

Spring 2003

Fiction Fix 01

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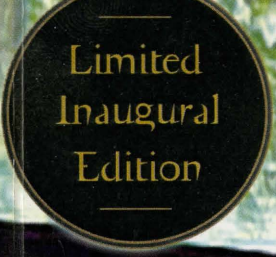
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Limited
Inaugural
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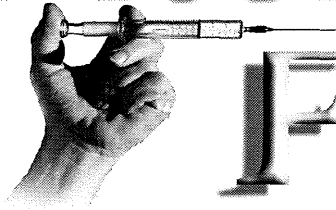
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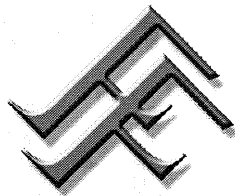
Amy Quincy

Fiction Fix

First Injection Vol 1 ♦ Spring 2003

Fiction Fix





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First Injection Vol I

Spring 2003

Edited by

Sarah Howard

Darren Longley

Shannon McLeish

Black Osprey Press
Jacksonville, Florida

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Welcome Fiction Junky!

Some people get their fix shooting heroin or snorting cocaine. Others are addicted to alcohol, cigarettes, sex, sports, shopping, or TV. But when my hand starts shaking and I break out in a cold sweat, nothing cures me quicker than a good dose of gripping fiction.

In this first issue of Fiction Fix, we're offering stories for every taste, from a parody on religion to teenage pregnancy to the trials of parenthood. We hope you'll laugh, be moved, or even offended. In any case, we hope this gives you a few moments of escape from your hectic life. It may even be that after reading a couple of these, you'll decide your life isn't so bad after all.

Look us up anytime. We're not famous or anything – yet – just a bunch of undergrad, grad, and post-baccalaureate student volunteers who love to read and write. Besides, we could always use the help, on staff or with fiction and graphic art submissions. Please e-mail us at fictionfix@hotmail.com, or visit our website at fictionfix.net.

Now, turn the page, and prepare to become addicted.

Sarah Howard
Editor-in-Chief

Fiction Fix is fully staffed by volunteers from a University of North Florida fiction workshop. It would never have come about without the inspiration, encouragement and assistance we've received from our professor, Ari. A few paragraphs in our publication hardly do justice to his talent and contributions, but we hope it will give him an inkling of how much he means to us.

If you're ever looking for Ari, he's pretty easy to spot. He's the one who looks like he's on the wrong university campus – the guy in tattered jeans, green fishing vest, Bogartian Casablanca hat, cowboy boots, with rather unkempt salt and pepper hair. But don't depend on catching him for long. At last count, he's teaching five classes in addition to juggling his family life and artistic interests in painting, music, reading, and writing (not to mention keeping up with his incredible webpage, www.arifiles.com).

This whole thing started when Ari walked into class one early fall evening and asked if any of us had considered publishing a literary magazine. He suggested that we see him after class if we were interested. Most of us stayed after that class, and have stayed after every class since. We're a pretty diverse group. Many of us work full time in addition to coursework and all of us are involved in a number of things other than school. In spite of our tight schedules, we've devoted a great deal of time, effort and other resources, essentially just because Ari believed in us.

In addition to what he did for our morale, he also set up an online discussion board for us, gave us technical and professional advice, encouraged us to talk to the English department and to professors of other creative writing programs around the country, sending us to them to get more advice and support. From him, we learned about devotion – to each other and to the written word. He has listened to us cry, yell, and pour our hearts out with understanding and patience - no matter how busy he was. He's shared in our lives and in our dreams, and we are better because of it.

There aren't sufficient words to thank him for what he taught us, nor for what he gave us: faith in our talents and the ability to just try – even when we had no idea and were scared to death.

Many other people deserve thanks, too. We would like to thank several instructors, Ari, Joe Flowers, Pam Hnyla, and Eileen Maguire for ordering our publication for their classes. We are extremely grateful for their support of us. We would like to offer a special acknowledgement to Professor Kaplan. She has been incredibly helpful and supportive, assisting us many times and giving wonderful suggestions. It was Dr. Hassall's brainstorm to have a fiction workshop in the first place. Without her, we wouldn't have had this opportunity. Dr. Slaughter's information and suggestions on electronic literature magazines and the creative writing and publication process were invaluable. Dr. Wiley's support and encouragement on improving graduate offerings in Writing as a Fine Art for those of us interested in continuing on for masters degrees has been much appreciated. We would like to thank Chair Tilley for his guidance, support and contributions. We really feel like we've been supported by the entire English department. The enthusiasm we've been met with at every turn has done much to keep us motivated and engaged.

Many thanks to all of you. This has been a tremendous learning experience for us. Without you, we could not have done it.

Sincerely,



The Crew of Fiction Fix

Civil Rights

Chuck sat in the dark next to the window. A knife lay on the ironing board across the small motel room. He lived there, lived there for the last few months. And before that there had been another motel room. That one stank just as bad as this one. Mold grew on the walls and ceiling between the yellow streaks of nicotine.

Jane was not there tonight. She wasn't many nights. She would come home later. Drunk. And she would stink of her own cunt. She would stumble and scream and fall and shit and vomit and tell of the man who bought her a bottle of wine, or if she was lucky, whiskey, and fucked her. But she always came home when the booze ran out. And Chuck always waited.

He stared out that window, between the bars that kept him from the world and the world from him, at the city he barely knew. He wasn't even sure what city it was anymore. He wasn't sure where he had been last year, or even how he got to this fucking city with its lights at night that didn't even do the job of exposing the roaches that crawled up the walls and tickled his feet until he moved and stomped.

Tonight was no different than the rest. Chuck sat and drank from

the gallon of cheap red wine and wore only his underwear. And they were no longer white but rotted with holes, a yellow-green with red stains from the boils and sores and falls.

And Chuck sat and he drank from the jug of wine and he swore to himself and cursed his woman, now underneath a man in a similar room with an all too familiar stench wafting from inside of her. He rolled his cigarettes with one hand and he coughed and hacked and coughed and sometimes threw up, but continued to smoke and drink and wait. Wine had spilled on his gut and his hands, sticky, sweet, and disgusting. His feet were bare and his toenails were long, yellow and brittle. He scratched at his beard and the sores on his arms.

At nearly 5 a.m., as the paperboys and delivery trucks began to make their rounds, Jane came home. She flicked the light switch next to the door and exposed her disgusting husband in waiting. He greeted her with a slurred, "Fuck you."

"NO. Fuck you, you fat shit!" She slurred back.

"What did he do for you tonight? You get some whiskey, some wine? Some of that damn CRACK?"

"Yeah all of that shit I got. And a better fuckin' than I ever got from you."

"Fuck you, Jane, you stupid whore."

"Look at you in your fucking shitty underwear and drunk and ugly and fat. Why do I stay with you?"

"You don't stay with me. You go get fucked every night by some guy who's got a bit of money he won at the track and some booze. Why do I stay with you?"

"You shouldn't."

It was time for Chuck to put an end to it all. She plagued him. It was just too much. He'd hung on to the damn bitch no matter what she

did. She was a part of him; a part that had to be removed. The light shone on the knife across the room on the ironing board that functioned as a dinner table, when they ate, if they ate at all.

The knife lay there, illuminated by the one light in the room that was only a light bulb suspended from the ceiling, shining down on the blade and the filth around it.

Chuck walked to the makeshift table, muttering incomprehensible statements with an occasionally audible, “Bitch,” or “fucking whore,” mixed in. He grabbed the knife and returned to his seat by the window. He stared at Jane across the room; she went silent in shock. Jane shivered as Chuck felt the blade’s sharpness on his fingertips and continued to stare at her with a grin frozen onto his face. He needed freedom. Freedom from that shitty motel room, freedom from that whore.

And freedom he found as he stood up and tore the rotten, dirty underwear from his loins. With no thought or hesitation, he held the blade to his scrotum, and sliced away his balls. They fell bloody to the floor and he finished the last of the wine as Jane screamed. He grabbed a towel and walked out the door.

Free at last.

Echo

You'd miss it if you were not me. It's called flirting. And like all forms of human contact, it occurs in a single moment, then echoes for a long time afterward.

There is a young man in a navy blue shirt and khaki shorts standing behind her. She's laughing because the ski boots don't fit and the pant leg she is trying to unzip is stuck. Like a Christmas tree in her bright new outfit, she sways left to right, almost falling, but not quite. The young man's hands move gently toward her hips and kinetically hover in the air beside them. Small, eager hands. Losing her balance, her head falls toward his shoulders. With an audible brush of rayon, he makes contact. I watch her eyes grow wide as her hair falls all over him. It's so damn loud. If I had a tape recorder, I could make my point and be done with it.

For eight years we have carried on with glances and smiles and private gestures. And I'd bet this was a kind of love. The other day I was about to say something and not only did she finish my sentence, but she corrected the grammar of how I was about to say it. We make up words for things all the time. Our children are not simply perfect, they are love-ish. When we sleep together, we don't have sex or make love, we nook it.

We are playful and silly like this, but not silly - on the short bus. Like so many marriages, and even dolphins in love (so science has proven), this is of our own creation. Through our familiar language, the world falls in and out of place, and we have learned how to make the best of it. We can talk it out. We can talk the hell out of a great many things.

But only when we remember the details.

In our second year of dating, when moving in became a possibility, we would meet at the bars with our groups of separate friends. Often we pretended to be interested in each other like strangers for the first time. It was a game we played, and she played it better than I. But I remember *specifically* that I never got jealous back then. Never. Even with the simple matter of physics between us - her, four years older and a damn sight better looking, and me, just an average-looking guy with a law degree and straight teeth. I didn't even have the benefit of being smarter than she was. Initially, I was taken by her stained-glass voice and then later by her symmetrical good looks. Finally, it was her willingness to listen to my every word, no matter how boring or self-indulgent the subject of me remained. Her eyes were in a constant state of illumination at the things I said. Whether it was about some football game I lost a bet on or the details of a case trial I was pursuing - she would close in the world around me. I loved the attention and she loved giving it, and that is what we had.

Now I have to yell through a bullhorn to get a response, and when I finally do, the light is gone.

I recall that this was, in fact, all my idea - this *domestication*. Late one night, after last call at the local pub, we walked out to the parking lot, passed by our cars, and stepped onto the beach. The wind blew cool and strong with a green moon in eclipse above us. I remember the way the sand looked with our tracks parallel to the water. New terrain was being crossed. Impressions were being made. Eventually I asked her the question on my mind. A wave crashed - or rather, each time I recall the moment I

hear a wave crashing. The strangest thing was the way her voice sounded when, finally, she said yes. Probably we were both drunk. I honestly only intended to say: *Do you want to move in with me?* But what came out was: *Do you want to marry me?*

This is one of the very first things she does not remember.

In a sense, my adult life began with either a Freudian slip or an inebriated, overly-romantic gesture. Either way, we are in the thick of it, and by now the young man's hands are comfortably resting on my Sarah's hips. I can't blame him, not really, though I'd still spend the money to have him killed. The fact is she's a very attractive woman with a casual demeanor. People are naturally drawn to her. I have watched men of all ages turn to stare at her, leaving their wives or dates at the table at the first opportunity to stand face to face with her. She loved this and eventually came to expect it everywhere we went.

She clunks over to me from across the department store. I could meet her halfway, but don't. The boots make a dull thumping sound and jerk her knees forward. She stumbles as she gets near me and almost knocks me over, but this time her fall is an accident.

"I remember this being easier, darling. Perhaps we should call it off and head for the Bahamas instead."

"Do you know what's funny?" I ask.

"No. What?"

"That young man looks like your old friend Bob Weinstein." This is a complete lie.

"You think so?"

"At first I couldn't quite place it. But then I was just sitting here watching you and it hit me."

"That is funny, darling. Have you found the gloves you wanted, or do we have to order them over the web and have them sent up?"

