent of the garage’s open area, the little space that was left shared by a refrigerator and three revolving fans. During game nights, the garage became intolerably hot and stuffy, and by the time we staggered out, drunk and soaked with our own

piss-smelling sweat, we felt like tortured souls, time-served, climbing out of the depths of a fiery underworld to breathe fresh air for the first time in ages.

I'd moved in with Barry, straight out of the dorms. We had met in a Human Sexuality class that turned out to be a lot less exciting than either of us were expecting. One night after class, Barry bought me the first of many beers.

The next semester, Barry and I became roommates. We rented a house about a mile off campus and furnished it with furniture we bought from freshmen moving into the dorms. You'd be surprised how cheap you can buy someone's stuff when they are faced with the prospect of carrying it up five or six flights of stairs. We decorated the house almost exclusively with road signs and license plates we had stolen during our tenure in the dormitories.

Neither Barry nor I worked. My parents provided my half of the rent, along with a little extra to live off of (wired to my personal bank account each month). This gave me enough money to buy food and little else. Barry, on the other hand, had enough money to keep our fridge reliably stocked with an assortment of imported and exotic beers, many of which I had never heard of. This certified him, to me, as an ideal roommate, regardless of any flaw in character.

One night, Barry and I decided to throw a poker party. I had been watching a lot of Texas Hold 'em on television and it didn't look too difficult. It was the only thing on at two in the morning besides the Home Shopping Network and a litany of "As Seen on TV" advertising – poker seemed a better use of money. I caught on to the rules fairly quickly and thought it would be fun to try. When I brought it up with Barry, he laughed.

"Texas Hold 'em?" he said, chuckling, "Celebrity bullshit. If you want to play poker, I'll show you how it's done."

Later that day, Barry and I went to the Good Will and found our table. Then, it was only missing one leg, and we tied to the top of my car, drove it home and placed it in its, now sacred, spot in our garage. From that day forward, the garage door never touched the ground. Always, to keep from suffocating, we left it at least half-way raised to let in air.

That night, Barry and I had a couple of mutual friends from school over for cards. As they arrived, Barry would hand them a beer and offer them a place at the table. “Listen up and shut up,” Barry would say, lifting his bottle. “House rules – Number One: dime a chip. Number Two: deal passes left. Number Three: dealer’s game. Number Four: no whining. There’s no room for sore losers when gambling, which leads us to our fifth and final rule: if you don’t have it, don’t bet it. If you don’t like it, get the fuck out.” The seven of us raised our beers in toast, then took a swig to seal the deal. Barry took a slow and calculating look around the table, “Lucky Seven,” he said, beginning to deal, “Ante up; you have to pay to play.”

In most circumstances, Barry oozed unreliability, but when it came to cards, he knew what he was doing. Every time he dealt, he dealt a different game – or a familiar game with a twist to make it more interesting. We all knew, more or less, how to play Hold ‘em and Draw, but Barry introduced us to Stud: Five-card, Seven-card, Follow the Queen, Low Chicago. To Barry, Aces were Bullets, Kings were Cowboys and the Queen was “The Bitch”. He taught us what it meant to shoot the moon and what a Widow Hand was. He showed us games like Bourré, Acey Deucey and, the riskiest of them all, Gut – but my favorite was Anaconda: High, Low.

There hundreds of games and a hundred variations, each with it’s own rules and name, but none were more fitting than Anaconda. If you weren’t careful, that snake could strangle you (and your wallet). It had seven betting rounds, with the possibility of a split pot. That gave you

plenty of time to lose your money, and even if you won, more often than not, you had to share your winnings with another player. At the end of every game of Anaconda you must declare your intent: high or low. To do this, you take a poker chip from the table and hide it behind your back, or under the table, then, all players present their hand, palm up. If you are still holding your chip, you are going high, trying to achieve the best possible hand; if your hand is empty, you are going low, declaring that you think you have the worst hand of anyone in the game. If you are the only player to go high or low, you automatically win half of the pot, regardless of the cards you hold. This declaration gives the seasoned player ample opportunity to bluff, and provides the perfect temptation for amateurs looking to win big.

Of the thousands of games I called that year, I called Anaconda the most, and I won a good many hands. Most of us adopted a favorite game, one that we played more than others. In a way, they were reflections of our personalities, or, at least, you could read it that way. For example, Barry, being a lucky son-of-a-bitch, loved to play No Peek – or as Barry called it, preferring the more offensive moniker: Mexican Sweat – a game that relied about as much on the shuffle as the skill of the player.

It wasn't long until we were playing poker once a week, usually on Friday nights, and although some of the effaces changed, the seats remained occupied. Before we knew it, we were playing every other day, then every night. Some of us adapted: studying over breakfast at the local IHOP on no more than a few hours sleep. I'm ashamed to say that I submitted more than one assignment stained with coffee and syrup. Others, Barry included, followed the more traditional path of the college undergraduate and stopped attending classes all together. Aaron, a regular at every game we hosted, wasn't a student to begin with.

Aaron was what we called a University Rat: a young person who haunted college campuses but were never enrolled in school. For the most part, they were musicians or poets, writers, touting self-published manuscripts at bars and coffee shops, punks or hippies, run away from home; they all were all panhandlers. Live in a college town long enough and you develop a sort of radar for spotting them. They would show up at off-campus events: house parties or study sessions, and on the curb of every restaurant and convenience store in the vicinity. Despite the fervent admonition of Campus Police, you would see them walking the corridors of university halls or napping on campus benches and lawns. On weekends, they seemed to flock to McCoy, a small street that housed about ten tiny bars, all crammed into the single city block, no more than a hundred yards off of school grounds.

We first met Aaron outside of Dave's Dive. Dave's was one of the many bars located on McCoy, but unlike the others, Dave's was independently owned and operated. The employees were paid in cash, under the table, to avoid taxation, and worked with little to no management. The walls were decorated with vintage antiques that looked like they might have been picked up off of a stranger's curb. The floors were covered in ashtray dirt and the men's room, consisting of a single, unwashed commode, a picture of Ronald Regan taped to the inside of the bowl, had been graffitied, floor to ceiling, with the profane, the prurient and the offensive. The establishment consisted of two levels: an upstairs consisting of a bar and stage where miscellaneous venues were hosted, including performances by amateur bands and stand-up comics, and the occasional open mic night. Downstairs, in the basement was another bar, and a cramped area filled with tables and torn booths where more dedicated drinkers would loiter. Descending down the narrow, crowded staircase into the windowless, dimly lit and smoke filled box was like walking through the gates of hell, a place where you could indulge yourself in the

vice of your choosing, place that banished your reserve and self-consciousness, where you were free to revel in the private satisfaction of hedonistic abandon. Despite, or because of, its soiled charm, Dave's was always filled, well past any occupancy restrictions set by the state's fire marshal – a testament to the drawing power of daily, dollar wells in a town overflowing with youth desperate to throw off the shackles of their inhibitions.

Aaron was sitting on a short brick wall beside the building, peddling for change from all passersby, and as Barry and I walked by, he said, "Hey, excuse me, my car ran out of gas. Can you spare some change? I just need enough to get home, my Dad is waiting and he's gonna be awful mad if I don't show."

"Who the fuck do you think you're kidding?" Barry said. "Who would believe that? I mean, look at you! You're dressed like a hobo; you sound like a hobo. Hell, you smell like a fucking hobo, too; it all adds up, buddy. I mean, does that sob story actually work?" Barry spoke with unmatched showmanship, elbowing me and smirking, his bravado, it seemed, meant only to impress me, but if Aaron was embarrassed or angry, he didn't show it.

"Yeah," he said, "You can't just ask people for money. Believe me, I've tried it." At this, he grinned. "I'm not a dishonest guy; I don't like lying, but I can make two, maybe, three times as much if I have a story to, kind of, decorate the whole thing. It doesn't matter if it sounds believable or not. Hell, most people wouldn't believe the truth anyway if they heard it. They just like to see a little effort. I guess it's like a passive aggressive way to make themselves feel you earned it."

Barry's self-righteousness evaporated as quickly as it came. He burst into about of shrill, almost hysterical laughter that was a bit too loud and lasted a bit too long for comfort. "That's



priceless, man. I'll tell you what, how about I buy you a beer. You can tell me more about the tricks of the young and the homeless.”

Aaron agreed and joined us a table close to the bar. Barry bought the first round, bringing three pints of four dollar Guinness to the table. I bought the next round: two-dollar Budweiser. We finished our drinks and I went to the bathroom, relieving myself on our fortieth president. When I returned, Mark had left.

As the night progressed, Barry watched the bar, like an owl, his head darting away from me in mid-conversation, for single women, and by the time the bartender shouted for last call, Barry had introduced two girls to our table; both were considerably drunk. Barry bought us all a final round of shots, whispering too loudly that I could have the fat one. The girls looked incredibly alike, and I might have been offended by Barry's callousness, had I not been so confused by which girl he was referring to.

The four of us left, stumbling out into the night, Barry whispering into his date's ear, making her peel a cringing, screech of a laugh as she hung flirtatiously from his arm. Her name was Candice; the other woman (the fat one, I supposed, although, I thought she looked quite beautiful), didn't give her name, but hung from my arm, as well -- more, it seemed, in an effort to stay on her feet than from any coquettishness she felt toward me. We walked toward the campus parking lot, where we had left our cars, and saw Aaron a few bars down, still asking for handouts.

“Hey!” Barry shouted, “Hey, Aaron! How'd you fare tonight, man?”

In answer, Aaron held out a sagging baseball cap, almost filled with loose change.

“Holy shit, man! That is impressive!” Barry reached in and grabbed a handful of coins from the drooping hat. Aaron scowled, but didn't say anything. “Lesson Number One, my

friend: a fool and his money are soon parted. Number Two: never bet what you can't afford to lose. This ought to cover your share of the beer.” Barry said, not offering to reimburse me for the money I had spent on his new friend. He pocketed the change and invited Aaron to join us for a nightcap at Candace's apartment. Aaron shrugged and put his cap into a large, many-zippered backpack, and joined us.

By the time we had walked to our cars, having parked at the end of the street in front of a row of pristine, sorority apartments, I had thrown up twice – once behind a dumpster, and again on the sidewalk in front of another group of students, who whooped and laughed as I tried to clean myself with my t-shirt. Barry dropped me off at the house, before driving away with Aaron to meet the girls, and I went to bed feeling dizzy and sick.

The next time I saw Aaron was our first night of poker. He sat down to the table with a zip-lock baggie full of dimes, and, because we always played a dime a chip – a rule Barry was very adamant about – his coins were thrown into the pot to mingle freely with the red, white and blue plastic poker chips. At the end of the night, Mark had cashed out with a wad of green bills he could barely stuff into the pocket of his jeans. Barry had, somehow, managed to break even, but the rest of us lost our shirts.

At first, Mark was an impossible player to read. He was a ridiculously conservative better, never seeming to bluff, accumulating his winnings through patient folding when he had a bad hand, and incrementally increasing his raise when he had a winner. Often, in poker, this is a poor strategy, relying solely on luck to keep you in the game, making it impossible to increase your odds over a fifty percent draw.