"I actually found a pair that will work perfectly. And they match

my goggles.”

“Fantabulous.”

Everything is fantabulous. Our trip is going to be fantabulous. Her new ski outfit will be fantabulous. The snow, the cabin, the dinner with the Metz’s, the hot tub, the port wine, the old record player we bought on Ebay for our Bill Evans records - all of these things: nothing short of fantabulous.

I watch her clunk back toward the Weinstein look-a-like. When she gets there, her laugh radiates through the entire mall and every alpha male in the pack catches her scent. She is the epitome of fantabulous. It sends a chill up my spine.

These past few days, I have been constantly reminded of the thing Sarah does not remember, the thing that we brought back with us from Vermont the first time we went, the thing that did not stay in the white snow-tipped mountains of Sugarbush, nor linger in the fingers of the pine trees outside our cabin window, nor remain hidden beneath a wool blanket beside a fire. It is the image of Bob Weinstein’s shoe. An Italian-made thing of leather and gold, as expensive as the wristwatch I own and twice as gaudy. Like I said, I remember things - images especially. I could have been an artist, if only I’d had the courage to be alone for extended periods of time.

This is the truest thing Sarah has ever said to me: “There will always be secrets. Secrets among friends, family, and especially lovers.”

She does not remember saying this either.

One Saturday evening, about a year ago, a man and a woman - let’s just go ahead and call them Bob and Aubrey Weinstein - check into a popular ski lodge for a week in the middle of February. That very same evening, another couple drive up from Providence, Rhode Island, to meet them. They are all old friends from college and they used to get along very

well. The idea is to get away for a much needed vacation from the normal bump and grind of domestic life. They are over thirty, well-adjusted, and profoundly bored with life.

By day, the couples ski the sunny mountainsides of Northern Vermont. They do both the downhill and cross-country trails. At some point, they discover a frozen pond off one of the flatland paths to skate and ice fish on. They drink buttered rum at the busy little cafe at the bottom of the slopes. They lounge in hot tubs, take unexpected naps by the fire in their New England furnished rooms of lighthouse paintings and dark wood rocking chairs. They read, write letters, talk philosophy, and reminisce. The men recall early business proposals and, during a round of single malt Scotches, make plans to call one another when the week expires. The women linger beside bay windows watching the fuzzy bundled children topple down the kiddy slopes; they speak of their hopes of future children, their ideal vision of family life, the concerns, the devotion, the way everything might change.

There is an atmosphere taking shape between them. They are lighter, somewhat altered for a short time as their specific gravity acclimates to the week of leisure.

“Why not move to Paris and write?” Bob Weinstein says almost angrily over a tabletop of empty champagne bottles. “Why not just do that?”

“Because, well, first of all Bob, the French hate us and secondly, all of that has been done before. Who the hell wants to read another book by an expatriate? I sure as hell don’t,” I say.

“That’s because you’re a realist, Sam. Where is your sense of adventure? Your sense of danger and risk of the unknown?”

Sarah reaches across the table and takes out a cigarette, the neck of her dinner dress dips low. “Sam is certainly a realist, that’s definitely true,” she says. “But you’re not being very imaginative Bob. I mean come

on, Paris?”

“Trust me when I say I can be very imaginative when I need to be,” he says.

This actually happened. The facts are as stated: we had been drinking steadily, each night drinking more and more. What began as a few glasses of wine with dinner, quickly turned to bottles of champagne, assorted highballs, and multiple rounds of martinis.

More facts: Bob Weinstein is a stocky man - five ten, dark hair, bearded, and often mistaken for being in a foul mood. Really it is only the burned in façade of a corporate officer who has limited responsibilities in his company. When Bob isn't renegotiating his salary, he's making plans to fire people. It shows in his face.

Aubrey Weinstein is a ceramics teacher at a community college. A bohemian turned housewife, she smokes marijuana regularly, but Bob doesn't know this. She says it helps her unwind from her busy day of spinning pottery. She is attractive in the way that some things possess a gentle, unobtrusive beauty. She doesn't stand out in a crowded room, but when you notice her, you cannot stop noticing her.

Together, Bob and Aubrey form a modern union of left and right brain symmetry. For myself, they came across as perfectly balanced. They fit together better than most. I'll admit that.

In contrast, I don't know how Sarah and I were viewed. Maybe in the same way, but I doubt it.

“I like the law, Bob. It's solid.” I knocked on the table for effect. “Real.”

“Sam, tell me what's so solid about it? Words on a page. No less real or unreal than the works of great literature,” Bob said, his voice inflected with the echo of a Harvard English professor.

Aubrey chimed in, “The point you two gorillas are trying to make

is essentially the same: the things we love fill us with a sense of wonder. They remain always bigger and unfathomable.”

I thought it was a hell of a thing to say and mostly true. Bob had other thoughts.

“Nope. Not everything that we’re taught to respect is good for us. Some things suck the life out of us and we don’t even realize it. Our careers are essentially choices we’re forced to live with to provide for those who depend on us, and all the while our hearts go in other directions. I’m talking about desire.”

It was at this point that I realized the core of the conversation was beyond my grasp and the game now was to sound as profound as possible without actually having to make any sense.

Sarah looked radiant, but acted quiet and distant. We had spoken very little that day. I believe at the time, I just thought she was relaxing and feeling introverted. She and Bob got along well. I could tell by their eye contact.

Facts.

At some point, the hour was very late. There was a common area between our two adjoining rooms with comfortable leather chairs and a couch. Aubrey and I found ourselves sitting alone. We had no thought of where our mates had gotten off to. A large fireplace sat squarely in the middle of the room and cast an orange hue over everything, while simultaneously drawing everything toward its blazing center. The windows nearby were large and gave a wide view of the falling snow outside. Above the tips of the dark pine trees, you could see the whiteness of the snow settling in clumps. They lined the horizon, creating an effect like that of clouds viewed from the window of an airplane.

The fact I remember next was leaning into Aubrey Weinstein. Falling almost, as though I was off balance and unable to stand without someone’s help. A rather pathetic gesture. But if done correctly, it could

send us headlong into a course of action that somehow could be reasoned as a fault of gravity rather than our own.

At first, we were both slow to respond, but only in the way our mouths hesitated to stay connected. The first few seconds were unfamiliar and awkward, but in time, the warmth spread. A natural glide of desire that can only run an unconscious course. A course of simple surrender to weight and motion and gravity.

The very next thing I have chosen to remember is the fact of the shoe. I awoke the next morning to find it beneath our bed. In the room rented under the name Sam and Sarah Radcliffe. The fact was that it did not belong there. It was out of place and unexpected. Tilted sideways with the laces not even untied. Kicked off haphazardly the night before. To think then, in that moment, as I knelt down on the floor examining it, that I felt nothing but the afterglow of something predetermined having finally occurred. It was as though Bob Weinstein's shoe had been waiting for me there the whole time. I knew I could talk about this with Sarah. I had the shoe. It was evidence. More solid and real than anything else that ever transpired between us. It was a confirmation of the way we were. The evidence of the people we were turning out to be. Or more truly, the people we had failed to become - the way we had settled.

So here we are. Luckily for both of us, it's my job to collect the facts and I haven't given up yet. Case in point: today I will recall the sound of hair brushing against rayon. The subtle, frictionless gesture of a human head falling toward synthetic fibers. A sound that can easily be remembered because, if I listen carefully, I will hear the echo everywhere I turn.

Hush

I don't like Trang Duc's eyes. They are flat, black, with less emotion than a porcelain doll. They follow me. I can feel them on me – cold, oily – on my hair, on my legs, on my bottom. Wanting. Waiting for the moment I stray too close – then he grabs me, laughing too heartily, “Ah hah! Hee hee! Gwan tickle you! Gwan tickle you!” While his hands roam everywhere – grabbing my bottom, between my legs, over my chest. I know he's not supposed to touch me this way. But he does – in front of everyone: my father, my mother, his mother, his wife, his 2-year-old daughter.

I cry out for him to stop, to leave me alone – the red runs to my face. He laughs, this time with a hint of sincerity. He is enjoying himself. His eyes gleam as his hands and nasty fingers probe and grope my body. The other adults laugh with him, at me, at my frenzied, pathetic, terrified humiliation. Trang Duc smiles paternally and allows me to escape, but it is clear in his smile that it is not over between us, and I am ashamed. Somehow it seems I am his guilty accomplice. Only he knows and I know how he has touched me and how he will touch me.

“Bye now, honey. Be a good girl for Mrs. Trinh, and watch out for your sister. I know you girls will have such fun together tonight. I’ll see you tomorrow morning bright and early, so don’t stay up too late,” and my mother kisses me goodbye. I start to cry, holding desperately to her hand.

“Lisi? Honey? What’s the matter with you? Stop this now.”

Mrs. Trinh pulls me away, her arms around me. “Shhh. Hush, hush now. No need carry on so! You like it here. Come – I give you piece candy.” My parents make their escape while my back is turned, my vision blocked by the wily body of Mrs. Trinh.

The evening passes in a blur, despite my efforts to keep everyone awake and in the same room – particularly myself, my sister, and Mrs. Trinh, my only protection. “Come. Seepy time! We seep. All go to bed. Seep! Seep!” and we’re herded into bed.

I will not sleep. Just to be sure, I poke my sister periodically to make her cry. But I am so tired. I drift away, thinking of my dog, Fluff and how he’s sleeping on my pillow at home, and I wonder if he’s missing me. He’s not supposed to be on the bed, but I know he is. I wish I was.

At first, I am dreaming. I think my mom is petting me, then that Fluff is snuffling in my ear, licking me to get up. Then I am awake and it all comes back – I fell asleep and he is here, in bed with us, stroking me and panting, licking my ear while his hands slide under my pajamas. I pretend to sleep, moaning and trying to roll away, as if I’m about to waken in an attempt to frighten him off, but his roamings become wilder and more insistent. He pins me beneath him and smothers me with his mouth, choking me with his tongue when I try to cry out.

I pinch my sister as hard as I can with my nails – on her leg where I can reach her. She wakes screaming, and he jumps. I grab her and drag her toward the bathroom, almost shrieking over her protests, “You have to go to the bathroom! Come on – you don’t want to wet the bed! You’ll

get into trouble and get a spanking!”

The bathroom has a lock. My sister is whining. She's tired; she doesn't have to go to the bathroom. She wants to go back to bed. I ignore her. I know he's out there –waiting. There's a knock on the door. I jump and put a hand over my sister's mouth. Another knock. “Girls? You come out now. No play now. Must go bed.” It's Mrs. Trinh. I open the door, babbling, “I can't sleep. My sister needed to go to the bathroom. We need you to sleep with us.” Talk, talk, talk, so fast I talk, saying nothing and everything, if she'll only listen.

She walks us back to bed. He's still there. She knows. She speaks to him in Vietnamese. It's all very polite, but she knows. He leaves.

“I seep here with you tonight,” she says. I fall asleep under her watchful gaze and protective arm. I know she will not sleep.

The next afternoon, at home with my mom, I wait for my moment, when we are alone. “How do the Vietnamese kiss, Mommy?” I ask her. Slyly, because I already know. They kiss like my father, and I'll tell her if she'll only listen.

Freedom

FRIDAY

I just finished writing my suicide letter. It started as a note, but I actually had something to say other than poor me, I can't take it anymore. The truth of the matter is, though, I can't take it anymore.

I used a yellow legal pad. I only have about four million of them. Perks. Some people manage free trips to Paris through their jobs; I get yellow legal pads. They're defects, of course. I have piles of yellow legal pads with the lines running diagonally, vertically, squiggly. You name it; I could probably find an example of every kind of messed-up line in here somewhere.

My name is Daniel Money. Friends call me Dan, Danny, Dan-the-Man, all kinds of bull-related-shit. I've never liked my name, but I guess I'm stuck with it.