Barry, on the other hand, was impossible to read, not because he was a better player, but because all he seemed to do was bluff. With every hand he was dealt, good or bad, he would

warn us to fold, saying, “Get out now, boys! I’m unbeatable!” It was this compulsion for bluster that made Barry almost impossible to stand in the outside world, but, in the garage, it gave him the quality of a circus ringleader, leading the table with a profane brevity that kept us all from taking our losses too seriously. Barry exuded an air of frivolity and surprising generosity that kept people coming back, night after night. If someone went broke early in the evening, Barry would slide a stack of his chips over to them, saying, “You might as well let me win it back a second time.” Even when the pot was big enough to make those with the most money sweat, Barry would lighten the tension by revealing a few of his better cards to the table, saying, “Are you sure you don’t want to take that raise back? I’m only going to give you this opportunity once.”

The only time he wasn’t saying anything was when he lost. He never complained, but his face would redden, looking bewildered and embarrassed. These episodes never lasted long, and a hand later, he’d be back to his mocking, derisive self.

After that first night, Aaron never missed a game, and about a month later, he was living with us. Barry and I never discussed the arrangement, and Aaron didn’t talk to me at all, at least, not at first. He just stopped leaving and neither Barry nor I had the heart to tell him to.

By the time our games had become a nightly occurrence, the game had infiltrated every aspect of our daily lives. My classes became recruitment endeavors and my classmates the recruits. We began printing flyers for our Friday games and, although not everyone who came played, there was always plenty of beer in the fridge to keep our guests entertained. We referred to our garage as the Church, and our table became our altar. Each morning, hung-over and bleary eyed, Barry, Aaron and I would return, clearing the empties and cigarette butts into a large trash bag to be deposited in a dumpster on the way to campus.

School became less of a priority, and I attended classes less and less. Most of the time I would oversleep, collecting notes to photocopy from other students as they left the building. Soon, the only time I attended was when the syllabus showed there would be a test. All assignments and projects were half done or not done at all, and as finals approached, I calculated, with growing alarm, my chances of passing my classes. Most of my finals amounted to thirty percent of my grade; if I studied, with a little luck, I could still ace the tests and pass every class.

Study I did. Each night when I sat down at the table, I laid my textbooks beside me, stacking my chips in a neat perimeter. “What are you doing?” Barry asked. “You need to take *the game* more seriously. You’re disrespecting *the game*!” I ignored Barry’s vehemence as best I could and read my texts, paragraph by paragraph, in between hands. I even mustered enough resolve to sit out a couple of hands when my focus was especially needed – this Barry found unbearable, yelling, “You need to either shit or get off the pot! I can’t win your money if you won’t fucking play!” I fought through each subject: Biology, History, English, Algebra, and, by the time the week was up, my books were wrinkled and stained brown from spilt beer and coffee.

My first test, English was on Monday at eight o’clock in the morning, but I felt prepared. I woke up an hour before the test began and had time to brush my teeth and hit up the ATM for the night’s game before I had to take my seat. The test consisted of three essay questions, the last of which I finished well before allotted time was over. When I got home, I could hear Barry’s alarm clock, wailing like siren in his room. I let myself in and turned it off; an amorphous blob of bedding lay on the floor, Barry’s feet protruding from beneath.

“Rise and shine, man,” I said, “It sounds like you’re late.”

Barry pulled the blankets off his head and looked at me with an indignant stupidity, his eyes swollen and red from what looked to be an incredibly painful hangover. Speaking with what sounded like a swollen tongue, he slurred, “Wha?”

“You’re late,” I said, over emphasizing each syllable. “You. Are. Late.”

Barry stood up slowly, assimilating his dress from the pile of unwashed clothing carpeting his floor. “Can I have a ride?”

Aaron staggered off of the couch to join us, looking like he felt as terrible as Barry. “You missed a good game,” he said, “Barry made a killing.”

The three of us walked to my car, and I sped to campus, parking in a staff-only space close to Barry’s building. Barry let himself out and strolled up the steps, while Aaron and I waited.

Aaron and I had lived together for almost a year but, very rarely, had we occupied the same space without Barry there, keeping the conversation going. Aaron was a quiet person. You would have thought he had some form of debilitating shyness if not for his tendency to look you straight in the eye when you were speaking. He had a way of talking with a defensive authority in his voice, as if he were attempting to justify each statement without provocation. Barry, of course, took an inordinate amount of pleasure from annoying him, asking him the most embarrassing questions he could, pushing for a reaction. He would stop in the middle of his grandstanding, during a game, and ask Aaron about how he lost his virginity or if he’d ever had homosexual fantasies. Aaron always answered without embarrassment, with a stern tone, as if challenging us to laugh or question his truthfulness. No one did except, of course, Barry, who would chuckle and pester him until his face became red and the tension became thick in the

room. There were times I thought that they would come to blows, but, always, as if sensing Aaron's breaking point, Barry would turn his attention back to the game.

We sat silently in the car for a while, while I tried to think of a way of instigating a conversation. "So," I said, "Where are you from?"

"Belton," he said, not giving me much to work with.

"How did you end up here?"

Aaron looked away from me and out of window. "It's a long story," he said.

Barry returned to the car with his usual swagger and slammed the door after him.

"What happened?" I asked. "Is your professor going to let you retake your exam?"

"No," Barry said dejectedly, "He wouldn't listen to reason."

"What do you mean?"

"You know, he was being as smug as hell, like all the professors around here. I gave him a C-note and told him I could ace it. I said, 'I can pass this test and, if I don't, the money's yours and you can fail me.' I told him if I did pass he could still keep the hundred, all he'd owe me was an apology. He threw me out of his office! Can you believe that?"

"You're kidding!" I said incredulously.

"No," he said, "he really did."

Little changed in the first month of our summer break. We spent more time around our table than we did in our beds, the space once occupied by my text books, quickly filled with empty bottles and aluminum cans. When our grades arrived in the mail, mine was accompanied with a notice of academic probation; Barry's came with a notice of suspension due to academic dishonesty. If this bothered him, he didn't show it. I, on the other hand, was devastated. My fall in grades meant that I would not be receiving my scholarship for the next semester.

I called my parents the next day to tell them, and my mother answered the phone.

“David?” she said with a wavering voice. She sounded like she had been crying.

“Yeah, Mom, listen. I have some bad news.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice becoming alarmed and concerned. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah, Mom, listen...I lost my scholarship.”

“Oh.” She said bluntly. “I’m sorry.” She seemed distracted. I expected more of a reaction, at least an hour of yelling and arguing about responsibility and the cost of a good education or at least a thorough interrogation. How did this happen? Are you on drugs? Is there a girl distracting you?

Instead, she was uncharacteristically silent. “David, you listen to me now. I think you should come home.”

“Why?” I exclaimed, taken aback, “If I do better next semester, I’m sure I can get another scholarship. I can do better next semester.”

I waited for a response, but it didn’t come. I was about to ask if she was still on the line when she said, “Your Dad and I are getting a divorce.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice incredulous, even though I had a very good idea what she was talking about. My parents hadn’t lived together civilly in years. By the time I left for college, their arguments had become routine – my mom yelling belligerently, to which my dad responded by disappearing for days at a time. This wasn’t an uncommon occurrence and, for as long as I can remember, my dad had been disappearing, only to return, acting as if nothing had happened. When I asked where he was, my mom would say he was just

taking some “alone time”, or that he was “on business”. As far as I was concerned, my dad was always on “alone time”.

He worked as a journalist and editor for *Saturn's Ring*, a tabloid magazine that warned the public of the dangers of alien abductions and the rampaging Big Foot. He spent hours on end cooped up in his study, a room covered from floor to ceiling with bookshelves that had more Roswell alien bobble-heads and urban myth action figures than it did books – his prized possession being the flying saucer space-ship-in-a-bottle that, he boasted, had been constructed in less than a week. I can remember desperately wanting to help him build it. “You’ll mess it up,” he said, “This isn’t a toy.”

“I need you to come home.” My mother said, “I need you with me right now. I need somebody on *my* side.” Her voice rose in anger, and I could tell that it wasn’t comfort she needed from me. She needed my allegiance. She wanted me to despise my father as much as she did, to tell her she was right and justify her hostility. “You’re father thinks I’m a bitch. He said as much...won’t let me talk to him without his shyster lawyer in the room. I have to schedule an appointment to talk to my own husband, that bastard, that...”

I cut her off before she could go on any further. “I can’t come home, Mom.” I said, trying to sound sympathetic, but, to be honest, I didn’t feel much sympathy. My mother had always been antagonistic toward my dad, often cruel in her angry outbursts, calling him nasty names and belittling him in front of me.

“What are you talking about?” she snapped.

“I told you, I can’t come home. I need to concentrate on my school right now.”

“You’re being selfish, David, I need you here.”

“I can’t.”



“Well, don’t think I’m going to pay any more money to have you sitting around on your ass up there. You can come home or you can find another way to pay your rent.”

“I can’t,” I repeated, unable to think of another way to tell her that I’d rather panhandle with Aaron than live with her or my father again. I’d rather starve.

“You are *just* like your father.” She screamed, then hung up the phone.

I thought about calling my father, seeing what he had to say about the situation, then thought better of it. What would I say to him anyway? It felt as if I barely knew him. I tried to think of the last conversation we’d had and I couldn’t. The thought made me angry and bitter towards them both. Fine, I thought, I will pay my own way. I slammed my cell phone down on the table. It felt like a futile gesture and left me longing for the time when telephones still had a good solid cradle.

That night at the table a friend of Barry’s showed us a flyer he had picked up on McCoy that read, “Poker Night at Dan’s Dive. Friday, July 4, 8:00 p.m.” Barry was beside himself with excitement. “Those mother fuckers won’t know what hit them!” He talked about the event for the remainder of the week, going so far as to buy a cowboy hat and a pair of plastic cap-guns that he hung from two belts crossed across his waist.

When we arrived that Friday, Barry pushed the door open with his usual bravado, calling out at the top of his lungs, “Roll ‘em up or move ‘em out. The sheriff’s in town! Yeehaw!” He spoke with an exaggerated Texan accent, firing his pistols into the air with little, impotent pops. The regulars congregated at the bar erupted in laughter and applause as Barry strolled downstairs. Aaron and I followed him down and took a seat at a table with Barry.

“What are you doing?” he asked, looking from me to Aaron and back again. “I already know I can beat you two; let some other sheep get fleeced!”

Aaron and I found other tables to play at, and, by the end of the night, we had both made a considerable take. Most of the night was spent humoring players who either didn't know how to play, having to constantly remind them that a flush beat a straight, or waiting patiently as those who considered themselves high-rollers, wanting, exclusively, to play Hold 'em, like they saw on television, lost their money and slunk away from the table.

As the people began to lose their money and cash out, the remaining players consolidated into one large game, pushing several tables together to form an area large enough to seat us all. Barry looked like he had a winning streak as well; his cowboy hat now lay on the table full of his chips. Aaron stood next to me, but didn't take a chair.

"I'm cashing out," he said, holding his chips in his outstretched t-shirt. "Get out while your ahead, right?"

"Hell, no!" Barry said, "Don't be selfish."

Aaron ignored him. "I'll walk home, David, see you at the house." He made his way to the bar, emptying his shirt on the counter, the waitress meticulously counting them and paying him out from the cash register. He slipped the bills into his pocket and trudged off up the stairs.