My name is Daniel Money, and I just finished writing my suicide letter.

Then I filled eight pages with Erin's name. Erin here. Erin there. Erin all over the damn place. Makes me feel so cold.

But it is chilly today. I wish it was warmer. I want my body to be all stinky and rotten when they find me. It's supposed to be cold this weekend, possibly warming up by Tuesday. That's what the weatherman said last night at eleven.

I've been thinking about waiting. There's no rush, really. ESPN is showing a Padres game Sunday afternoon. That would be nice to see.

I was born and raised in Southern California, so I grew up a huge Padres fan. I moved here to New Hampshire about ten years ago, and I haven't had the opportunity to see many Padres games in that time.

I've seen my share of Red Sox games, though. I've even become a little bit of a follower. But the BoSox can be frustrating to the nth degree. They start off smoking the first couple months of the season, but quickly fade shortly after the All-Star Break. The Curse of The Babe is how these native New Englanders explain it. Whatever gets them through the winter.

So, I guess I'll wait until Monday. That way I'll get to see the Padres and will better the odds that my body will be a rotting pile of meat. I'll call out sick. When I miss Tuesday as well, I don't think it will raise any eyebrows. Maybe they'll give me a call Wednesday, maybe not. By Thursday, though, someone might get sent out to check on me. I'm planning on keeping the shades drawn so no one will be able to see in. I don't want some kid chasing his baseball into my yard taking an exploratory peek through a window to see me laying there, shotgun in my arms, top of my head and my brain on the floor beside me. I want to save that surprise for Erin.

I'm fairly certain that by Friday, Saturday at the latest, someone will either force the door or call Erin. I hope it's Erin. She still has a set of keys to the house. Imagine the look on her face when she opens the door, cautiously calling out my name, and sees the bloody mess at her feet.

I hope she feels a certain amount of guilt.

I killed her cat last week. She took my daughter but left the frigging cat behind. I put a bunch of crushed Valium in his chow, then waited for him to drift off to sleep. I took him out to the garage and placed him behind the right, front tire. That's the power tire. Then I ran over him. Three times. Set him free. His guts were coming out of his asshole. I buried him in the backyard, then planted some tulips over his grave. I've always liked tulips. Erin likes carnations.

I really don't need the cat hanging around the house after I've offed myself, maybe snacking on me after his food bowl runs dry. Yes, that would have added to the gross-out factor when Erin (hopefully Erin) opened the door, but I just can't handle the thought of the cat chewing on me. There's something unnatural about it. I appreciate the fact I'd be dead, but that knowledge doesn't change anything.

Erin always used to say, "Love me forever like you love me now." Isn't that a laugh? I loved her, I thought she loved me, end of story.

What it boils down to is that I wasn't prepared to make the decisions I did. Because they all ended up being wrong. I know I only have myself to blame for that, but I sure would like to pin it on her.

There comes a time in life when you have to take stock in where you are, see if what you wanted out of life is what you've ended up with. For me, it's been a gradual thing.

I think I first started questioning where I stood with myself when Erin left me. It can be a very humbling experience when the woman you love packs her shit and bolts out the door, taking your daughter with her.

At first, I wanted to fault Erin. Isn't that the way with everyone? Place the culpability squarely at the other's feet and free yourself from any blame? The problem is, you can't hide from the truth very long. Some try with the bottle or with weed. I couldn't drink or smoke myself into some kind of suspended reality. Believe me, I tried. Every time I looked up, the truth of the matter was peeking at me from behind the couch or over the

top of the TV.

All I had to fall back on was my job, and I hate that. Being a cop is not what you see on TV or in the movies. Those mediums show the glamour and the glitz. They don't show how mundane and down right frustrating the job can be.

I think, after ten years, I'm most annoyed with how damn stupid people are. Does the drunken husband who shows up at his estranged wife's apartment at eleven o'clock at night really think she's going to let him take the kids for the weekend? Come on. I'm no Stephen fucking Hawking, but I can see that one plus one equals two; I don't see how being drunk and showing up at eleven p.m. equals getting the kids. But some folks swear it does.

Allow me to let you in on a little secret: don't argue with the police. We don't care one little bit about what you have to say. Take Mr. Eleven O'clock at Night. I don't give a shit how much you work, that your wife cheated on you, or that you pay my fucking salary. Kiss my ass.

It's like my neighbors. They argue all the time. I hear them late into the night sometimes, her crying, him screaming.

Her name is Renee. I can't understand why she married the bum. His name is Igor. Can you imagine? She works for a lawyer, does paralegal work. I think. We don't speak much. That's because Igor is home much of the time. I don't believe he partakes in any kind of legitimate work. I see him leave his house late, late at night. He drives a black Honda Civic with wide-ass tires. He's had it lowered as well, so it scrapes along a few scant inches above the roadway. There might be a law regulating how low you can go, but I don't care enough to look it up. If he wants his exhaust to rip off each time he drives over a twig, that's his business.

I watch them through my window. She flutters from one room to another, partially naked, always crying. He follows close behind, always yelling, "I know you're cheating on me, bitch! I fucking know it!"

They keep every light burning. Tracking them is easy, easy, easy.

She pulls on the ends of her hair when she's upset. It's long and shit brown. I'd like to be nicer because she really is an amiable type, but I can't argue with the facts. She's pretty in a plain way. Her blue eyes always look like it's raining inside her heart. Her face looks like it belongs on the side of a milk carton.

I'm really more interested in him, though. We've only spoken once. It was shortly after they moved here. About two months ago, now.

I was outside, doing some work on my car, when he strode over. He keeps his hair short, almost shaved. The sun gleamed off his pink scalp. He was dressed in a white tank top and a pair of blue jeans about three sizes too big, hanging around his ass, revealing a worn pair of plaid boxers. Modern day hoodlum attire. Both arms were criss-crossed with a multitude of colorful and confusing tattoos.

"Yo, man. S'up?" he said.

I looked up at him. "Excuse me?"

"S'up, bro?"

"I don't understand what you're saying," I explained. "Try speaking English."

A crooked, purple flush ran from his neck to his temples. The formalities were over. He came to his point.

"I saw you looking at my wife, man."

"She lives next door. I can't help but look at her."

"I know you want her."

"Are you saying I covet your wife?"

"No, man. You want her."

I put my screwdriver down and looked Igor straight in the eye. I don't think he was expecting that. Most hoods use fear and intimidation as weapons. Usually, that's all they need. People are so scared these days, they're looking for a reason to piss their pants.

“What’s your point?” I asked him.

He hesitated, and I knew I had him. That hesitation told me everything I needed to know. Earning my living on the street had taught me how to read people: who was all talk, who was willing to back up the rough words. Igor was the former. He hid behind his hoodlum appearance and the tough façade it gave him. But he was a wuss. Like most criminals. They’re tough and assertive while they’re ripping some poor grandma’s purse from her arms, but when the police show up, they run; or when you call them out, they get pussy on you.

“You know what my point is, bro,” he said, looking cocky and potent as he held his tough-guy stance. But I could see he was nervous. His eyes gave him away, darting this way and that.

“Let me tell you something, boy,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “Who I look at and the reasons behind it are none of your concern. If you want to spend the rest of your life looking at everyone sideways because you think they might be plotting to steal your woman, I don’t give a rat’s ass. All it proves to me is what a fucking insecure child you are. Now get the hell out of my driveway. I don’t have time for your bullshit.”

I turned back to my car, dismissing him. He loitered there a moment, and I thought that maybe he was going to call me out. If he did, I knew it would turn ugly.

But, in the end, my assumptions were correct. He plodded away, muttering under his breath how he was going to get me and how I better not fuck with him. I let him mutter. I’d be as much a shithead as him if I let some ugly words spoken in passing as a way of saving face, needle me.

Like I said, Igor and I haven’t exchanged pleasantries since, but Renee and I have. It was roughly a week later, I was watching Leno on the tube. So it was late. Jay had just welcomed Britney Spears to the stage when I heard a light rap on my front door. I briefly considered not

answering it. Ever since Erin left me, my desire to be sociable has waned considerably.

I shuffled to the door, pulling my Scooby Doo boxers out of my butt, and cracked open the door. Renee was standing there, looking as lovely as I imagined she possible could.

“Mr. Money,” she said, with a nervous peek behind her. I followed her gaze, noticing that Igor’s Civic was not in its accustomed place in their driveway. She knew that too, but the knowledge didn’t stop her from looking, just to make sure. That must be a terrible way to live.

“Renee,” I answered.

“I’m sorry if I’m bothering you, but I saw your TV on through the window.”

She stopped there, needing confirmation that it was okay to continue, giving me the opportunity to tell her to hit the bricks, not to trouble me with her pathetic little problems.

“You’re not bothering me, Renee.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Again, she hesitated. Getting information from her was like trying to catch Moby Dick with a bamboo rod. So unsure of herself. So different from Igor. I briefly wondered how they had hooked up.

“So...” I began.

“So...”

“What can I do for you, Renee?”

Another quick glance behind her.

“I just wanted to thank you.”

“For what?”

“For standing up to him. Very few people do that.”

“Do you do that?”

She smiled then. I’d never seen one like it before: sad and wistful, yet hinting at a hidden intellect.

“No,” she said. “No, I never do that.”

She smiled again, and I was struck by how beautiful it made her. How sad that it took misery to bring out the magnificence in her features. Her eyes glistened, as if tears were a possibility. “No. I could never do that.”

“Do you think you could leave him?” I asked. “Is there a relative, maybe, who could take you in for a little while?”

“No. My mom wouldn’t take me back after the heartache I put her through just to be with him.”

“Have you asked? I mean, she is your mom. I can’t believe she wouldn’t let you back if you really needed it.” I’ve always had that kind of blind faith in one’s family members. Maybe that’s part of the reason I’ve been reduced to plotting my own demise.

“I’m afraid to ask her,” Renee said. “With her, it’s like I made my bed, now I have to sleep in it. I don’t blame her. I fought her so hard to be with Igor.” She trailed off, lost in her thoughts. “But that was then.”

“A girlfriend, maybe?”

“There’s no one, really. My circle of friends has dwindled a lot since Igor came into my life. But that’s my problem,” she said. “I just wanted to let you know I appreciate your standing up to him. It’s usually better for a while when someone does.”

I nodded knowingly but wondered about that. I don’t want to say I think she was lying, but my experience has always been the exact opposite. Let’s say, for the sake of argument, that some shithead is at the local club. Loud, bass-filled music, mixed drinks with erotic names like Sex on the Beach and The Orgasm, milk-fed honeys undulating sweetly beneath a rainbow halo of flashing and blinking lights. All that crap. Now let’s say that shithead gets into a dispute with someone over, well, over something stupid. We are dealing with shitheads, after all. One of two things happens: either shithead gets his ass handed to him or he

backs down because the other half of the argument is roughly the size of Idaho. My point is this: shithead is now going to come down pretty hard on his significant other. I've seen it plenty during my years on the street.

But I wasn't going to say anything to Renee. If she was lying, she had her own reasons.

"Well, that's good," I said instead.

"Yes."

A brief pause followed and quickly became uncomfortable.

"Is there anything else I can do for you, Renee?"

She looked momentarily taken aback, and I could tell there was plenty she thought I could do for her. But she wasn't going to ask. That wasn't an option for her. Suddenly, I knew she hadn't knocked on my door in the wee hours of the night to thank me. She had something definite on her mind but hadn't dared play it out.

I had a choice right then. I could tell her good night and gently shut the door in her face, blocking out those bittersweet eyes, or I could cajole her, convince her to trust me.

You're probably going to think I'm an asshole, but I opted for the first choice. Right at that moment I could see all too well what might have happened. I'd tell her everything was alright. I'd invite her in for some hot cocoa or something, make her think I was truly concerned. Then maybe things would get too comfortable and maybe it would be too easy to console her with an arm around the shoulders. And who knows where that might have led.