The game continued slowly, losing only one other player in the next couple hours. It wasn't until Barry called Gut that people really began to lose. "To play Gut, you have to *have* Guts," Barry said, "...and balls." In Gut, you could lose every cent you had pent the night accruing in a matter of seconds. The concept is simple: each player gets two cards; the best pair takes the pot; those that lose must match the pot, thus increasing the money available to win exponentially and giving the losers another chance to win their money back and a whole lot more. The only way out is to fold. This game, although deceptively easy, often, creates more excitement than any other poker variation I know. A five dollar pot can grow to a hundred

dollars, and keep growing, each hand giving the losers an incentive to keep on losing. A cool-headed and patient player can make a killing.

When the bartender called last call, I was sitting on close to a thousand dollars in chips, the only remaining players were me, Barry and a large, bald-headed man who rubbed his scalp when he had a good hand. In the pot was over three-hundred dollars. "I'm out," the man exclaimed. "My wife is going to kill me." He threw his cards on the table and pushed his way through the crowd of spectators that had accumulated around us, laughing, cheering and groaning as players either won big or were put out of the game. Barry's hat sat on the table beside him, empty, the last of his chips piled on the table between us. Since I first met him, I can't recall a time he's been quieter. He didn't laugh or boast, but sat staring at the table in disbelief, red in the face.

"It's not too late," I told him. "You can fold now if you want, doesn't look like you can cover the pot anyway if you lose."

"Deal the cards," Barry snarled. "I've got the money."

I dealt, and when Barry looked at his cards he smiled. "You're in trouble now," he said, a bit of his goading good humor returning to his voice. "You shouldn't have pushed your luck. You shouldn't have pushed it." He put his cards on the table slowly, one at a time: a pair of eights. Feeling my stomach turn, I threw my cards over, without bother to look at them first: a pair of tens.

The crowd howled in surprise and laughed uproariously as Barry shot to his feet. "Bullshit!" he screamed, "That's bullshit!" One of the employees stepped through the crowd, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"We're closing up," he said, "let's pack it in."

“Get off of me,” Barry yelled, and pushed the man away from him. “The game’s not over! The game’s not over!”

“It is now,” the man said, and put Barry in a head-lock. I watched Barry struggle in his arms as they walked awkwardly up the stairs, and I cashed in my winnings. Before leaving, I went to the bathroom and counted my money. Move home? I thought, not a chance.

When I left the bar, Barry was waiting for me, sitting on the hood of my car. His hands were thrust deep into his pockets, his belts and toy guns discarded in the parking space next to him. “The game’s not over,” he said. “I didn’t fold.”

“I know,” I said, feeling euphoric. “We’ve got a perfectly good table at home.”

We drove home in silence, and when we pulled into the driveway Barry leaped from his seat, slamming the door behind him with a bang. “Come on,” he said, “Hurry up.” We ducked under the garage door and sat down at the table. Barry pulled out his wallet and removed five, one-hundred dollar bills. He slammed them onto the table and said, “Deal. But enough of this Gut shit. Let’s play a real game.”

“Fine,” I said, “Anaconda.”

As the cards were dealt, Barry bet aggressively, round after round, pulling bills from a seemingly endless supply in his wallet. Using the cash I had won at the bar, I matched him, bet for bet, until the pile of money between us looked enormous. The bigger the pile got, the more desperate I was to win it. The bet was to me, three hundred dollars; I only had two. I went to my room, carrying my cards with me, and got the rest from my savings – just barely enough to cover it – and when I returned, Barry hadn’t moved an inch. He didn’t seem to breathe. I put the money in the pot and sat down.

“Declare,” Barry said, speaking through his teeth.

We each grabbed a poker chip from a bucket we kept beside the table and put our hands behind our backs. “One,” we counted, “Two.” I gripped the chip in my hand tightly, afraid it would slip from my sweaty palm. “Three.” We held out our hands in front of us, each holding our chip, the both of us going high.

We took our seats again and looked at our cards. “Check”, I said, passing the bet to Barry.

Barry laughed, “You aren’t getting off that easy,” he said, “not after all of this.” He walked into the house and returned a moment later with a safe deposit box. “One thousand dollars,” he said, spinning the combination into place and removing a stack of rubber-banded bills. “Pay to play, David. Pay to play.”

“You can’t do that,” I yelled. “You know I don’t have that much.”

Barry snickered. “That’s not my problem, man, the rules are the rules.”

“I can owe you.”

“That’s not how it works. You have to pay to play.”

“Fine,” I said, “Take the money. But I can beat you, Barry.”

Barry smirked. “There is another way this can go.”

“What do you mean?”

“Put up your car and I’ll put up mine. We’ll call it even-stephen.”

I didn’t even think about it. There was nothing to think about. I pulled my keys from my pocket and dropped them on the table. “I can beat you Barry. I told you I could.”

Barry snorted and added his keys to the pile. I had almost forgotten Barry had a car – a blue Honda that had been parked on the curb outside for as long as I could remember.

Somehow, I had become our little group's chauffeur, carpooling us all in my old Maxima whenever we were going somewhere that wasn't walking-distance away, a rare occurrence.

"I call," I said, my hands shaking with anticipation.

Barry, like a magician, spread his cards across the table evenly in one quick motion, each number and suit clearly visible. "Straight," he said.

I looked at his cards in disbelief. He *did* have a straight – ace-high. I exhaled deeply, pushing the air from my lungs in a long steady breath. I laid my cards on the table clumsily, my hands shaking with a barely visible tremor.

"Flush," I said, and smiled.

Barry lost control. A seamless, unintelligible sting of expletives seemed to explode from within him as he bolted around the table. "You fuck!" he cried. Tears welled in his eyes. "You miserable fuck!" He grabbed my shirt and began to shake me back and forth violently.

"Get off of me!" I managed to yell, pushing him away.

He was on me again in an instant, his hands around my neck this time, still shaking me as hard as he could. My head lolled, as I tried to pry his fingers off of my throat. My head spun as I lost my breath, the dizziness making me feel small and weightless. I scratched at his arms, my sweaty hands unable to grip him as he shook me. I tried to look about me, but it was impossible to focus; everything blurred and moved too swiftly. I managed to get a leg between us, pushing him back a step, enough to keep him from rattling me any further. I kicked out as hard as I could, launching myself away from him and onto the floor. I gasped for breath and spit onto the floor, forcing back my desire to vomit.

Barry had been sent the other direction, losing his footing, and falling backward. His head crashed into the table then under it, as one of its legs broke off from beneath it. The table

wobbled then, slowly teetered over, bringing its full weight down upon his torso. Money slid off the slanted surface in every direction, hundreds of dollars gracefully floating to the ground, coming to rest on the blood and beer stained floor.

I got to my feet still feeling sick, then gave in to my nausea when I saw what had happened to Barry. I rushed to the table and tried to roll it away. It didn't budge, and I tried again. Still, I couldn't move it. My head began to clear and I looked around the room, realizing that our fallen chairs were blocking my efforts. Stepping over Barry, I gripped the table and tried to roll it the other way. I strained my back and the muscles in my neck stung intolerably. Slowly the table turned over and thudded as its weight met the concrete floor.

Without moving, Barry groaned. I found my cell phone on the floor beside him and called an ambulance. I ducked under the garage and stepped outside, the morning air blew over my sweat covered skin, chilling me and caused me to gasp again. I lit a cigarette and waited for the paramedics to arrive.

I heard the siren a long time before I saw them turn onto our street. Before they parked, I ducked back into the garage and hit the button. The door rattled open, letting in the first rays of sunlight, and I noticed the money was gone. Every dollar was missing, the blood on the floor smeared where the bills had been removed. Aaron leaned in the doorway leading into the house.

“What happened?” he asked, as the paramedics rushed into the room.

Barry turned out to be alright; he corroborated my story: we'd gotten into a fight; he had fallen. We never spoke of the money. His injuries were substantial, but he healed quickly, returning to the house a week later to box up his things. When I saw him, I walked hesitantly into his room.

“You don’t have to go,” I said, “I’m actually leaving myself.”

Barry ignored me and continued to work, scooping his belongings off of the floor and into the cardboard box open before him.

“I finished packing this morning. I’m moving in with my father.”

Barry stopped what he was doing. He turned and looked at me, wincing as he did so.

“Good,” he said, “then you can help me, you lazy bastard.”

Barry and I finished boxing his belongings and carried them out to the truck he had rented. When we had loaded them all in, we shook hands for the first time. He got into his truck and I got into my car.

I started the ignition, and put it into drive. Aaron waved from the doorway as I drove away.



## Intelligently Maligned

1

What a strange man you are: you lead such a solitary life that you know nothing of things that concern you personally. ~Crime and Punishment

I could write drunk and did, quite often. Unfortunately, alcohol is not conducive to coherency -- the resulting deluge deleted first thing in the morning. I've tried to write stoned, but have never been able to fill a complete page without being distracted or bored, wondering off in search of external stimulation. In fact, the only substance that has helped me write was a cocktail of ecstasy, cocaine and ketamine that I snorted from the seam of one of my brother's comics last Christmas. I spent the rest of the night scribbling a twelve page suicide note in my closet -- flashlight in one hand, colored pencil in the other, working unselfconsciously into the night. It was pretty damn good, to tell the truth.

Dear Dad,

I'm not sure how to start this letter. A suicide note isn't the kind of thing you practice -- or maybe I'm just doing it wrong. Regardless, this isn't your fault, entirely.

I suppose that is the thing I'd like you to know for sure. That my death was not a direct outcome of any parenting choice you made over the years. I'm certainly not saying you were perfect. I'm neither accusing you of leading me to this moment, nor am I

absolving you of blame. I would, however, like to accept responsibility for my own part in this dilemma (my being dead). After all, it is with sound mind that I compose this letter and steady hand with which I pull this trigger.

The letter continues, carefully detailing the formative moments of my prepubescence that led me to seek out writing -- a widely practiced method of self-directed therapy -- to begin with. After signing my name in illegible squiggles, I folded it in thirds and shoved it into my back pocket. Now well into the night, I made my way quietly out of my childhood bedroom, each creak of floor and door memorized and easily avoided.

I stopped briefly at my brother's room, leaning my head inside to see him one last time. His blankets were pushed into a tent and lit from within by a flashlight. I thought about approaching him to tell him I was leaving, to offer some closure to our relationship, despite the fact that we barely knew one another, that we rarely spoke. I took a step inside, the words I intended to say savagely broken and discarded by those that lay silent over the years. "Jim," I whispered, barely audible, the consonants softly punctuating my breath. I paused, expecting to see his head to emerge from underneath his bedding, my name inquisitively returned, but he must not have heard me. I saw the blankets began to move, and realizing I was intruding on a moment of privacy, I felt my cheeks burn.

Careful not to disturb him, I retreated back to the hallway, closing the door as quietly as I could. I began to feel a familiar itch under the skin on my chest, a sure sign that I had reached the apex of my high and was on my way down. I began to scratch the itch beneath my shoulders. The irony of the situation struck me as I stumbled through the dark, and I began to laugh to

myself, snorting, my hand over my mouth, at the thought of us relieving ourselves at the same time -- him coming, me going.