"No," she said. "I've taken up enough of your time."

With that, she turned and plodded the length of my walk. I watched her go, thinking I should leave her with, 'If you need anything, just let me know'. Something to help ease her mind. In the end, I simply closed the door.

We haven't spoken since. I've seen her a time or two, scurrying

from her car to her front door, swallowed by the house. The midnight arguments started up with zeal a few days after her visit. I watched, Renee flitting through the house in her lacy dress, hands gesturing wildly, tugging at her hair, Igor pacing her, barking out his accusations, killing her by inches.

I find that I've left the best parts of myself behind. Perhaps watching Renee tiptoe around makes me feel that way. I see her, and I see what she's become. Not that I knew her before she moved here, but I can't fathom that the timid, little bird I recognize is the same someone who once argued ardently with her mother to date the fool she ended up marrying.

Nevertheless, I think about those things. Especially when I'm sitting in the recliner, watching the tube. There's a small, round end table there, covered with a lacy doily. On it, there's a photo of me and Erin, smiling sweetly and wrapped in each other's arms, shortly before we exchanged vows.

K-Mart was running a promo, so we took advantage. That was when the love thing was still novel enough for us to do silliness like that, like sitting in the middle of K-Mart, getting our pictures taken while folks milled all around checking for the best blue-light specials. It's humorous. If I think about that day, I smile. If I look at the photograph itself, my upper lip twitches, and my eyes want to close.

The memory is good; the reality of where I am now isn't. Erin was truly my rainbow in the dark, the only thing I felt was good in my life. But she ran out on me, taking our daughter with her. I guess there's some bitterness. Maybe that's why I'm hoping she's the one who finds me with my head blown wide open. I'd hate to think vengeance is a driving force behind my decision to kill myself; but, I don't think she ever felt any guilt whatsoever about taking Lynn, skipping town, and blowing my whole world apart.

Maybe I'm more like Renee than I care to admit. Her husband controls her life, has robbed her of the ability to think for herself, to fend for herself. She goes to work. She comes home. She scurries antlike through the rooms of her house. She has allowed her situation to rule who she is, what she does, what she thinks.

Me too. I've done that too.

I met Erin in the early fall. Perhaps I should have seen that as an omen. Perhaps I should have seen a lot of things. But you know how love is. One minute it's smiles and laughter, the next...

I think about her all the time. I close my eyes at night, and the ghost of her face plays in the darkness, just beyond my reach. I awake in the morning, confused, and there she is: standing next to the mirror, two shirts in hand, asking me which one I prefer. Then her image melts, and I stumble to Lynn's room. The bed is always empty.

My mother tells me to move on, to get back out there. I don't want to get back out there. I just want to sit in my recliner, sipping my cocoa, and steal glances at that K-Mart photograph.

Mom doesn't understand. Why would she? She was married to my father for thirty-seven years, right up to the day she planted him in the ground. Two years later, she married her insurance agent. What does she know? I haven't seen Lynn in eight months, and the last time I spoke with her, she wasn't sure she wanted to come for Christmas.

The divorce is only ten months old, and my daughter is already weaning me from her life. Tell me what my mom knows about that.

I knew we had problems, Erin and I. Who doesn't? I didn't think they were so bad.

"You don't help enough with the housework." One demerit.

"You don't love me the way I think you should." Another demerit.

“You don’t, and you don’t, and oh, by the way, you don’t.”

She made me feel that loving me was a huge sacrifice on her part. And through it all, I just kept thinking about the first time I saw her: peering at me through wet bangs as she washed my car, her hands wrinkled and soapy white, her bikini an orange so fierce it almost hurt my eyes. Who knew anyone could make orange look that good?

I agreed to double my donation to her university’s ski club if she agreed to tell me her name and number. Wonder of wonders, she lied about neither.

But that was then, wasn’t it? That was before I learned love is more than flirtatious smiles across oceans of dreams. Love is a job; either you go to work or you stay in bed and call out sick.

SATURDAY

Lots of happenings around here today. So much, in fact, I nearly forgot about my own state of affairs. Maybe I should have seen this coming, especially after Renee’s midnight visit and my certainty that she wanted to tell me something.

She killed Igor today. Cut his stomach wide open and watched his guts spill all over the floor.

I didn’t have a clue.

I was sleeping, having seen in the wee hours with an old John Wayne movie. True Grit, I think. The one with Glen Campbell. The sirens awakened me. They were right outside my bedroom. I crept to the window and stole a peek. The first police car was pulling in behind a fire truck and rescue unit.

Renee was standing just outside her front door, an old natty robe tied loosely over her naked body, the front spattered with Igor’s blood. She held a large knife in her right hand, the blade streaked red. Her free hand

was tugging viciously at her hair, and she was screaming. High pitched wails.

It was then I noticed the firemen huddled near the rear of the fire truck, their bodies tense and excited. They were standing back, mindful of the big knife clasped tightly in her hand.

The police officer (I didn't recognize him) had exited his car by now and was advancing toward Renee. His gun was drawn, and he was barking loud, concise orders, telling her to "Drop the knife! Drop the knife, now!"

It didn't appear that Renee heard him. She continued to wail and tug at her hair.

I quickly grabbed a pair of old jeans that were lying on the floor and pulled them on. I knew I had to get to her before something bad happened.

I grabbed my badge, bolted out the front door, and rushed across my lawn. The cop saw me coming and began barking his orders in my direction. Maybe, since Renee wasn't heeding his commands, he thought I would. He told me to leave the area immediately and not concern myself with police business.

I flashed my shield at the young cop and told him to holster his weapon. I didn't want an innocent bystander taking a round because the rookie got over eager.

"But she's brandishing a knife," he protested. Brandishing. There was a good academy word. He'd probably been waiting for the opportunity to use it.

I ignored him, and I think it was the fact that I did, more than anything else, that made him put his weapon away. I focused my attentions on Renee: the way she screamed, how her body moved when she did, the careless way she grasped the knife in her hand.

Her eyes were wide and wild, but I don't think she was seeing

anything around her. I'm sure, in her mind, she was replaying the horror of what she'd done. Her robe had been hastily secured in the front, and much of her was visible. Blood was spread in a broad fan across her chest and abdomen.

Two more police cars had arrived, followed by an additional fire truck. In another few minutes, I figured, Channel 6 would show up and that pretty reporter Mandy Michaelson would start shoving a microphone in everyone's face.

I stopped about ten feet from Renee and called her name. I kept my hands up in front of me in case she mistook me for whoever had prompted her to arm herself initially. At the time, I didn't know Igor was spread out on the living room carpet, his intestines slimy blue accordions at his feet, and I didn't want her springing at me with that pig sticker. Ten feet seemed ample enough space to provide me with an out, should I need it.

My worries never came to fruition. Thank goodness. I know what you're thinking: what difference would it have made if she'd carved me up like the Thanksgiving bird? I was planning on killing myself anyway. That's true. All I can tell you is that I wanted to go on my own terms, not hacked to death by a despondent, knife-wielding young lady. But I didn't have to worry because as soon as I spoke her name, she dropped the knife and ran at me, throwing her arms around my neck and crying uncontrollably.

"I didn't mean it," she wept. "I didn't mean it."

I could feel her hot tears against my neck. I was also all too aware of her partial nudity and the fact that a growing crowd of my comrades and neighbors was gathering. I felt compromised, and all I wanted to do was get Renee and myself away from those watchful eyes.

"It's okay, Renee. Shhhh, now. Just get hold of yourself."

I began ushering her toward the street. She continued to blubber

and insist that she didn't mean it.

Three or four uniformed cops rushed by us, into the house. Renee and I had made it approximately half the distance to my yard when exclamations of "Holy shit!" and "Goddamn!" poured from the open mouth of Renee's front door. I knew then that she'd killed him.

She never looked back. I'll give her that: she never looked back. We completed the trek to my living room, and I held the police off long enough for her to readjust her robe and cover her naked, bloody breasts.

She was arrested and hauled off to jail. I watched as they drove her away, her face peering at me from the backseat of the rookie officer's car. I couldn't return her gaze. I tried but couldn't. What kept creeping in was the memory of her standing outside my front door in the hollow hours of the night, arms crossed protectively over her chest, wanting to ask me something. Wanting to, but not daring.

I tried to call Erin about an hour ago. The hubbub next door had long since moved from the rooms of Renee's home to the stuffy homicide office. I didn't go. I simply told the primary detective my abbreviated account of what happened, then I came back inside to my empty rooms.

"The Price is Right" flashed onto the screen when I fingered the TV's remote, and I caught an ageless Bob Barker in the midst of reminding the world to help control the pet population, have them spayed or neutered. Sometimes I think he must be a robot. He was doing that show when I was a kid. Can you dig that? When I was a kid.

But he started me thinking about Erin. Only because, with her, the price never seemed to be right. The price was something I just kept paying.

Then I tried to call her. I'm fairly certain the better part of me was relieved when the ringing went unanswered. I could console myself by saying I had tried. Likewise, I was thankful that an answering machine didn't click on, requesting that I leave a message after the beep. I was all

too aware that my extended silence, beneath the hisses and scratches of the tape, would have spoken more volumes than anything I might have managed to say.

I don't think I'm going to wait until Monday. Maybe I'll join Igor and add to his torment by telling him I've been boffing Renee for months. I'd like to see how tough he is in the afterlife, threatening me with one hand, holding his guts in with the other.

What would have happened had Erin answered the phone? Do I really believe the conversation would have been civil? Do I really believe I would have discovered some absolution in her voice, in her words? That's just as stupid as the drunk who shows up at midnight expecting the kids. I don't want to picture myself that way. I've spent far too long falsely assuming Erin was the answer. I know the answer. I've known it for some time. Watching Renee getting hauled off to the big house brought it home for me. We each live in our own prison. Renee simply traded one for the other: Igor for three hots and a cot. Tit for tat.

Not me.

I think the only thing that even remotely bothers me is missing the Padres game tomorrow afternoon. But if there is a Heaven, and I strongly suspect there is, I'm going to stretch out on a couch in the Rec Room with a big bag of buttered popcorn, a liter size bottle of coke, and the remote to the big screen within easy reach.

Savior

“**I**sense someone here is suffering. Suffering with guilt and shame in their heart. Someone here is walking that lonely path that leads to the house of the devil. You know who you are. This is your chance to break free from the chains of Satan. Take this opportunity to get back in God’s good graces. This is your chance to rise up out of the darkness and enter the light! Stand up!”

A man three rows in front of me jumps out of his seat and raises his hands high above his head. His sleeves slide down, revealing monkey hair and stick-figure forearms. I can’t see his face, but I imagine his eyes are shut tight. His head is tilted back, and he’s trembling. Through his laughable comb-over, I see an assortment of brown moles that trail off toward his neck. They look like little colonizing parasites migrating to more lucrative regions. *Please God, give me a full head of hair. Please God, remove these hideous growths.* He remains standing in a sea of sitting bodies.

This is how it starts.

“Yes! Thank you brother! You see that folks? God moved that man! God filled him with the Holy Spirit and lifted him out of his seat!

Let God move you too!” A woman gets up and trots toward the stage like she has crabs nipping at her feet. She loses her equilibrium and falls to her knees. Her sobs mix with the singing and yells of “Hallelujah,” but can still be heard in the nosebleed section. *Please God, find me a man. Please God, make me rich.* People run up and touch her back as she rubs her face on the cheap industrial carpet. Immediately, they’re infected with her zeal. They fall to the ground beside her. *Please God, give me a BMW. Please God, give me bigger breasts.*

This is the opposite of stained glass. This is the opposite of church bells and gothic statues. This is what happens when you add Civil War to Reconstruction and give it 150 years to fester.

A man who bears a striking resemblance to Ted Kaczynski starts jumping, and the woman next to him follows suit. She quickly runs out of breath and has to wedge herself back into her seat. To my right, a skyscraper of a man looks up at the ceiling and shouts, “Thank you, God! Fill me with Your Spirit.”

“Yes! Do you feel that? Oh Lord! Oh Lord! Please give us strength to remove sin from our lives! Please give us strength to honor You and do Your bidding! Please come soon oh Lord, and take us to Eternal Paradise!”

“Take me, Lord!” I hear from behind. “Me too!” from somewhere up front.

Kaczynski’s neighbor gets her second wind and starts the arduous process of standing up again. The Unabomber is too focused on his own plight to offer any help. She manages to get her left side out, and I see her grimace as the armrest meets her kidney. She heaves one last time, breaking free from her seating bondage, only to sit back down a few moments later, gasping for air. *Please God, let me be beautiful. Please God, make me thin.*

A vast chorus, a mixture of all types of God’s children, stands on

four rows of bleachers stage left. They're swaying, but not in sync with the music or each other. This is known as kinesisis. A pimple-face kid is playing electric guitar. There's a drummer and a keyboardist. There's a violinist and bass-player, two flutes, and a trumpet. This is God's Orchestra, and it's being led by a man whose only qualification is that he bought the book *Conducting for Dummies*. Some people are running around and throwing themselves on the stage. Everyone is trying to one-up the last person. If this goes unchecked, people will be climbing the walls and swinging from the ceiling fans, stampeding over the weak and trampling each other. This is known as Darwinism.

Knowledge gave us humanity; religion took it away. These people need to be saved. They need something personal, something on a deeper level. Jesus just watches it unfold during the football commercials on his all-seeing TV. If he knew what humans were going to do to his faith as he died on the cross, he might have said, "Fuck em up, Dad. They're all a bunch of little bitches, anyway," instead of, "Forgive them, Father, they know not what they do."

The trick is to be the last to stand up. It's like the State of the Union Address. No one knows when to rise in support. Some people lead the way, while others remain seated throughout. That's who you notice. The people going against the crowd. The people who had too many martinis before the big show.

Everyone but me is on their feet, which is my cue to slowly get up. A few members of the parish glance at me side-eyed.

The only thing more profound than being saved is the act of saving. That's what these lost souls need. They need the points. This is the big game. There's no next season. They think God won't answer their prayers unless they assimilate me into their little subculture, make me a productive member, so I can start my evangelical quest to bliss.

It's the big pyramid scheme to heaven. You save three people,

and they each save three people, and so on. If their quota isn't met, they'll perform poorly at work. This will indelibly lead to a reduction in consumption. Economies will crumble, inflation will increase, unemployment will be out of control. If they can't save me: anarchy. I'm just doing my piece to keep society on its feet. By letting these people save me, I am saving humanity one over-zealous Christian at a time.

These are *my* points.

“Yes! Do you feel him? Do you feel the Lord? He's all around us. He's the blanket of our lives. He keeps us warm when we're cold. He keeps us dry from the wet rain. He makes us strong when we're weak. God does this for all of you. Now what are you gonna do for him?”

Men, dressed in their Sunday best, start marching down the aisle with collection plates. Some put on a big show, over-exaggerating the motion of donating ten ones wrapped in a twenty dollar bill. Others are very careful to make sure no one's looking to see their feeble contribution. Some opt to hide their *charity* with envelopes, while others have the impudence to pass the plate on as soon as they get it. A few give every penny they can spare. This is their quid pro quo. They're buying themselves eternity in the Lincoln Bedroom. They're buying themselves a pardon.

“Generosity is the key to the doorway of heaven. Give your heart to the Lord and only happiness will come. The war for souls is not cheap and God needs your help. God needs your hard-earned money because we are all soldiers in this perilous fight. The Devil is a formidable competitor. He has lust, greed, and hatred on his side. But believe me when I say those weapons are dull and weak when compared with the Blinding Light of the Lord!”

For this to work, I have to avoid eye contact and stand very still.

I feel a hand on my shoulder, and before the full weight bears down on me, I zip my head around. A Jenny Craig flunky twinkles a

soccer-mom smile. I can only manage an awkward one. Her stubby fingers tenderly rub my back, and a tear falls from her eye. This is first contact. The whole congregation sees this moment of warmth and knows the door has been opened.

I stay in character, returning my focus on the preacher, who is now running around touching people's foreheads and speaking in tongues.

People everywhere are planning their lines of attack. They're thinking, I'll approach him after service and invite him to Bible study. Some are planning on captivating me with lunch requests. These are the soldiers of the Lord, and I am the prize. Me, a prize? Me, worth fighting for? This is the opposite of loneliness. This is the opposite of estrangement and solitude.

"Ok, Ok. Let's bring it down a little. Let's settle down for a second." People with beaded brows gradually sit. "Folks, I want you to look around. Take a good look at the brothers and sisters next to you." My eyes stay fixed forward. "What you see are sinners; sinners who need your help. They need you to share with them your troubled past, and they need you to share with them the road to redemption. Your homework for this week is to find a sinner and help them find the Lord!"

Service ends with song and everyone exchanging smiles. After the announcements of barbecues, picnics, and Bible studies, the minister says, "Go in peace, and may God bless you all." I make a beeline for the exit.

"Hi! Are you new to the parish?" comes from a woman waiting for me in the atrium. She's dressed in I'm-humbler-than-thou thrift store fatigues, her eyes aglow with anticipation. I don't answer too quickly. They like the chase, the possibility that I might make a run for it.

"Yes," I whisper to her second-hand shoes.

"I thought so. I haven't seen you before, and I know everyone at the parish. I'm Event Coordinator, you know? I'm the one you talk to

about events.” She extends her hand. “My name’s Darlene.”

“Roger,” I tell her.

“Well Roger, it is a pleasure. You absolutely must come to my house for brunch next Sunday. I would invite you today, but Rosa is only cooking for twelve. Roger, it is faaaantastic; we feast on food, and then we feast on the Word of God. It’s important to fill both appetites, don’t you agree? I’ll tell Rosa to plan for one more next week. I think we’ll have Eggs Benedict. Do you like Eggs Benedict Roger?” She is already leaving to finish her rounds. “It was a pleasure meeting you. See you at church next week.”

She didn’t reach me, but she made a key next step. She let me know I was welcomed back. All the points won’t go to her, but God remembers team players. The way they save people is by making them feel like part of the family, letting them know they belong. Saving is accomplished through repetition and the memorization of Bible verses. This is the opposite of free will. This is the opposite of dissent and rebellion. But I can’t give in. Everyone’s watching, waiting for an opportunity to pounce on the prey. If the first couple of people don’t connect, it makes it all the more meaningful to the person who does. They want to be the one who climbs Mount Everest and dances a jig on the summit. If I’m saving souls, I want it to be special.

I continue my race for the exit but my arm is grabbed before I can escape.

“Where’s the fire, lil buddy? Got somewhere more important to be than God’s House?”

I stutter an answer and the booming man tightens his grip. He says, “Good, you can come with me for coffee. There’s a great little place right down the street where I always go after Service. We’ll walk and enjoy this Glorious Day that God has given us.” His voice monopolizes the hall like a trucker telling a dirty joke.

Normally, I don't give in this easily, but as we leave the church something tells me he won't let go.

“Did I overhear you say your name's Roger?” he asks. “Where are my manners? My name's Peter. You know? Like the disciple. Soooo... Roger, you married?” He needs to share for me to share. I need to know I can speak freely. “Me, I've been married twice. Of course, that's before I got saved. Yeah, I was a real hellion, ha. Partying and drinking myself into a constant state of stupor. I can't even remember my first wedding. In fact, I didn't even believe it when I saw the ring. But then I saw the pictures. They weren't very flattering. I was wearing a teal tux — can you believe it — I got married in a teal tux, ha. They should tell that story in high school to keep kids from drinking. Don't drink or you'll end up in a church at three in the morning. You'll be wearing a teal tuxedo, marrying a woman who looks like a cross between Mrs. Doubtfire and Mike Piazza. Even with the storybook beginning, I wasn't very good at honoring that whole faithful vow. She left me in '94. I can't say I blame her. I took to drinking even harder and doing a little dope here and there. I'm not sure if it was because she left me or I just needed an excuse to really start killing myself. The whole time I was looking for something. I just didn't know what. I married my second wife in '98 God bless her, she was a bit of a drinker, too. Come to think of it, that's where we met, at an AA meeting. Somewhere between the booze and the dope, we managed to pop out a couple of kids. The most beautiful things you ever saw, two daughters, Jennifer and Melissa.... They got taken away from us in 2000. After that, needless to say, the wife was hopeless. We went through all the court proceedings to try and get them back, but some *colored* judge had the nerve to tell us we weren't fit parents. Can you believe it - that judge ruined her - she took her own life that same year.”

The door jingles as my savior opens it for me. The vague smell of Vanilla Cream, Hazelnut, and French Roast pollutes the air. “You grab a

seat over there, lil buddy. Coffee's on me."

He meets me at the booth closest to the bathroom with a Styrofoam cup, "I put two creams and two sugars in there for you," he says. "That's how I take it — yeah, well, after my wife died, I took my drinking up a few more notches. Drinking was my life."

My new friend will do anything for me; I'm his project. I'm what keeps him from throwing himself off an overpass. Sure, all this is artificial. It's all some programmed story he goes through every time he's on a saving mission. But what isn't artificial? How often do you have that real connection, where each person is sharing because of some cosmic chemistry? No, people talk to hear themselves talk. People listen because they are waiting to speak.

"Something had to change," he continues. "I'm not saying change happened over night. I went to a lot of meetings, worked through a lot of issues. What really helped me was reading the Bible. After I started doing that, things became much easier. The Bible saved me. Now life is great. I haven't touched the bottle in over a year. I got a wonderful woman. And most important, God is with me every step of the way."

My new friend would cook me dinner, give me the shirt off his back. My new friend would loan me his car or let me sleep on his couch. I'm his retirement plan.

It's nice to be with someone, to have friends. The coffee shop is filled with people who see me with this other man, having what looks like a bona fide conversation, and for a moment I become real. I'm functioning in society like everyone else because I can sit in front of a cup of coffee with two creams and two sugars. It's like the old philosophical question, "If a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?" If people aren't functioning in society, do they really matter?

"The first time I came to this church, I was like you," he says. "I was scared, timid. Skeptical? I was like, What the heck are all these idiots

doing running around waving their hands in the air? Religion is supposed to be somber and dignified. I promised myself I would never go back there again. But then, something happened. Something so powerful. All of a sudden I had wings. I was running around acting insane, but I didn't care. I mean, in retrospect I must have looked pretty silly. But when you're filled with the Holy Spirit you just lose control."

He takes the last sip of his coffee, and there is a long silence. Then he asks, "Aren't you gonna drink that?"

I smile without showing any teeth. The first coherent thing I ever say to Peter-you-know-like-the-disciple is, "I don't drink coffee."

Peter returns the same smile I just gave him and we become two men sitting in a coffee shop, both trying to save ourselves.

The Ride

Looking at Lena's leg beside mine makes me angry. I'm riding bitch between her and Jillian, who is sleeping. The quiet of the ride forces me to stare at my leg and Lena's side by side. Hers is thinner and tan; mine has more muscle and probably more fat. Her white shorts accentuate it, but still. Her legs are spread a little, and her back is stretched away from the seat. My legs are crossed, matching my arms, and I'm sick of comparing our legs and our lives.

I sit there for hours, or minutes, before Tara remembers to turn on the radio as we pass a gas station. "Hey, can we go back there and get something to drink?" I ask. Sipping out of a straw will give me something to do for the next three hours.

Tara breathes out heavily, "Could you have mentioned that before we passed it?" She is always inconvenienced.