My father kept his pistol in the kitchen. It was stashed along with the oven-mitts and pot-holders in a drawer next to the utensils. I'd known its whereabouts since I was a kid -- it's presence in our day to day lives no more alarming than the roaches in the toilet bowl. I had only fired it once, when I was in grade school, but I could still imagine its cumbersome weight in my hand.

My plan was pretty simple: get the gun, leave the house, shoot myself in the head. This would kill me and prevent any further teeth gnashing or feelings of contrived uselessness. Foolish as it might seem, I felt, at that moment, that there surely, undoubtedly, was a god -- some stony-faced cretin, staring off into oblivion. I wanted his attention. I wanted, if just for a moment, for him to bat an eye in my direction; if my death was what it required, so be it.

I had been walking for what seemed like ages, but, finally, I stepped quietly into our living room. I walked on tipped toe, and, despite my dilated pupils, I was unable to distinguish the shapes of the furniture, forcing me to extend my arms, waving them about in front of me in the dark. I have never gotten along well with my father, so, needless to say, I avoid him and this house at every opportunity, returning only for Jim's sake. Unfamiliar with my surroundings, I didn't take two steps before I had slammed my shin into the rigid corner of some unknown piece of furniture. It croaked loudly as it scraped across the tile and I cursed.

Immediately, the room was illuminated. I covered my eyes with my arm, squinting into the light. I heard my father say something from the direction of his faded, blue recliner, but I couldn't understand what it was he said -- either because I was high, or because he was drunk.

As my eyes adjusted, I still couldn't see his face, but I saw the vodka on ice he gripped shakily in his left hand and I saw the gun he held in his right.

For a moment, I thought he would shoot me. I wondered if he knew I was stoned. Neither situation much bothered me, so I stood dumbly, scratching my nipples. We remained that way for I don't know how long, but eventually the silence became unbearable. I apologized for disturbing him and returned to my room.

The next morning, I woke fully clothed, my throat and sinuses dry and painful. I put my head under the faucet, drinking until my stomach became water-logged. I sat down at the foot of my bed and felt the note I had written in the seat of my pants. I pulled it out and, despite a throbbing head, reread its entirety. The night before seemed like dream, my memory lacking any notion of verisimilitude. But, the writing was good, and, more importantly, it was eleven pages. It had been months since I had written more than a few paragraphs. I became excited – inspired. Having only slept a few hours the night before, my body screamed to return to bed, but I forced myself to move. My joints were sore and I stumbled, helter-skelter, back and forth across my room, packing what belongings I could find. Jim and Dad were still asleep when I left, but I didn't have time to wake them. I needed to get home. I needed to write.

2

And perhaps it was just because his desires were so strong that he had regarded himself at the time as a man to whom more was permitted than to any other man. ~Crime and Punishment

I can remember the exact moment that I decided to write. It was shortly after I had finished *Crime and Punishment*. I had always enjoyed reading, but there was something unique, something special about this macabre story of personal salvation Dostoevsky had created. I

spent hours skimming its pages, picking it apart like a scavenging animal, scribbling my favorite passages on whatever scraps of paper I had close at hand. I read and reread each chapter, convinced that there was knowledge within, true knowledge, if only I could find it.

But, my epiphany never came. I grew frustrated, and, although I had begun dabbling at the keyboard, writing short meaningless vignettes about my daily life, it was only a hobby, something to pass the time. It wasn't until I realized, rather simply, while reading again of Raskolnikov's confession, that the work was not written for me, but, rather, for Dostoevsky himself, it was then I knew that I must write. Above all else, I must write.

That afternoon I drove out to Teleport and threw my television from the tracks. I watched as it tumbled end over end to the loose gravel below. I sat there, feet dangling, my notebook in my lap and began to write.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," I couldn't help but mutter under my breath. Just looking at him brought an inappropriate grin to my lips. He looked ridiculous, dressed in the nicest clothes I'd ever seen him wear. His hair had been bleached and dyed a natural brown, combed just right, a perfect part down the left side of his skull. His hands were folded over his stomach, a large faced watch ticking softly on his wrist. As far as I knew, the bastard had never owned a watch in his life. If he saw himself now, I'm sure he'd be glad he killed himself when he did.

I looked around at the congregation in mourning, many of whom weeping openly for a stranger -- for, surely, they did not know the boy who lie before them. In the eight years we'd been friends -- in the four he'd been on the street -- I'd never once seen any of these faces. If they knew him like I did, I wonder, would they have come? The funeral: an obligation to their relation, his body and blood. I wonder if they had seen his suffering, witnessed his innocent bemusement the days before his death, if they would comfort him, take him into themselves as they so willingly devour their Soilent Nazarene.

I continued to write for hours, well into the night. I lay down that night, pen in hand, and awoke with renewed vivacity. Writing soon became a regular part of my life. I wrote every spare moment. Not everything I wrote was good, but enough of it was. I felt that if I kept writing and writing, eventually, as if through meditation, I would reach a state of heightened awareness, a place in which the preposterous was not only achievable, but probable. Wisdom, I hoped, would come from within. I holed myself up in my house, insulated myself from the outside world. I stopped going out, or answering the telephone. Instead I wrote. Some nights I wouldn't sleep, calling in sick to work the next morning. I could see my priorities clearly, and my ambition did not waver. Single-minded, I worked. Letter followed letter; word followed word, and, after months of arduous labor, I had a sizable manuscript. The story -- five hundred and seventy pages, all stemming from those first few sentences I wrote on the track -- came to an end before its completion. That is to say, the words simply stopped coming.

Then I, too, will come to you to be crucified; for it's not joy I thirst for, but sorrow and tears!

~Crime and Punishment

The drive back from my father's house felt never-ending. Despite my body's drug-induced hangover, my car was without air-conditioning. I tried rolling down my windows, but the smell of exhaust emitted from the vehicles around me made me want to vomit. The highway was clogged with traffic extending as far as I could see in both directions. I glanced in my rearview mirror, constantly monitoring the car behind me that seemed to drive inches from my bumper. My head throbbed and my teeth were covered in a bitter, slimy film. As traffic slowly progressed, I reread my note. It seemed remarkably clear now. How had I not seen it before? It was the perfect ending. There was no other possibility. They find the note. The note is found! Its addition would not, by any means, be easy. There would be changes, surely -- many, many changes. But, finally, I had found my ending. Finally, my book would be complete; that void, filled. Finally, laid to rest. I looked again into my rearview mirror; still, the car behind me was tailgating -- inching along behind me, suffocating me. I turned and threw him the finger.

The man behind me scowled; then, he seemed to smirk as I drove unwittingly into the car in front of me. The steering wheel pressed into my ribs and my head was tossed to the side. The muscles in my neck and shoulder tightened, instinctively fighting the forward momentum. The car's frame rocked back, and, although the car was moving no more than ten miles an hour, my muscles refused to relax, cramping, causing me to scream. I sat perfectly still, not daring to move as the pain, throbbing, began to decrease like heavy retreating footsteps. I tried to right my

head. The sharp, stinging pain, reemerged, viciously, hammering the left side of my head. Then, an enormous pressure seemed to be relieved the moments before my vision faded.

I can feel myself descending – falling – but slowly -- without fear. A gentle wind brushes my cheek. For a while, all is dark, then, gradually, things begin to lighten like the slowly approaching dawn. I feel disoriented, not weightless, but inverted, as if I had fallen down a well only to reemerge on the other side of the globe. I come to a rest, but my feet do not touch solid ground. I can feel all that is above me, pressing down. It is burdensome, but not heavy, and soft. The feeling is not so unlike what I'd felt the day before. Anonymous. Detached. Intangible. Epicurean. Unconscious.

This lasts for only a moment. Then, feeling slowly returns -- not physical sensation, but rage, elation, despondency. They fight within me, each asking for devotion, sacrifice, to commit, forsaking all others, forever and ever -- Amen. One by one, I refuse, preferring, instead, the stillness, the silence of the void.

4

“But if that's a lie," he suddenly exclaimed involuntarily, "if man in fact is not a scoundrel--in general, that is, the whole human race--then the rest is all mere prejudice, instilled fear, and there are no barriers, and that's just how it should be! ~Crime and Punishment



When I came to, I opened my eyes to the sun, glaring through my windshield. To my left, I heard a woman's voice. "Thank God you're awake," she said. "Are you okay?" It sounded as if she is sitting in the car with me. Squinting, I slowly and painfully turn my head to find her digging in my glove box, receipts and paperwork thrown across the floorboard. "Please tell me you have insurance. What's this?" She took my note from the dashboard and quickly flipped through it. Not finding what she was looking for, she discarded it with the rest of my paperwork. She looked at me again. "Seriously, are you okay?"

She was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. The first thing I noticed about her was her hair, a faded green, her roots a dark brown. Her septum had been pierced, and her lips were coated with a bright florescent red. But, these additions were poor distractions from her soulful brown eyes, so soft they were almost tan. "I'm fine," I said, unwilling to break eye contact for even a moment. "I'm Aaron."

"Good, Aaron. I'm Gertrude. I don't see any reason to call the cops, but I need your insurance information."

I heard a honk to my left and turned in time to see an elderly woman shaking her fist. I threw her the bird and looked around. The highway was two lanes, my car and Gertrude's stood still, parked askew between them. Looking behind me I could see the traffic split, moving around us like a river inconvenienced by a stony island.

Reaching into the inside pocket of my door, I took out my insurance card. "Here," I said, and handed it to Gertrude. "Thank God." She reached down between her legs and grabbed my note. She laid it face down on the dash and quickly copied my information onto that back,

tearing the page free as she finished. “Here’s mine,” she said, handing the remaining pages back to me. “Gotta go.”

She stepped briskly out of my car and into her own, effortlessly merging with the cars surrounding me and drove out of sight. I got my own vehicle moving and started home. My body hurt, but my attention was focused outward; I looked ahead, hoping to see her dented fender in front of me again.

When I got home, I carried the remaining pages of my note inside and read what Gertrude had written.

**Gert - 214-717-2550**

**Don’t kill yourself.**

I read this note again and again, unable to tear my eyes away, the gentle loops of her handwriting reminding me of the gentle curves of her face. She appeared like an angel, without warning, and invaded my thoughts. I memorized her number, repeating it in my head like a mantra, as if by doing so I might ascend to Nirvana, lose myself, dissolve, but not in death, to another life, transcendence into another body – another mind.

When I got home, I read through my manuscripts again, disgusted by their self-indulgence. I had years worth of pages accumulated haphazardly, chronicling my every insecurity. They were filled with violence and morbid, wallowing self-pity.

I called the number and waited – I waited an intolerable amount of time – until Gertrude answered.

“Hello?” I said. “This is Aaron. Aaron Eckson.”

“Who?” she said.

“Aaron Eckson, the guy from the car.”

“Oh! Hey, Aaron. I guess you didn’t off yourself, did you?”

“No,” I said and tried to chuckle nonchalantly. “I didn’t. That was just...just a story.”

“Well, that’s good to hear, I guess.”

“Listen, do you think you might want to meet for coffee? I know you don’t know me from Adam, but I thought...I thought, you know, we could talk.”

“That sounds great, Aaron. But, I think I’ll drive if you don’t mind.”

“No, that’s great.”

“I’ll pick you up tomorrow, around noon? I have your address already, and I need to give you your insurance card back.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s great.”

“Bye, Aaron”

“Goodbye.”

That night I drove to Teleport, walking up past the broken concrete of the bridge’s underbelly, and out above the river. In front of me the tracks continued around a curve, out into a thin stark forest of conifers. I looked briefly behind me, noticing my name painted upon the wall, then dropped my notes, my notebooks and my journals into the water below. It felt like operating on some essential part of my self, self-operating on the right side of my brain, surgically removing those parts of me that dreamed, that wanted to accomplish something, be it morbid or profound. The pages hit the water, becoming transparent as they soaked up the water and drifted away in the slowly moving river.

## The Guardian

By the time Jimmy was born, Aaron was eleven, the garage was on its last leg and their home (although as sylvan as ever) had fallen into a state of disrepair. When Jimmy was two, a dog bit his face, leaving a thin scar from his cheek to his chin, and, by three, his mother had passed away. On his twelfth birthday, Jimmy was mowing the lawn and heard a loud crack over the rattling hum of the contraption's engine. He killed the gas and rolled it forward, looking for debris or stray pieces that may have fallen from inside the old, rickety machine. He bent down and ran his hand over the surface of the grass, then, unable to locate the cause of the report, he pulled the mower back and tugged on the starter. The string made a whirring sound as he yanked but snapped back into place, forcibly extending his thin arm without turning over. He tried again, then again, but couldn't jerk it fast enough get it going. Giving up, he went inside (careful to remove his grassy shoes) and found his father bleeding and still, a gun barely clinging to his drooping fingers.

Jimmy, shocked and frightened, sprinted across the living room passed his father (slumped, as usual, in his tired, old recliner) and to the phone. He called Emergency Services and, somehow, managed to report his father's death despite a rebellious voice that skipped octaves of its own volition.

The next few minutes passed in an intolerable silence. The house was still and Jimmy held his breath, the involuntary action seeming somehow vulgar.

How long had it been since he had phoned? Surely, someone should have arrived long ago. Jimmy exhaled and, gasping for air, made his way, tentatively, fighting the temptation to look, passed his father and outdoors. He was overcome with a desire to do something – anything. The wait was unbearable. He grabbed the mowers ignition string. Effortlessly, he

started the mower and continued to mow, feeling the muscles in his arms and legs strain as he circled the lawn, straining his ears for the sound of a siren.

Aaron -- Jimmy's older brother -- had left home the year Jimmy started school, but he came home every Christmas, and every Christmas he had a present for Jimmy: a comic book, he'd pull from his coat, swatting the top of his head before allowing it to be ripped away. Jimmy would read and reread them until the magazine's spine wore thin and the pages worked themselves loose from their staples. Gradually, with each issue, he became more enraptured with the disgusting, the flamboyant, the violent and the camp. Laying a thin sheet of paper over an illustration, he'd trace the hyper-sexualized anatomy in short, rapid scratches, learning to shade and scale through relentless repetition.

Each Christmas, Aaron looked like a different person, his only recognizable feature: the large brown eyes he'd inherited from his mother. It began with his hair. One year his head would be shaved, the next, magically, his hair would hang past his shoulders. He began to dress differently and grew facial hair. It was as if each year he was cocooned, emerging quiet, or opinionated, or thin. One year he brought a girlfriend.

Her name was Becky and, almost as soon as she had walked in the door, she had pulled Jimmy close, hugging him firmly, her breasts pressing into his skinny chest. Her breath smelled sweet as she told him, her voice as soft as her body, that he was handsome like his brother, that his brother had told her all about him, that he and his brother looked so much alike. She put a hand on either side of his face, then stepped back, just looking at him and smacking her gum. Grinning, she leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek, then seemed to walk right through him, giving his dad the same perfunctory peck.

Jimmy looked to his brother then and smiled. Aaron furrowed his brow.

“You’re big.”

“I guess.”

“Not too big for this, I hope.” He swung the comic out from underneath his jacket and popped Jimmy in the side of the head. In previous years, Jimmy would have mimed injury, swaying back and forth in a daze until, too dizzy to stand, he fell to carpet. He remembered jumping for the book that Aaron held just out of reach, until unable to wait any longer, he would scale his brother; knees, hips and shoulders used as foot and finger holds as he climbed to his prize.

Jimmy couldn’t bring himself to act so foolishly now -- not with Becky watching. Instead, he grinned shyly and thanked his brother for the gift, putting it out of sight, in his back pocket, until he could file it away with the rest of his collection.

Becky said she would stay for dinner and offered to take Jimmy with her to Midnight Mass. He could barely contain his excitement. Jimmy had never been inside a church, much less a Catholic church. He pictured looming, ominous statues of God and Devil, clanging swords; bloody frescos of martyred saints, lining the walls, their faces contorted into agonized, tortured caricatures; one sprawling, epic masterpiece, splattered across a domed ceiling, paneled, spider-like, by dark wooden supports, of bare-breasted women and grim stone-faced angels.

His father and Aaron excused themselves and retreated to the garage, where, each year, they would hole themselves, drinking beer and talking, he assumed, about his mother. Becky offered to watch the food that was still in the oven and on the stove, then came and sat next to Jimmy, draping her arm across his shoulders.

“So, what’s your game, Jim?”

Jimmy blushed. “What?”

“What do you do?”

Jim thought for a moment. What *did* he do? “I’m an artist.”

“Well, let’s see what you got.”

Jimmy led her to his room, regretting his decision to share so much information. He had a few friends in the neighborhood, but none had seen his room. Even his father (a strong believer in personal privacy), had only entered his room on a handful of occasions, preferring to shout his name from the comfort of his recliner, when it was necessary to communicate. Revealing this space to Becky, he felt naked and talked rapidly, explaining, defensively, its childish adornments. Colorful figurines lined his bookshelves and desk: useful reference material for studying positioned anatomy. His drawings were tacked to the walls, the skill of each rendition noticeably progressing as they circled the room. Becky entered, uninhibited, nonchalantly scanning these private expressions of his imagination, stopping only once she had cursorily glanced at them all. “These are good,” she said. She leaned in close to a drawing of a horse bucking wildly away from its owner, who held, desperately, to the lasso around its neck. “Let’s do one together.”

Lying close, in the middle of the living room floor, Becky and Jimmy illustrated, then colored, one picture after another, filling each blank page with life, until the voices of his brother and father intruded, growing gradually in volume, each trying to over take the other until, reaching their zenith, they stopped. They entered the room, one after the other, tight-lipped, eyes red, temples swollen. They looked at each other one more time, as if an agreement had been reached, then Aaron made for the door.

“Becky,” he said, opening the door, “we’re leaving.”

“Dinner is almost ready.”

Aaron looked at Jimmy then, his brown eyes more penetrating than usual due to his bloodshot sclera, but he didn't speak for several moments.

“Jimmy,” he said. “You can come if you want. You don't have to stay here with him. You...” His father cut him off.

“He stays here.”

Aaron grabbed his coat and left the house. Becky, gathering her things from the floor, apologizing again and again, followed him awkwardly out the door.

By the time the ambulance had arrived for his father, Jimmy had finished the yard and showered, dressing himself in a suit and tie he'd worn once before when his grandmother had passed. He had left the front door open and, the sun having set, turned on the porch light. And, now, he sat, hands in his lap, across from his father. The paramedics spoke quickly assessing the situation with a calm, confident demeanor achieved through tedious redundancy. Jimmy repeated the details of his circumstance as calmly as he was able and watched as his father was lifted gently from his chair and placed onto a rolling, collapsible gurney.

It occurred to him, suddenly, that he was an orphan. His mother's face had always been unfamiliar, vague except when confronted with a photograph, but he'd never felt especially sorry for it's absence until now. In an instant, as if by association, Aaron's face became obscured in his memory. He closed his eyes, and tried to evoke a mental image. He pictured a blank page, as if planning an illustration, but all he could remember of either were their bold, brown eyes. Frustrated, he lifted his head.

“Don't,” he pleaded, “Please. Don't cover his face.”



Jimmy was allowed to ride with his father in the back of the ambulance, but it was only a short while until his body was removed. The ride that followed seemed much further. The paramedic sat beside him, his hand draped lazily across his shoulders, offering his condolences intermittently until they arrived at their destination.

He was helped out of the vehicle and led, supported as if in danger of falling, into the police station. Once in the building, he was seated on a long, empty, wooden bench, across from a large plastic window. The office behind was elevated at least a foot higher than rest of the room, making it hard for Jimmy to see its attendant. The paramedic had to stand on his toes to sign the required documents and flirt with what Jimmy assumed was the girl behind the counter. When he had finished, he returned to Jimmy's side. "Listen," he said, "We've called your brother. He'll be here soon to pick you up. I've got to go, but if you need anything, anything at all while you wait, you just tell Alice, there. Ok?" He gave Jimmy a wink and pat on the back, then left the building. Jimmy looked again, but his chaperone was still obscured by the glare of fluorescent lighting.

The room had an incredibly high ceiling, and the walls were bare, except for a plastic clock above the window and a vending machine, humming in the corner. There were three doors. One led to the office, where Alice anonymously hid, seemingly unconcerned by Jimmy's presence. Another led outside, its exterior equally obscured by the dark. Aaron appeared from the third, his clothes torn and his eye bruised. The muscles in his face tightened when they met eyes, and he fell to his knees, pressing his face into Jimmy's chest.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I know."

"I know," Jimmy said, "I am too," and kissed his brother's disheveled hair.

Aaron looked terrible. His hair stood on end, pointing off into random directions. His eyes were unfocused and tended to sweep across Jimmy's face as he spoke, unable to maintain steady eye-contact.

"The cops say we need to identify the body, Jim. It has got to be you. I..."

"I'll do it." Jim said, stepping under Aaron as he began to droop, supporting him in the pretense of a hug. "Call a cab. We need to go home. You need some sleep."

When Jimmy came out of the Coroner's office, Aaron was slouched on a bench, his face buried in his hands. Jimmy stood still for a moment, watching, before announced his presence. If you looked close enough you could see Aaron shaking, nearly imperceptibly, almost vibrating.

"Hey," Jimmy said. Aaron looked up, his eyelids red and sagging.

"How did it go?" Aaron asked.

Unable to think of anything else, Jimmy shrugged his shoulders and said, miserably, "It was him." Aaron nodded his head.

"I called a cab. It will be here soon."

Jimmy put his arm around his brother. "It's here already," Jimmy said, pointing through the glass door at an orange, checkered van. "C'mon," he said. "You look worse than Dad." Jimmy's face turned red, embarrassed by his own inappropriate and morbid joke, but Aaron laughed and smiled openly, the first genuine display of emotion he'd shown all day.

"Jimmy...that was fucked up."

Aaron lived in two-bedroom house that existed in a state of profound squalor. He slept on a pallet of blankets under the one tiny window that, besides the radiating glow from the

computer's monitor, provided the only light to cramped living quarters. Discarded papers were strewn across the desk and floor. Food containers lay in the open, attracting small gnats that flew up from their hiding places when disturbed.

Aaron went straight to the fridge and grabbed a beer. For a moment he looked at Jimmy, as if contemplating whether or not to offer him one. Instead, he said, "Do you want some water? I don't really have any glasses, but, here, you can use this." Aaron handed Jimmy a bowl. Dried food had cemented brown ring along the bowl's interior.