I remember the time we all went shopping before our first day of high school. We each had an idea of what we wanted to wear. We figured this choice would be one of our most important. Tara found a jean dress before lunch. From that point on, she was done. Every store we entered, every outfit we tried on, was torture. By 2 o'clock, she had called her mom

for a ride.

Tara does a U-turn, and we pull into the gas station. I get out of the car and call shotgun. Marie pretends she doesn't hear me, but I know she'll be in the back when I return. I get a Diet Coke, Skittles, grapes, and cigarettes. When I come back, Jillian is awake, and the radio's blaring. I lay my purchases down and smile at Marie, who responds with a glare. She already hates being where I was.

Tara and I left her house at 7:00 a.m., picked up the rest of the girls, and were on our way by 7:30. Pretending it would be a regular school day, we wore backpacks and smiles. The closest clinic is four hours away. Tara went last year with her older cousin. She says you can't miss it. We live miles away from any excitement. But if it exists, she knows how to get there.

I light a cigarette and look at Jillian in the side mirror. She's looking back at me.

"So what are you doing this weekend?" she asks, trying to break the silence. I can barely hear her over the radio and am glad to have an excuse to turn it down.

"Nothing," I say in a hopeless tone, wishing she would say something encouraging. I've thought about my options for months, and this is the only real one I have. It's not that I should be happy about it, but I'm not really sad, either. All I feel is guilt. She agrees that she is also doing nothing and suggests we all do that together.

Tara is going 10 miles over the speed limit and smoking my cigarettes like they're hers. "Aren't districts this weekend?" she asks Jillian, who answers, "No," before listening to the whole question.

"Then when are they?" I ask. She says they're next week, which is prom, and everyone is quiet. "Are you missing districts for prom?"

Jillian is captain of the varsity soccer team for the third year in a row. She's going to college next year on scholarship. Her parents bred her

to be a champion, Wheaties and all. She spends hours each day kicking a ball into a net while her Dad watches, cheering her on. He is almost disgustingly interested in her. Their house is covered with trophies, medals, and pictures of her in uniform. Her bedroom is even plastered with soccer ball wallpaper. She tried to get them to change it, but her dad says it might change her focus.

The district games are the biggest of the year. If they win, they become the second biggest games because then the team goes to the state championship. It's not a game the captain can miss, not something Jillian would miss, anyway.

“Jillian?”

She looks at me, straight-faced. “It doesn't matter.”

“Of course it matters,” I begin, as everyone in the small car stares somewhere else. “Are you kidding me? Why wouldn't you go? This is your last year, and all the recruiters will be there. You might get more offers.” She's still looking at me, and now everyone else is, too. “Jillian, your dad is going to kill you. Why would you do this, ruin your future?” I know I should stop, but I can't. I'm giving her the lecture I deserve, and it feels good.

“Nic, don't worry about it,” she says. “I'm fine. It's not like I don't have other offers. It's one game.”

I still don't get it and continue. “You are ruining your chances at a better school. What if UCLA is there and you aren't? Then you've blown it. And what, all because of a stupid prom to which you don't even have a date?” She looks a little upset, so I think I got through to her.

“Nicole,” she begins but pauses. “I'm not going. The end.”

But it's obvious I'm not finished. Tara turns her head away from the road and toward me.

“They don't schedule major events together, Nicole. Districts are this weekend, which means they would leave today, which means she can't

go because she's here.”

I feel like vomiting. I wonder how it's possible for me to be Valedictorian yet still so dense. Jillian says it's really not a big deal, and she'd rather be here with me, with us. I begin to say how sorry I am, and she tells me to stop; “Don't worry about it.” I feel like a bad friend and a bad person, especially in comparison.

Lena interrupts my guilt trip to give us a play by play of her upcoming prom date with Jeff Watson. She details her dress, shoes, hair, and then proceeds to outline the date. “He's taking me to Crossroads. He made reservations like a month ago, and then we're going to prom for a little while, and then he's got a room at the Hilton. It's on the 5th floor, where everyone is going to be. I told him I wanted a daisy corsage because my dress is yellow. Won't that be cute?”

No one responds to her for various reasons, the overwhelming one being that Lena is really annoying. She means well, she's nice, she's been our friend forever, but she's really annoying. Her family is incredibly rich and equally snobby. They own half of the property in our town. They do nothing all day and drink cocktails at night. Lena turned out pretty okay, considering. She was the homecoming queen. She is barely graduating high school but will inevitably go to a great university and be wealthy forever. She will never know what it's like to want for anything. This is another reason we usually don't respond to her. We love her, but we just don't want to. I have my own reasons this time.

She goes on for about 10 more minutes before finishing with, “Anyway, you guys can come if you want, I mean to the hotel, that would be really cool. I'm sure Jeff wouldn't mind. The whole football team has rooms on the 5th floor.”

We drive in silence until Tara has to pee, and we stop at another gas station. I haven't eaten any of my food yet, but I want to get out of the car, so I go in for more. While I'm deciding between chocolates, a little girl

walks in behind her mom and points to the aisle where I'm standing. She wants some candy too. She has brown hair and eyes, like me. I imagine her as mine and wonder if this is what I'm destroying. I watch her deciding, picking up different types of candy and putting them down. I imagine that I am her mom, and I'm telling her to just pick one. For a moment I smile and change my mind.

I've been doing this for months, changing my mind. I know I cannot have a kid. I'm 17. I have a part time job at a grocery store and no money in savings. I don't even like kids, really. I'm going to college after graduation, but only because of the Valedictorian scholarship. My mom has two jobs, two kids, and no husband. She wouldn't be able to support another child.

I decide on a Hershey Bar and leave the mother and daughter behind. I pay for the candy and walk toward the car where Marie has switched with Jillian and is no longer bitch. They left me the front seat, so I climb in and unwrap my candy. Lena starts up again about Jeff, and I tell her to shut up, that no one cares. I nod toward Jillian and try to make Lena believe that I'm silencing her for Jillian's sake. In a way, I am. I'm sure no one wants to hear about her prom date. I know I don't.

Lena's tall and tan and rich and blonde. She has the perfect life, and she always will. I never realized I felt this way about her until the Jeff thing happened. I don't know if I even did. Now things are different. Every time I see her, I want to yell at her, tell her she's dumb, and tell her the truth. But it really has nothing to do with her and little to do with truth. Telling her would be my revenge for her being perfect.

I've loved Patrick my whole life. We met the first day he moved in next door. We played on the swing set my grandpa built and talked about our favorite games and how he used to play in the woods by his old house. After that first day, I can't remember him not being there. We shared our first kiss when we were 7 and had been kissing ever since. But *only*

kissing.

I've been afraid of getting pregnant since before I knew what it meant. My mom always made it out to be this horrific event. My grandmother attached it to biblical damnation stories in Sunday school. I even got a "True Love Waits" videotape for my 15th birthday. As I grew older, I realized what they were trying to do and appreciated it. I had never had sex, so I wasn't missing anything, and Patrick never seemed to mind. We did other things, and it wasn't an issue until we were juniors. Everyone was having sex except us. At first, he was sensitive to my feelings, then suggested condoms and birth control, and then just got angry. I told him he could tell everyone that we were having sex, which is what he started doing. That worked for a little while, but then he really wanted it. By the beginning of our senior year, it was over. We were still dating, but sex had torn us part.

One night we were supposed to meet at my old swing set to discuss our futures. There were so many things we needed to talk about. I had been thinking about the sex thing too, and was ready. Things had been going bad between us, but I loved him and knew I always would.

I sat on the swing looking down at the grass for what seemed like hours. When he didn't show, I knocked on his door and found out he went to a party. I called his cell phone, but he didn't answer. I left a message and then called Marie. She picked me up, and I told her what had happened. She assured me that he must have forgotten. I didn't mention my decision about sex because, as a part of my sex-free plan, I'd told her we were already doing it.

The party was in the woods outside of Jeff Watson's house. When we got there around 10 p.m., everyone was already drunk. I didn't see Patrick anywhere, so I started drinking with Marie. We had 6 or 7 beers from a keg that was mounted on the back of Jeff's truck before the bugs started to get to us. Marie walked with some guys to their truck to get

some bug spray, leaving Jeff and me with the keg. I finished my beer and, by that time, had to pee. Jeff said I could use the bathroom in his house, so I wouldn't have to go in the woods. He took my cup, filled it up again, and led the way.

Between the woods and his house, I tripped over three tree roots and two cans of beer. Jeff caught me once; I caught myself the rest of the time. When we reached the porch, we were both laughing hysterically over something that may or may not have been funny. When we walked inside, Jeff pointed to a white wooden door on the left side of the hallway. I opened it, still laughing, and shut it immediately.

"Jeff, Jeff, there's a girl in there..." I was trying to whisper, but the laughter wouldn't let me. I wanted to tell him there was a girl in his room trying to put her clothes on. When I opened the door, she had her underwear on and was trying to snap her yellow bra. I wanted to laugh at how funny it was and find somewhere else to pee. Then, I wanted to go home and wait for Patrick to call, to tell me he got a flat tire, his cell phone died, that he was fine, and he loved me. I want this so bad, now. But it didn't happen that way.

I kept laughing, trying to tell Jeff what I saw, then the naked girl opened the door. She wasn't naked anymore and looked embarrassed. We stopped laughing and avoided eye contact. I looked at Jeff, smiled, and ran toward the door he pointed at. I walked in and saw Patrick, shirtless, sitting on the edge of the bed reaching for his shoes.

"We'll be there in 30 minutes," Tara says as she changes the radio station.

"Perfect timing," Lena adds cheerfully.

"Yeah, perfect," I snap. I feel bad for the way I'm treating Lena. None of this is her fault.

Everyone thinks they know how I feel about this ride. I've been

waiting for it. I'm glad it will be over. And they're right. I lied to myself about this for a long time. I blamed myself over and over again until I realized it wouldn't change anything. But I'm still lying to them.

Things changed after seeing Patrick reach for his shoes. He looked up and saw me and cried. I told him I was done, that we had been done for a long time. We both cried and yelled and fought until he finally left, and I stayed at the end of the bed. A while later, Jeff came into his bedroom. Drunk and angry and alone, I had sex with him. Three weeks later, when I found out I was pregnant, I told him. He called me a whore, said he wanted nothing to do with me, and asked Lena to be his girlfriend the next day.

I didn't know what to do. I guess at some point I could have told my friends the truth about everything. But I did feel like a whore. And a liar. I was fucked, any way you looked at it. I thought I deserved to be alone. I still do.

Patrick called, crying, the morning after the party. He apologized for not showing up at the swing set, for saying things he didn't mean, and for sleeping with the naked girl. He said he was so sorry and wanted me back. The greater part of my life had been spent with this one person. Until that night, I had shared every part of myself with him. It's hard not to tell the truth to your best friend, even harder to be honest.

I knew for a while that things were changing. I think we both knew. Sometimes the idea is stronger than the thing itself. We wanted our relationship to work because it had for so long. And we loved each other; we still do.

The green lights above the cassette player say it's 2:48 p.m. when we pull into the clinic. All my food is gone, and the wrappers and stems remain at my side. I pick up what's left and lean back to put it in the garbage bag that hangs on the back of Tara's seat. Lena sees me move and pulls open the Velcro that keeps the bag together. I empty my hand, and

she touches my wrist. When I try to move my hand back toward my body, she holds on to it. It's perfect timing.

Letting go of something that has become a part of you isn't really letting go at all. Letting go sounds easy, like you just stop holding on. It's much worse than that.

Guitar, Table, and Bottle

Justin just kept pouring sugar into the tea, like sand, time. I was already loopy enough from the first batch. His dad, Dave, sat outside drinking Crown Royal with the gang. Justin called me fat, but I'm not. But there's this pouch just below my belly button, very marsupial, where the kangaroo lives. The kitchen shimmered. The walls, the refrigerator, the sink, and the counter with all of the chicken and Cous Cous laid over it like a buffet. Everyone took their plates outside to eat. They listened to Neil Young on the radio. I felt the twangs. That voice, carved by age and depth, blew across my skin, rearranging the hairs on my arm like wind ripping through a canyon. I'm shorter than Justin and always wear jeans and sweaters or something with sleeves and keep my hair knotted behind my head and watch everything with my wide, brown eyes. I'm pasty and don't feel very Spanish, like Dad.

Justin quit pouring sugar into the pot. He stirred it around and looked at me with that clown look of his. His hair is stringy and chopped off near the bottom of his neck but curls up at the ends. He's skinny and tall and has these lips, like an actress filled with collagen. You want to hide because it looks like they're going to explode and ruin your clothes with

melted margarine. Justin poured some chunky tea into a coffee cup and we shared it, each took a turn drinking from it and tasting the sweet sugar that overpowered the dung and dirt. I looked around and noticed the jagged edges of the counter top and the way the chickens seemed to be alive and living at separate angles from each other. I touched Justin on the arm and felt the kangaroo kick inside my pouch. I was afraid Captain Black would come around and make me get rid of my kangaroo. Nobody believes he exists but me.

The citronella candles chase away the bugs, and Justin covers the dying coals in the grill with lighter fluid. He tells Stunt Bear to stand back. Stunt Bear turns his head but when Justin closes the lid to the grill, fire shoots out from beneath, the sides, the top, every conceivable angle.

Justin looks up, still clutching that bottle of lighter fluid, smiles and exclaims, "Goddamn, I love vapors! I love pyrolysis! I can control Fire!"

I smile and shake my head. He's such a clown. Him and his science.

He grabbed
my hand and
said, "Love

you baby.” He
grinned, and I
could see my
reflection in his
eyes.

I smiled
and said, “Love
you too.”

We
walked out of
the kitchen and
into the dark
backyard. The
night covered
me as a quilt of
blue, red and
green squiggles.
I could barely
make out
the forms
at the table.
Their faces
shimmered in
the candlelight,
distorted, as if
they had been
destroyed and
glued back
together by a
child.

Jay, the guy who's writing this, and Rachel are there. Jay'll sit and quietly drink Old Milwaukee with Lutrell, laughing when it's appropriate and louder when it's not, until he's good and drunk and Rachel has to drive both of them home. Stunt Bear will follow Holly into bed once Justin burns him with his fucking science. Maybe I can get some Demerol from Stunt Bear before he disappears. Justin's dad, Dave, sits in a chair and looks like a redneck Santa Claus. He's a DEA agent. That's how Justin and I get all the best shit. He'll get wasted and be obnoxious and make everyone laugh. He'll call Justin's brother, who doesn't have a license yet, and make him come and pick him up and drive him home. When that happens, Lutrell'll show up to fill in the void they create and drink Old Milwaukee until Jay's drunk and ruined another night out for Rachel. Then Captain Black'll step out of the shadows with more beer, but by that time, nobody'll be around but me. Reality will have collapsed, and Captain Black will pick up the pieces and put them to good use in his propaganda machine.

“Justin, this chicken’s great!” Dave says. “You’re cut off! No more Crown Royal for you!”

“But Dad, I haven’t started drinking yet.”

“It’s eight o’clock. Get the Absinthe!” Dave wears a tee shirt pulled down tight and making it look like he has a belly, but he’s really in good shape. He is a DEA agent, after all. I have a pouch. There’s a kangaroo in there.

Justin hurries into the kitchen and comes out with a green bottle. He unscrews the cap and divides the green of the bottle into five small glasses.

Dave says, “Man, this stuff’ll fuck you up!”

Holly asks, “Isn’t this what van Gogh was drinking when he cut off his ear?”

Justin says, “Absolutely.”

“And you guys want to drink this stuff? Stunt Bear, don’t drink that honey.”

“One shot won’t kill me,” says Stunt Bear.

“Besides,” Dave rolls his hand around in the air, “I think we all know van Gogh couldn’t hold his liquor!”

“Sure it’s okay for me to drink, Dad?”

“Shut up.” Dave looks at Jay and Stunt Bear and says, “I never minded when he drank. Even when he was sixteen.” Dave slurs his words and rolls his head around as he talks. “The only time he ever got in trouble was when I came home from Columbia one time and all my Crown was gone. Justin, you’re cut off! No more Crown for you!”

Everybody laughs. “Drink this, Dad.”

“Is my favorite daughter-in-law gonna drink?”

I smile and say, “Yeah, give me some of that.”

Dave and Stunt Bear and Jay and Justin and I pick up a glass and

throw them back. I taste the liquid black licorice that melted on the grill when Justin made his fucking science. I hate Science. It's a manipulation of nature. It leads to war.

Rachel glares at Jay, the guy who's writing this. The last time he drank Absinthe, she had to take him to the Emergency Room.

The five of us kick back two more rounds.

Then Holly says, "Stunt Bear, sweetie, can I have some candy?"

Stunt Bear, with his curly, thick, black hair that comes down his back and his gruff voice and intimidating size and demeanor, says, "Jesus Christ, baby, you've had eight bars of chocolate already today."

I envision him wearing a tutu and a tiara and riding around on a unicycle in the circus, cussing the entire time and shooting dirty looks at the Ringmaster, and I giggle and shoot my hand up to cover my mouth, looking around to make sure nobody hears. And to make sure Captain Black's not lurking around.

Holly smiles and replies, "I know, but I want more." Her eyes flash and she smiles the smile of troublemakers who want to look innocent when they're after something.

"Justin, you're cut off! No more Crown for you!"

Stunt Bear lumbers off, stopping to scratch his back against the door frame, to get the candy for Holly that he's hid somewhere in their house, which is next door to ours.

Rachel smiled in the candlelight. The flicker of the flames gave her freckles that I knew weren't really there. Her face looked round but was jagged at the edges by the red and blue and green squiggles in my eyes. I got up and moved to sit on Dave's lap to get her from a different

angle. I saw her profile. Her small nose came down to a curve just above her mouth. Her hair was pinned to the side of her head with a dragonfly barrette and the rest of it hung in her face like a mask. Faces popped out from the lines in the fence, and they stuck their tongues out at me, and I giggled uncontrollably.

Dave said, "Justin! Where'd that Absinthe run off to?"

"I put it back in the kitchen, Pop. You want some more?"

Dave slapped me on the back and said, "Hell yeah, son! Pour another round!"

And the now somewhat green bottle made its way back to the table. Justin's such a clown.

David picks up the phone and dials, "Matt, yes, come pick me up, stat, I'm drunk."

Matt walks through the gate. He's tall like Justin but with a Drill Sergeant hair-do.

"Ready,

Dad?"

"Gotta
do one more
shot!"

I stand
up from Dave's
lap and look
around at the
splintered
picture in front
of me. I know
it'll never be
put together in
order again.

Justin
fractures the
green bottle
into five glasses.

Matt says, "Come on, Dad. I have school in the morning,
and I still have homework to do."

"Homework's
for losers,"
Justin butts in.

Lutrell walks through the gate carrying a twelve pack of Old Milwaukee. Stunt Bear and Holly have gone to bed after Justin burned Stunt Bear with his science, and Matt drove Dave home. Justin's in the bedroom doing physics calculations.

Rachel says, "Great, it's Jay's shadow."

But Jay, they guy who's writing this, just grins and starts drinking with Lutrell until they're both too drunk to walk and Rachel has to drive them both home.

And then I'm by myself in the blanket of the darkness. Justin's going to have to learn to create. He's going to have to give up his fucking science. I slouch forward and light a cigarette and look down and see my marsupial pouch where the kangaroo lives.

I exhaled and watched
the smoke drift into the
air. That's when Captain
Black stepped out of the
shadows. The light from
the street seemed to run
through him.

I shivered and
wrapped myself up
in my arms and said,
"Hello, Captain Black."

He said, "Hi
there, Stephanie."

"I don't want to
give up my kangaroo."

He sat down in
front of me and pulled
out a can of beer and
crossed his legs and
smiled. "Tell me why."

“I don’t want
to destroy anything else
with the science.”

He marked that
down and said, “But
it’s too late. You use the
science everyday. There’s
no reason to change
your lifestyle now.”

I started to
cry, and he jotted
down something in his
notebook. No doubt
more data for his
propaganda machine.

Angela's Days

Angela glanced at her watch. Quarter till nine. It was too early to be up on a Saturday morning. Fortunately, the weather was unusually pleasant for December. According to the woman next to her, it had been miserable the previous year.

“-so cold and wet. I had to throw my hat away when I got home; it was velvet. Can you imagine?”

Not that it had stopped her from wearing a hat again this year. She had a great lavender one perched on her head, its floppy brim concealing most of her overly made-up face. It was impossible not to notice that her three-piece dress suit, purse, and shoes were the same color. Although Angela tried to convince herself that her jealousy of fashionable women had worn off years ago, it still nagged at her that she felt too round to dress that way. Her husband squeezed her hand; his lifted eyebrows showed that he knew she was being too critical. Angela offered him her I-know-I-might-be-wrong smile. To prove she could be friendly, she asked, “Whose graduation was it?”

“My daughter’s,” the woman answered. “This year it’s my son.” She offered her hand, bejeweled with three diamond rings, the smallest of

which looked to be a karat. “Louise Miller.”

“Angela Sinclair.” She put her own child-sized hand, adorned with only a simple college class ring, into Louise’s. “And this is my husband, Ben.”

“Nice to meet you. Who are you here for?”

“Our daughter,” Ben said.

“What’s her major?”

“Education with a minor in chemistry.”

Louise forced a polite laugh. “Sounds too ambitious for me. That kind of degree must have taken longer than most.”

Angela was embarrassed and slightly irked by the assumption. “She’s a semester ahead, actually.”

“Oh.” The woman looked around for a diversion. Finding none, she extracted a long, white wallet from her pocketbook. “This is my daughter”-pointing to a photo-“the one who graduated last year.”

“She’s very pretty; she looks like you.”

“Thank you.” She smiled, her eyes wide, expecting Angela to offer pictures of her own.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have anything recent of my daughter. We . . . wore ourselves out on pictures a long time ago.”

“Why is that?”

Angela wondered if she should use the same old excuse to keep the conversation from getting too personal. “Well”-yes, she would take the easy way-“I guess it was when Marie, our daughter, was six months old. Ben’s family insisted we have her model, but it ended up costing too much. I mean, seventy-five dollars for an eight-by-ten.”

“What a shame,” Louise said, her tone condescending and cold.

“Besides,” Ben added, “we were too busy keeping up with her to slow down for more than a few snapshots.” He was interrupted by the arrival of his sister and brother-in-law. “Hi, Grace, Lester,” he said.

As soon as she was seated, Grace asked, “What are we going to do for your anniversary?”

“That’s still two weeks away,” Angela protested.

“Which anniversary?” Apparently, Louise was still taking part in the conversation.

“Twenty-five,” Grace said. “We’ve got to plan something big.”

“Really, Grace, you always do so much –”

“Twenty-five! I’ve been married three times, and I can’t add them together to make twenty-five.”

Angela met Ben’s eyes, and they fought to keep from smiling. For the next five minutes, Louise continued to marvel at everything said. Angela offered polite replies only when necessary. People like Louise amused her, acting as if her family couldn’t be real.

“They’re coming out,” Ben whispered to Angela.

She turned, looking for the familiar black hair and permanently ruddy face.

“You were real quiet. What’re you thinking?”

Angela smiled. “We must have done something right.”

Twenty years earlier, a cluster of ugly, brown patio homes lay quiet on a chilly North Georgia night. In her own small house, Angela was awakened by her baby’s crying. She dragged herself out of bed to check on her.