"I'm ok," Jimmy said. "This is where you live?" Jimmy had always wondered about Aaron's life away from home.

"Where *we* live," Aaron corrected.

Aaron finished his beer, throwing the bottle in the sink, and after a few awkward attempts at conversation, fell asleep, unceremoniously, on the floor. Jimmy pulled a blanket from his room and covered him, lifting his head to slide a pillow underneath. He went to the kitchen and began to pull the dishes from the cabinet, washing them in scalding hot water then replacing them, meticulously organized, in their former location. Next, he washed Aaron's entire wardrobe, completing the task in just two loads. He wandered through the house with a trash bag, putting them in a line on a curb as they filled, then swept the floor. He sat on the couch and folded his clothes, making big stacks of T-shirts and bundling socks.

Aaron woke the next morning the smell of pancakes. He stepped into the kitchen and saw Jimmy, standing on an improvised stool of an overturned shelf, pouring batter into a skillet.

"Sit down," he said, offering a smile. "They just passed the expiration date, but they should still be good."

Aaron sat at the table across from his brother, unable to think of anything to say. Luckily Jimmy initiated the conversation.

“So, what are your plans today? Do you have a job? Where are your roommates? Do you live in this house by yourself? It’s pretty big, for just one person.”

Aaron felt a pang of foolishness, embarrassed by his brother’s questions. “I work at the Movie Barn – but not today. I’m not on the schedule until the weekend.”

“What about the house?” Jimmy said, noticing Aaron’s reticence to answer, “Is it just you?”

“It’s just *us*,” Aaron said, “I had some roommates, but they moved out.”

Jimmy looked around the room. “I can’t say I blame them. This place kind of stinks.”

Aaron, finishing his last bite, pushed his plate away from himself, feeling bloated and slow. Jimmy swooped over and grabbed the dish, kicking his make-shift stool from the oven to the sink, and began washing up.

“Hey, Jimmy.” Aaron said. Jimmy turned off the water.

“What did you say?”

“Will you be ok, by yourself for a little while? I...I have a date at noon.”

“Yeah, cool. I’ll be ok. What are you going to wear?”

“I hadn’t really thought about it.”

“C’mon” he said, and walked away.

Aaron followed him into his room. He began opening drawers and laying clothes out on the floor in the shape of a man, interchanging slacks and shirts until he found something he was happy with.

“Isn’t that a bit formal?” Aaron said.

“You only have one chance to make a first impression!”

Aaron dressed himself, feeling silly, like a kid dressing up in grown-up clothes. They were a bit tight, but they fit, the collared shirt making his neck feel constrained and uncomfortable.

“Here,” Jimmy said, pulling a skinny black tie from the drawer. “I got this for you last Christmas, remember?”

“Sure,” Aaron said, “Sure I do.”

Jimmy motioned to Aaron, and he got down on his knees in front of his little brother. Jimmy’s hands worked deftly, folding the tie in and over itself then tied it again to get the length just right. There was a honk outside and Jimmy walked him to the door.

“Have fun,” he said, “but don’t be gone too long. There’s nothing to eat. We’ll need to go to the store.”

“Ok,” Aaron said and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Jimmy said and hugged his brother around the waist.

## Wouldn't It Be Nice

When Kyle was six weeks old, Millie dropped him. Had Millicent stayed home it never would have happened. Had she told her mother-in-law she was sick, or that the baby was fussy, she could have easily shirked the needy hands of a first-time grandmother. Cutting herself off from friends and family was not that difficult to imagine. She and baby Kyle would have been just fine at home, feeding and napping in the warm sunlight that drifted in through her large living-room window. So why then had she found herself two hours from home, surrounded by relatives, some of whom she had never met? She didn't need anyone but Kyle. She didn't even need John, so long as Kyle was in her arms, safe.

But, of course, she had gone to the family reunion. John had driven them down in his battered Oldsmobile, singing along to the Beach Boys in a horrible falsetto while she had slept with Kyle in the back. Kyle loved riding in the car, especially on the highway. The vibrations, along with the white noise of the open road always put him to sleep within minutes. It wasn't uncommon, on those nights when she was near hysteria, shushing and rocking him as he cried, walking up and down and up and down the hallway dividing their two room duplex, to pack him in his car seat and drive, just drive in silence, until she began to nod in and out of sleep herself.

The previous two days had been tiring, but fun. She had spent most of her time in a secluded cabin, which she, John, and Kyle shared with John's brother Mort and his wife Simple. Mort and Simple had met on an online bulletin, where they argued over the pros and cons of the most recent films, and although they rarely agreed, their relationship moved quickly. Their daily posts became IM's, then video chats, and within a year, Mort had moved to Florida to be with her. Millie and John had flown down the following year for their wedding, but Millie and simple exchanged nothing but the most cursory pleasantries. A few months later, Simple was pregnant,

and they moved back to Texas to be closer to Mort's parents. Millie got the impression that Simple and her parents were not so close, figuring that their decision to name her "Simple" couldn't have helped their relationship. Mort was a nurse and found it relatively easy to find new work, but Simple was struggling to find employment. She had several years of experience accounting for a national corporation and was invited to plenty of interviews, but invariably the hiring manager's eyes would fall to her stomach. She was only four months pregnant, but her bump was already too large to hide.

"Who's going to hire someone who they know will have to take leave of absence a few months from their start date?" she said to Millie on their first night in the cabin together. "It's like hiring the terminally ill. They know they aren't going to hire you, but they're too chicken-shit to say why." Millie laughed and pulled Kyle away from one breast, and when he began to cry, she pressed him to the other. Mort and Simple hadn't been in Texas for more than a month, but now that she and Simple had gotten to know each other, she wished she had had her to talk to over the last couple of weeks. John owned his own restaurant, a small café called *the Heavy Hen*, that served breakfast, brunch and lunch, and while he was away, she found herself craving someone to talk to. Kyle's vocabulary was limited to "garroo" and "geeaow," and although these efforts at speech left her heart swelling with pride, they weren't exactly thought provoking.

Those first few days at the reunion were both tiring and rejuvenating for Millie. When she was tired there were always plenty of people around, ready to take Kyle and hold him. This allowed her body to rest, but she was never fully comfortable so long as Kyle was in another's arms. This was especially true when it was a woman doing the holding. She was fairly confident that none of John's aunts were going to take Kyle and run, but her primitive, motherly instinct put her on edge and made her suspicious, even if it was foolishly so. But now, looking at

Kyle, at his face, she slapped herself, scratching her cheek with her uncut nails; she pulled her hair and cursed herself for not listening to that instinct, that prognosticating instinct God had given her to protect her baby.

It was their last night at the lake and the men had spent the better part of the afternoon collecting firewood for the bonfire. Every year they stacked limb after limb that had fallen from the trees surrounding the campgrounds into a humongous teepee. This was a particular point of pride for John. Millie watched as he ran around ordering his brother and uncles, even his father, *to lay that big bastard across the top, or, spread 'em out, you'll suffocate it, a fire's gotta breathe!* John had been in the boy scouts for three years as a boy. He had worked his way up the ranks until he earned his Heart badge, one away from Eagle, but quit when he entered high school, to pursue other interests. These had mainly included playing hacky-sack with his friends in the school courtyard. Had he been honest with himself, he would have realized that he had genuinely enjoyed scouting. He had loved independence and confidence he felt when backpacking in the woods of Arkansas or Colorado, how wise he felt, knowing which knot would best suit a particular purpose. But, being an adolescent, John found himself embarrassed by the short green shorts and tall wool socks that were the mandatory uniform. The other boys in his troop were either older than he was, or younger, and they occupied a very separate part of his life than the one he shared with his school friends. Then, in the ninth grade, his school friends, and what they thought of him, became enormously important. His parents had fought hard to keep him from quitting, but the nightmare of being caught in a kerchief was too real to bear.

Now that John was older, he genuinely regretted his decision to drop the scouts, but cherished the knowledge he had gained there, and thought of himself as a master outdoorsman. When the pyre had been built, John instructed his younger cousins to gather rocks to make a ring



around the fire. Millie watched him with his cousins and felt deeply in love. She pictured Kyle, no longer an infant, listening fascinated as John taught him the manly art of fire.

Millie often pictured Kyle in her mind, older than he was. She wondered what his voice would sound like when he first spoke, or how handsome he would be when he became a man. She wondered what he would be interested in. Would he like sports, or reading, or music, or drawing? Would he be talented and athletic like his father or a klutz like herself? Would he like her? Would they get along? She hoped they would. She hoped that they would be able to talk, to *really* talk. *Communicate.*

Her own mother had lacked this skill. It was as if she had the ability to speak, yet lacked the ability to convey her meaning in the kind of concrete language conducive to understanding. When trying to tell Millie she was loved, her mother would compliment her looks, or her hair, if she had been feeling especially sentimental. She had never had a conversation with her mother about what she was feeling or what she thought, only about what she did, or whom she was with. Her father rarely spoke at all.

In this respect, Millie envied John's family. They had a way of enjoying one another's company that was completely foreign to her. They hugged and kissed one another often (even the men), and she found herself having to excuse herself from their presence on more than one occasion, to escape the raucous laughter that seemed to swell until she felt stifled and her ears were ringing. She hoped Kyle would be able to participate, to show his love as freely as John and his family, without feeling the same embarrassment she felt when in their company. Although her smile always began genuine and sincere, as time passed it would begin to gain weight and feel artificial, while those around her continued to beam as effortlessly as ever. This

reunion, however, she had Kyle, and could easily excuse herself when their exuberance became too tiring.

She also had Simple, and in a short amount of time, had grown strongly connected to her. They were outsiders that had banded together against a common enemy. They could speak about the various quirks and oddities of the people surrounding them in a way that teased and made them laugh but would have been hurtful to their husbands. And, having so recently been through pregnancy herself, she felt like something of a mentor to Simple, giving her advice freely, and comparing symptoms. She found that when she was around Simple, her smile remained genuine and did not tire. Alone in the cabin, they laughed for hours about John and Mort's similarities. How they both picked their nose in the car, and how they both had the handwriting of a third-grader. She felt like she had found a sister and on the last night of the reunion, as she watched John light the fire, she wished Simple could accompany her home.

When John was done constructing the teepee of sticks and branches, he told everyone to back away, waving his arms, front to back, as if he were ready to fly away. When everyone had backed what he thought was a suitable and safe distance away, he pulled a small, yellow bottle of lighter fluid from his back pocket. The label showed a cartoon match running from the fire emanating from its head. John held the bottle above his head and began dousing the timber with the lighter fluid. It came out of the bottle in an arc similar to the one John had used to put out many a campfire. He squeezed the bottle until it was entirely spent, then threw it away.

"Everybody ready?" John shouted, turning to give Millie a wink. Millie smiled and lifted one of Kyle's limp, lifeless arms as he slept, and moved it in a miniature salute. John laughed, clicked his heels together and gave them a salute of his own, then turned on the balls of his feet in an about-face. Millie let Kyle's arm flop down to his side and giggled at the way he lay face

down on her chest like a rag doll, his head and all four limbs drooping as if gravity pulled them more forcefully than the rest of his body.

John faced the wood again and lit his match. By now it was dark enough for the match to make a real impression, making his face glow. Millie thought he looked handsome. They hadn't had sex since Kyle was born, but she thought now of what it would feel like to be in his arms again. John threw the match onto the pyre and the flames immediately leapt up, engulfing the wood completely. The heat felt wonderful, the warmth covering her body like a blanket. She squeezed Kyle closer and looked around at John's family, for the first time feeling like they could be her family too.

To her left were John's mother and father. They sat in a couple of tattered lawn chairs, watching the ritual in silence, absorbing the tradition they had seen every year for the last decade. To her right were Mort and Simple. Mort had his hand on Simple's stomach. He moved it in small circles massaging her thigh with his other hand. Millie thought they looked like an ideal couple, the kind you see in the movies, the kind that can make each other laugh. They looked like the kind of couple that would play chess together in the park or ride their bikes in the rain. John's aunt and uncle were still at their cabin playing acoustic guitars and singing in a warbling harmony that sounded soft and light and comforting. She pulled Kyle close to her chest and pressed her face onto his head, breathing in and absorbing his smell.

John stood back and watched the fire come to life with his hands on his hips. He turned and saw Millie holding Kyle, and began to stumble their way. He had a few beers in him and even with the fire illuminating his way in a bright orange aura, he had trouble finding his footing. "Here," he said, "let me see him."

Millie, noticing John's inebriation, snapped instantaneously out of her romantic reverie. The scene that was so perfect a moment ago now seemed staged, the people nothing but cardboard cutouts, the music tinny and obtrusive.

"Here," John said, "Let me see."

"No, not now. He's sleeping." Millie turned her head.

"I won't wake him, I just want to show him my parents. Here." John reached out for Kyle, ignoring Millie's resignation, and scooped him out of her arms. Kyle's head rolled to the side, then back before John got a hand there to support him. He startled awake and began to cry, wrinkling his brow and reaching for an invisible breast. Millie winced, but kept her seat as John walked away.

John, felt as happy as he had ever been in his life. Everything seemed to be just as it should be. He was surrounded by people he loved and he was a father, the one most important role any man plays in life, and he was determined to do it right. Kyle felt weightless in his arms. He bounced him up and down as he walked, shushing and singing *Wouldn't It Be Nice* under his breath.

When he reached his parents, his mom was already on her feet, arms out, clutching for Kyle in the same way a child reaches for his favorite toy. "There's my baby! My baby boy! My sweet baby Kyle!" Millie could hear this from where she sat. She now felt like a completely different person than the one who sat dreaming a moment ago. Now she felt bitter, defensive and hostile. *He's not your baby.* She thought. *He's mine. He's mine and I want him back.* Her hostility was not entirely directed at John's mother but also and John himself, and for the same reason. They both seemed to feel a sense of ownership, a stake in Kyle's well being that Millie knew deep down knew was artificial. Her responsibility was inherent in her being, stemmed

from her biology. Kyle belonged to her and the prospect of sharing him, even with her husband, scared her.

John's mom was not a delicate woman. Like the rest of John's family she was frighteningly enthusiastic and showed her love of Kyle openly. As soon as Kyle was within reach, he was snatched away from his father and swung into the air. Millie winced as she saw Kyle being pushed up into the air, free of any reassuring touch for only a second as John's mother's arms became fully outstretched. Kyle stopped fussing; the stimulation of the movement was enough to distract him from his tears. This seemed to be John's father's cue to intervene. Soon there were three sets of hands grasping, pinching and pulling Kyle, back and forth in a kind of jealous tug-of-war. John seemed to win the first round, taking Kyle back into his arms a little too forcefully to keep his balance. He stumbled a step backward, falling onto his ass in the grass behind him. Millie jumped to her feet at the first sign of his fall. Kyle seemed to be fine, but she wasn't going to let this happen again. John was already trying to get back onto his feet without using his hands, rolling forward with Kyle in his hands, trying to get a footing.

"I can't believe you, John. Give me Kyle." Millie gave her husband the bitchiest, meanest stare she could muster and plucked Kyle away. Without waiting for a response she turned her back to him and marched back to her cabin.

Alone, she pulled Kyle close, breathing in his smell. She felt intoxicated in her love for him. Again she thought of herself at home, lying in the sunlight, nursing Kyle. There didn't seem to be any place she would rather be. There she felt seclusion vast and wonderful, not only away from other people but from any concern other than Kyle. Selfish thoughts of money, or time wasted were focused into a single thought, like sunlight through a magnifying glass, condensed into a single burning thought: her baby.

Her daydream was interrupted by a knock at the door, followed by Simple's high pitched voice, "You O.K., doll?"

"Yeah, Simple, I'm fine," Millie said. The door opened and Simple walked in a glass of wine in her hand. "What the hell do you think you are doing? You're pregnant!"

"It's O.K. The doctor said I could have some wine, if it's just a little."

"It's not O.K., Simple, it's not. That's disgusting, it's just so selfish."

At the word "selfish" Kyle startled, reaching a hand across his body and shifting his weight away from his mother. By the time Millie could react, Kyle was on the floor. He lay face down, and seemed to be holding his breath. Millie and Simple were both speechless.

Millie yanked Kyle up from off of the wooden floor and screamed, "Get out!" "I'll get Mort," Simple said, stumbling backward out of the door. Kyle's cries sounded strange and muffled. His face was bright red and seemed to be trying to push his voice past some kind of barrier.

"It's O.K., baby, it's O.K." Millie repeated this to herself as she rocked Kyle in her arms. "It's O.K., baby." Suddenly Kyle found his breath, inhaling more forcefully than Millie had ever seen, and let out a cry so high pitched her eardrums seemed to vibrate like a glass harp. "It's O.K." The left half of his face was red and seemed pinched, but otherwise normal. Above his eye a goose egg had already begun to discolor.

Then Kyle vomited. Millie stopped talking to herself and seemed to be reawakened. Her terror attacked her in incessant, insistent waves. She grabbed her bag off the floor, she ran outside. She could see flashlights coming her way from the campfire. Kyle's seat was already in the car, but strapping him in was difficult while he cried. When she had him, and his seat belts buckled, she threw her bag into the passenger seat and jumped behind the wheel. She opened her

bag and began ripping out its contents, throwing her clothes and toiletries on the floorboard, before finding her keys in a side pocket. Seeing Mort and John approach the car, she hit the automatic locks started the car. Through the rearview mirror she could see John jump out of the way to keep from being struck as she backed into the road. She heard the door handles flipping like the beating of wings, and their flashlights and fists beating the windows and doors, but as she pulled the car into drive, pressing her foot to the accelerator, she felt alone with Kyle and his cries for his mother.

## Now That It's Done

He meant to kill her. There is no getting around that. Kyle was not the type to lose his temper. And now, now that it's done, now that she's dead, he realized that not much had changed. After all, he still had his job at Hannety's Super Market, stocking groceries every night with the night manager, Tim. He still had a small ground-floor apartment, close enough to his work that he could walk, but far enough to make it uncomfortable. He still kept his right eye covered, preferring giggles to grimaces, and still required one, quarter inch lens in his glasses to see out of his "good" eye. His mother still picked him up every Wednesday and drove him to the movies. He was still a virgin, and his hands were still wrinkled and sore from washing his hands in bleach.

He woke the next morning feeling slightly giddy, but anxious. He had slept without dreaming through the night, but it seemed like hardly any time at all had passed since he lay his head down the night before. He stepped out of bed fully dressed smelling and feeling like a cheap motel room that had recently been turned. He searched under his pillows and sheets for his glasses, and ran to the bathroom. He urinated for what seemed like several minutes then washed his hands and face, with soap. He wetted a washcloth, carefully wiping away the sleep that had accumulated within his cavernous right eye socket in the night.

He had lost his eye as an infant, in an accident. And, although his mother had told him the story several times, the details were still unclear. He knew that this accident was the source of his mother's enmity for his father, their divorce was particularly nasty. Kyle couldn't remember the accident happening and he could barely remember the fights. He couldn't remember much of his father's visits, but he could remember struggling to absorb each detail as the visits became less frequent and eventually ceased all together. Easily, and often against



every effort of aversion, he remembered the relentless snicker and teasing of those children with whom he had insisted were his friends. He remembered coming home from school, tears spilling from his injury, mucous giving them a thickness and weight, causing them to cling to his cheek like the head of a beer running down an overfilled glass. He remembered falling into the arms of a mother all too willing to comfort and console her only child.

Kyle splashed some water on his neck and under his arms. Quickly, he dressed himself from the piles of clothes surrounding his bed, finding the remote in the process. Kyle hovered above his couch, as if about to take a seat, and flipped the television from station to station, its inhabitants belching single syllable outbursts in fast staccato blasts, like the continual firing of a gun.

It was four o'clock, much too late for the morning news, but too close to his shift to wait for the afternoon broadcast. He grabbed his apron off the chair near the door and headed outside, the bite of the cool breeze, reminding him he had forgotten his patch. Turning to let himself in again, he heard a siren, its wail gaining volume incrementally as he fumbled his keys out of his pocket and shimmied the teeth through the deadbolt. Now running, Kyle raced through the house and tore the sheets from his bed before finding the black bandage. This time, on his way out he grabbed his coat. Plunging his hands deep into his pockets, he lowered his head, skipping across the pavement, half running on his way to work. Tim said that if he was late again, he'd take his other eye.

Kyle took his remaining few moments before clocking in, to skim one of the newspapers at the register. Quickly, he turned the pages, the thin unwieldy paper tearing as he skimmed the articles, looking. After looking again, from cover to back page, reading each headline, Kyle

attempted to fold the newspaper back into its unmolested form and placed it back on top of the stack.

The night passed quickly as Kyle worked with an enthusiasm he hadn't felt in years. If not for an extra shipment of produce to unpack, he could have finished a half an hour earlier than usual. As it was, he left at his regular time, passing Dave's Dive as the night's patrons spilled from the doors, approaching their cars with boisterous confidence. This scene played itself out before him, the same as each previous night, except, of course, for Candace's notable absence.

He couldn't help but remember the first time he saw her, or, more accurately, the first time she saw him. Kyle had been turning his head left and right, watching for the glow of cars in reverse, when he heard a scream followed by violent high-pitched laughter.

"Ahoy there, sissy!" a voice shouted behind him. Again – the scream, followed by incessant cackling, like that of a novelty witch designed to scare trick-or-treaters as they approach a stranger's house on Halloween. Kyle continued walking without looking back. He was used to this kind of verbal assault, most often hurled from the window a passing car. Mentally, he turned their volume down and pressed on, taking comfort in the darkness as he left the lights of the parking lot behind him and turned towards home.

The next night, on his way home from work, Kyle had all but forgotten the insults of the evening before. He moved in an ambling reverie, daydreaming of the pretty woman who had touched his arm, sliding her hand gently down from the shoulder to get his attention. She had asked where the kitty litter was located, and he smiled at her choice of words. She was old enough to be his mother, but, still, he felt an attraction that was both irresistible and nauseating. He followed her to the register, breathing heavily as he lugged the large box of litter, resting its weight on his hip as he memorized the movement of her buttocks.

Without warning, he was jolted from his dream, that same penetrating laugh, stabbing repeatedly into his mind, making all other thoughts impossible to grasp. Fiercely, he turned toward its source, scowling, trying to convey the depth of his outrage and annoyance with one ugly, ferocious grimace. Candace passed unknowingly, hanging from the shoulder of a tall bespectacled man. He put his hand on her waist, speaking quietly into her ear then retracting to avoid collision as she flung back her head, to scream and laugh yet again.

It was the same the night after this, and almost every night thereafter. Often, Kyle would make it as far as the last parking space, breathing a sigh of relief before Candace, inevitably, made herself known. He would then watch as she left, each night with different man, spitting unpropitious insults into the darkness.

After a few months, Kyle dreaded his walk home. What was once an inconvenience developed into a test of his resolve. Sometimes, he would sweat and begin feeling ill, then, very rarely, step unmolested out of the luminous glow that seemed to surround Dave's Dive like the flood lights of a prison, gasping, triumphantly overwhelmed with a sense of sanctimonious relief as he began the descent to his apartment. He had a similar feeling when he killed her.

When his mother picked him up the following Wednesday, she noticed, first, that he hadn't shaved. His stubble scratched her cheek as she hugged him close, squeezing him around the shoulders with lean muscular arms. She scanned the small littered apartment clicking her tongue at how untidy it had become. "You know, " she began, "I could stop by after work on Friday. I'll make you dinner." Kyle shrugged his shoulders and kissed his mother's cheek, hesitant to look away from the television.

"Would you turn that thing off, please? I can barely hear myself think."

Kyle clicked off the set, discarding the remote. It had been a week and, still, he had found no mention of Candace's disappearance. During the movie, he found it hard to concentrate. Normally, he looked forward to these excursions, finding comfort in their regularity and security in the familiarity of his mother's acquaintance. In her presence, it was perfectly acceptable to sit silently, looking out the window as they drove, listening to the minutia of her week like the pattering of rain. Then, when the movie began, he would sit, engrossed in the fantasy, blissfully reliving each clichéd nuance as he munched his popcorn to the rhythm of the dialogue.

Tonight, however, he felt distracted, uncomfortable. His mother's prattling annoyed him to no end, and once, finally, the previews had completed and the movie begun, he couldn't seem to hear above the shifting and coughing of the other guests. He excused himself from his seat, scuttling sideways past the protruding knees of his neighbors and rushed to the bathroom. He removed his glasses and eye-patch, and splashed water over his face. The restroom was vacant; the soundtracks of the films being shown around him could be heard, muted through the walls, softened and placated by a gentle padding. Here, he allowed his mind to clear, the sounds around him blending into a hum like that of cicada.

When he opened his eyes he was confronted with a horde of people entering the restroom, one after the other. He pushed his way out to find his mother waiting for him outside. "Are you all right?" she asked, instinctively touching his face, feeling for signs of fever. Kyle explained that he didn't feel well, that he would like to go home.

On the car ride back to his apartment, his mother didn't speak, but looked, every so often, in his direction, an expression of knowing concern on her face. He didn't stop to hear her goodbye and stepped onto the damp pavement, swinging the door closed behind him. In his

apartment, discarded dishes filled the sink and covered his counter-top. Worn clothes spread across the floor, accumulating in small piles as if huddled together for warmth. Stepping into this familiar space was like stepping, inverted, into his own consciousness. Here he was aware. Here he thought, acted, and spoke with a clarity that vanished in the world outside.

He turned on the television and was affronted by a newswoman's placid, vapid voice speaking at an uncomfortably high volume. He began looking for the remote, first skimming the surface of the clutter with his vision, then, diving in with his hands. Clothes were thrown from one pile to another and to another; the cushions of the couch removed and replaced, only to be thrown from the room. He thrust his arms into its crevices, examining its inner workings, delicately, with the tips of his outstretched fingers, until, enraged, he threw it on its back. The television still blared and Kyle allowed himself a moment of frenetic expulsion of energy, shaking, biting and scratching at the emptiness in front of him.

Panting and exhausted, Kyle wiped the sweat from his face and guiltily righted the couch. Now feeling more composed, he switched the television off, grabbed his coat and slunk into the night toward Candace's apartment.

Kyle had taken this route only once before. That night, *the* night, he had seen Candace before he heard her. He had just approached the bar's vicinity, and was steeling himself for the coquettish bray he had now begun to hear in his sleep. He scanned the lot, no longer wary of cars, watching instead for any sign of Candace and her revolving beau. He caught sight of her as she left the bar, letting the door swing closed behind her alone and visibly angry. She stomped her feet as she walked, the heels of her shoes tapping the cement and giving off a sharp clap, like the sound of an axe chopping wood. She looked over her shoulder, to her left, directly at Kyle. He had never felt so exposed. He waved. Her gaze then seemed to shift. Kyle could feel

himself going out of focus as Candace looked through him, passed him, to what lay beyond his seemingly transparent form. She turned and walked towards home.

Kyle unconsciously timed his steps with those of Candace as she walked. He kept a fair distance between them, but took no great effort to conceal himself from her. He didn't see the need. He walked confidently, his strides gradually growing greater and greater. With each step he stood more erect.

Now, as he neared her apartment for the second time, Kyle felt vulnerable, visible. His arms hung limply at his side as he approached the compound. He lowered himself, bending horizontally at the waist and walked, with knees bent, behind a well-manicured hedge. Here, between the plant and a tall wrought iron gate he walked, the bush clinging to his clothing, tugging at him as he moved slowly onward, but concealing him from passing cars; the darkness obscuring his form to any passers-by in the complex beyond the fence. As he reached the hedge's end, he stopped and watched a train of cars entering the automatic gate that slowly rattled open for the first vehicle. Each subsequent car, moved quickly, tail-gaiting their predecessor, until finally the last one entered the compound. The gate began to retract immediately. Kyle, first, peeked his head out, looking to see if any other car would follow; not seeing anyone approach, he stepped from his hiding place and made for the opening. At first, he moved at what felt like a perfectly regular pace, trying to maintain a casual composure, but as he watched the gate, little by little, nearing its destination, he began to run, then sprinted through to avoid being crushed.

Thus far, he had moved strictly on instinct, tracing a physical memory with rote ambivalence. But now that he was here, he stood frozen, unable to move any further, painfully aware that the gate was closed behind him. He stood in this spot for several moments,

completely lost, racking his brain for a scrap of a memory that could give him some clue of which way his destination lie. He felt as mouse might feel, dropped by his tail into a maze, each possible corridor looming ominous and unfamiliar before him, unable to return the way in which he came, the disconcerting yet tantalizing aroma of cheese in air.

Kyle took a step forward, startled as his foot kicked an empty bottle tinkling across the pavement, the high-pitched jingle reminding him of keys hurriedly removed and forcefully sited. He envisioned, now, the exterior of Candace's door and remembered the number. 332.

He began to move again, and walked between buildings, looking from door to door. They seemed to progress at random. 228, 1132, 614. He strode across the lawn, hoping to gain a better vantage point, uncomfortable to be surrounded by windows checkered in all directions, and balconies stacked one upon the other. It wasn't until he neared the pool and office, having made almost a complete circle, that he found her building.

Moving back onto the paved walkway between structures, Kyle attempted to resume an appearance of nonchalance. He put his hands into his pockets, then, removed them, deciding to swing them slowly at his side: first struggling to move them in sync with his legs, then, feeling clumsy letting them wander. He put them back into his pockets and headed up the staircase.

The stairs were steep, and Kyle was forced to step higher than was comfortable, pushing himself upward with his hands on his knees. It was as if the property's owner hoped to save money on construction by providing half the recommended steps. By the time he reached the third floor, his face was flushed and a cold sweat seemed to hover just above his skin. His heart raced then stopped, along with his breath, all autonomous functions halting as a door moved noisily open, swinging fully upon its hinge until it slammed against the wall. Emerging slowly from the room directly in front of him was an enormously obese man, who seemed to

miraculously escape the confines of the door's frame. His clothes were stained, darkened in repulsive locations, giving the illusion of shadow. His eyes met Kyle's, then, perceptively, they disengaged. He looked now, not at Kyle, but through him, grimacing as if nauseous. Kyle raised his hand to his face, prodding the fissure of his right socket, exposed and naked. He could still feel the pressure of the bandage on his skin, the strap in his hair, a phantom sensation he longed to feel in what was now a cold dry crevice. He moved several steps away from the stairwell, allowing the man to pass him, his stench violently obtrusive as he maneuvered his way down the steps, leaning precariously on the handrail.

Now alone, Kyle stood facing Candace's door, knowing neither why, exactly, he had returned, or how, exactly, he felt. He put his palm flat against the door's wooden front and pushed, the deadlatch clicking, as it swung open without resistance. He entered and found the apartment as he had left it. The walls were painted a rich violet purple, and speckled with an ornate texturing. On the floor lay Candace's purse, its contents seeping from its zippered slit. To his right was the kitchen, its counters decorated with floral ceramics, photographs of animals, encapsulated in pink, butterflyed frames, and a variety of wine bottles, each with a unique label, yet translucent and hollow, their crimson stained corks, upended and presented beside them in the same meticulous manner. Ahead, lay the bedroom, door ajar, and Candace, staring at the barren white ceiling, eyes removed.

Kyle stared at her, his outward body lifeless as he swung wildly within, from rage to fear and back again. He stood mute, his mind's own, cacophonous clamor deafening his physical surroundings, until suddenly it was all swept away by the faint, barely audible melody of Candace's cell phone, ringing from the floor behind him. He approached it warily and picked it up. Each vibration startled him, and it rang, melody repeating over and over again. Slowly,



Kyle opened the phone and placed it to his ear. The voice on the other side sounded dull and distant yet its volume was high enough to make him recoil. The words, at first were unintelligible, but they had a calming effect: a recorded message from the library, informing the borrower that fines were accruing.

Kyle closed the phone and looked around him, seeing, for the first time, Candace's bedroom. She had a small nightstand next to her bed, a stack of paperbacks, towering over her alarm clock. Against the wall were three tall, segmented bookshelves, filled entirely, a collage of colorful spines, like a schizophrenic rainbow.

The sun had started to strain through the window's blinds as Kyle began to look through Candace's belongings. He opened the drawers of her furniture, sifting through loose paper and various ornamental trinkets. He looked under her bed, through the clothes in her closets, and in her refrigerator, collecting scraps of information along the way, bits of data he attempted to organize into an image of a woman, but, having exhausted the resources available to him, he slumped upon her couch, feeling unsettled, the portrait of her that he'd formed in his mind was unsettling and incomplete. He realized he still held her phone and flipped it open. He began to scroll through its contents: a list of names, a *long* list, entirely men. Barry, Ben, Clark, Clint, David. Kyle felt a familiar wrench of envy, tightening the muscles in his face. He dialed the first on the list, static clicking indistinctly as the connection was made. The phone rang: one long, shuddering tone after another, until the answering service took over. He hung up without response. Kyle tried the next name, then the next, each call ending in the same abrupt manner. This was infuriating. Not one of these men answered his call. Who was this woman? Who was she? Looking up from the phone, Kyle caught his reflection in the television – and he knew she was him: lonely and desperate, and no one answered.

Kyle stood, the muscles in his legs and back were sore and achy. He walked into the bedroom, stepping clumsily over the mounds of her belongings he had littered about the room, and looked down upon Candace. Pulling the comforter from her bed, he covered her body, laying one end gently over her face. He used her phone to call his mother, the phone ringing for what seemed like ages, and when she answered, he said, "Thank you."