Marie had kicked her covers off and was shivering with each weak sob. Angela tucked an extra blanket around the little body and rubbed her back until her eyes closed. As she climbed back into bed, mild annoyance seeped into her; she was always the one to wake up. Her tired eyes skimmed over her husband’s body. Fatherhood hadn’t affected his physique at all, another reason to be irritated. Staring at his bare chest and firm abs, she got a little turned on and thought of waking him. She

decided to let him sleep, though, since he had to teach in the morning. Also, she was too disgusted with her jelly-roll belly and doughy, white arms to feel very comfortable instigating anything. She suspected he, too, was repulsed. He never helped her get dressed anymore – their sort of sensual, little getting-ready-in-the-morning ritual. If he did pick her clothes out, they were always the baggy ones.

Angela rolled away from him and eventually dozed back off, getting up for good at five. It was an hour with which she had become uncomfortably familiar. Her body was accustomed to odd hours and didn't know how to deal with long periods of uninterrupted rest.

Ben awoke forty-five minutes later and, without greeting her, headed for the shower. She cooked breakfast, deciding that if he didn't care, she didn't either. A forgotten promise to herself – that she would never turn into a closed, resentful woman – lay empty in her subconscious.

When Ben emerged from the bedroom, he was fully dressed, his brown hair still damp.

"You'll catch cold," she scolded, attempting to sound playful. He didn't notice her averted eyes and tensed shoulders and wrapped his arms around her. He let go when she didn't respond.

"Another early morning?"

"She kicked her blanket off. You were sawing logs."

"Yeah, I almost slept through the alarm, and on the worst day. I've got a parent meeting in twenty minutes." He ate quickly and was gone by six-fifteen.

Ben taught AP European History at Upton College Preparatory, a struggling private school in a city of thriving magnet programs. His teaching skills were higher than most school's standards, but his meager salary and skimpy benefits hardly did those abilities justice.

Angela didn't work. She was talented but had no motivation. Before Marie, she had been a research assistant at her university, the only

paying work she had ever known. Even if she wanted to go back to that job, they had moved away from the suburbs and the university ten months ago. They were cutting corners everywhere, even if it was just saving gas on Ben's commute.

Angela often forgot this house wasn't equipped with the conveniences of the old apartment. Halfway through rinsing the dishes for the dishwasher, she remembered she had to wash them by hand. She set them out to dry, shivering, and checked the thermostat. Sixty-nine degrees. She didn't dare change it; they had to save heat for the colder weather ahead. Angela risked leaving the baby for a few minutes to take a hot shower. She shook as she undressed, uncooperative feet tripping over pajama legs.

Marie awoke thirty minutes later, and Angela thanked her blessings that she was agreeable. It was always a toss up whether she would wake up cheerful or grumpy. This morning, she thought getting dressed was a game, giggling when her arms missed the sleeves and reaching behind her on the changing table, knocking over the caddy of ointments.

"Marie," Angela chastised. *Be patient*, she warned herself.

She sat Marie in her high chair and let her scribble on a scrap of paper while she poured cereal and milk in a bowl. Marie relinquished the paper and crayons with little fuss and jabbed at her breakfast.

The baby played with toys in front of the TV after eating. Angela kept an eye on her while she collected a load of laundry. Ever since Marie started crawling, one of her favorite pastimes was to overturn and rummage through trashcans. Now that she could walk, she also liked running her hand along tabletops, sending anything at the edge toppling to the floor. Angela set the laundry by the door, her narrowed eyes meeting the bright blue of her daughter's. Angela dared her to make a mess; Marie dared her to turn her back.

"I hate laundry, Marie-pea." She plopped on the couch, springs

squealing in protest.

At eight-thirty, there was a knock on the door. Angela raised her eyebrows and said, "Who's that?" Marie giggled, slapped her arms on her legs, and was lifted into the playpen so her mother could answer the door.

Cold wind met Angela's face and sought the spaces between the cotton fibers of her sweater. She saw a UPS truck down the street. A large package with a picture of a computer on it and an envelope taped on its side was nestled against the wall. She pulled the letter off and read it.

. . . Congratulations on your fifth anniversary, and you can wish us congratulations for Lester's new job.

Angela couldn't imagine buying anyone a computer for a wedding anniversary – even after a promotion to vice president of a bank – but she wasn't surprised. Her brother- and sister-in-law had never had money trouble and didn't have children.

"At least *they're* happy about our anniversary. Five years. . ."

They had married while they were still in college. At first, they did well attending classes and working at the same time. They were happy as long as they had each other. Now they had each other, a baby, and a patio home that nearly froze in the winter.

The wind revived and tore through her sweater.

"God, it's cold!"

Marie giggled from inside, and Angela echoed her. She dragged the box in, slammed the door on the weather, and stood, thinking. She'd never considered owning a computer. In the past, she'd always used a friend's or one at school.

Marie waved her roly arms, and Angela scooped her up. "Look at our new computer."

The little girl stared at the box then grabbed a lock of her mother's hair. Angela winced and gently pulled it from Marie's grasp.

“Would you like to see Daddy for lunch?”

The baby clapped her hands. “Ooh!”

Angela applied a little lipstick and blush, allowing herself to believe it took away from her chubby physique. She skimmed the closet, going past the pre-pregnancy size threes, and located a pair of pants from the fifth or sixth month, size twelves. She zipped them, her lips twisting in a grimace. When she was finished dressing, she swung Marie onto her hip, and they left.

The trip to Upton was worth it when she saw the look on Ben’s face. She sometimes caught herself worrying – and hated herself for it – about him losing interest and being tempted by other women. She was relieved to find him in the teacher’s lounge, seated alone at a table filled with student essays.

He looked up, surprised. “My two favorite girls! What’s the occasion?”

“Grace and Lester sent us something for our anniversary.” Angela passed Marie to her husband. “You’ll never guess what.”

“Okay, tell me.”

“A computer.”

“What? You’re kidding!”

“Nope. I wish we had enough money for the Internet.”

“We’ve been living without it for five years; a little longer won’t hurt.”

“But see, if I could work at home from the computer. . .” They seldom spoke of it, but Ben was an advocate of putting Marie in a daycare so Angela could work. Although she didn’t want to, doing it from home was better than a nine to five job. “Maybe I could get the hang of it again,” she suggested, hoping he would say they were better off than it seemed and that she wouldn’t need to.

Ben said nothing, stared into space for a moment, then attempted

to stack the essays with his free hand. “I guess you’ll have to find a babysitter and drive to the university,” he finally suggested.

Angela reluctantly nodded. She could at least give up one day to look into it.

At six thirty, Angela sat up with a start and looked at the clock twice to make sure. The thin sheet fell away, and her bare arms rippled with gooseflesh. She felt for her bathrobe, ending up with only a handful of sheets. She stumbled out of bed and into the bathroom and yanked her robe off the back of the door. Ben was in the shower; he hadn’t heard her.

“I’m cooking breakfast,” she called on her way out.

Several minutes later, he sat at the kitchen table, smiling for no apparent reason around a forkful of eggs.

“Okay, what is it?”

Pleased that she was showing interest in him, he said, “I have a surprise.”

“Surprise?” Angela grinned, feeling a mix of pleasure and anxiety – surprises were usually expensive. “What is it?”

“I was approved for a loan at Lester’s bank if I open an account there. If you get a job, we’ll put your paychecks in there to save for a house. It’d be good to talk about it when we have more time. Why don’t you meet me at school again?”

Angela feigned doubt, “I met you yesterday.”

“It’s up to you.” Ben stood, his chair scraping against the tiled floor.

Angela’s eyes glazed over, seeing but not seeing the blur of the opposite wall. Not only was Ben talking to her, but he was trying to turn her dream of the good life into reality. “Okay,” she acquiesced, “I’ll stop by.”

“That’s my girl.” Ben leaned over his wife, kissed her briefly, and left.

Angela hurried through her shower, just making it; Marie started crying while she scavenged for clothes. This morning, instead of being greeted by a cheerful hug and wet kiss, Marie was in a foul mood. She cried when Angela tried to change her, clung, sniffing, to her neck, and didn’t want breakfast. Angela carried her squealing child to the bathroom and set her less than gently on the floor. Marie started a fresh gale of screams.

“Uhh!” Angela countered through parted lips and gritted teeth.

Count to ten, count to ten. One...two...

Marie looked at her mommy, hurt and confused, tears streaming down her red cheeks.

Angela’s breathing slowed. “Oh,” she gasped. She scooped her daughter up and held her close. “I love you, Marie. I’m so sorry.”

She set her on the floor while she dried her own hair. Angela saw her upturned face and blew the warm air at Marie until she started to laugh. When her hair was dry, she carried her baby to the den. She vacantly stared at Marie watching her inexhaustible playing and thinking about how life would change if she got a job. “I hate work, Marie-pea.” For the first time, she heard the laziness in her voice and was annoyed with her lack of incentive. To make herself feel like she was doing something, she set a pot of soup on the stove and fiddled with the recently hooked-up computer. She was soon frustrated with it and Angela turned away. Angela couldn’t see her daughter.

A wordless, inhuman howl called her to the kitchen.

“Oh, God! Marie!”

Marie’s scalded face was contorted in pain, her body covered in blisters, and her clothes welded to her boiling skin. Angela reached for the phone and, after several aggravated attempts, stilled her fingers long

enough to dial 9-1-1. She reached for Marie, trying to comfort her, but the baby screamed and writhed at her touch. Angela couldn't see through her tears but could feel the small, burning body that squirmed in her arms.

It was forever and no time at all until the paramedics arrived. Two men held Angela down while she reached for Marie, who was convulsing on the stretcher. Angela's belly heaved and she vomited on the floor of the ambulance.

Once in the emergency room, she became more aware of her surroundings. The woman behind the counter made her fill out an impossibly lengthy amount of paperwork; what wasn't smeared by her tears was too sloppy to read, anyway.

"Here." She handed the clipboard back, sniffed, wiped her eyes, and looked around for her daughter. She could hear but not see her.

"Um, Mrs. Sinclair?" a voice called from far away.

Angela turned. "What?"

"Do you have a more recent insurance card? This expired last week."

Angela clutched at the counter, missed, and slid to the dirty floor.

Ohmygod, the insurance, ohmygod.

But she was always home to watch Marie.

Fishin'

Half in the shadow, half not. Half hidden, half exposed. My knees were pulled to my chest, and my back was against the wall. Cold crept in the apartment through holes where mortar had given up and let go of brick. Each blast of wind brought long skeletal fingers that held me tight and forced their way inside every gap in my clothing.

People moved and talked around me, a little laughter but not much. A girl walked in the door; her long dark hair swung with every movement. Low slung jeans gave me a glimpse of the boxers she wore underneath. A tight t-shirt clung to her slim frame and breasts. The men stared. I remained half hidden.

The girl walked over to the man sitting by the blue nitrous oxide tank. Lowering herself to the floor, she sat like a guy, her sneakers flat on the ground and her knees bent. One arm rested on top of her leg while her other hand reached for a nitrous-filled balloon. She smiled slightly before inhaling the contents of the pink latex.

Another woman walked in the door, leaving it open behind her. She perched precariously on the arm of a tattered couch, the only furniture in the room. "Ya know, we hafta work together on this," she slurred.

“Look at that mess.” She pointed outside the door. From my position, I could see the piles of paper and trash bags that had begun to overrun the carpet in the hall. “How we gonna keep the rats away with trash like that?” Her hands moved violently while she talked. The question was met with a few vacant looks.

Warmth eased through my body, relaxed my muscles, and left me limp. Colors and light swirled in my head as pills and liquor coursed their way through my veins. I was hidden.

A man sat in the corner of the room with a green army gas mask strapped snugly to his head. Another man lit the end of a homemade contraption so that the masked fellow could draw the smoke through a pipe into the mask. Everyone in the room looked up to him. They considered him a superhero. He couldn't leap high buildings in a single bound. In fact, it's possible that he couldn't even move. He could hold his smoke, though. I couldn't remember ever seeing his face. We were both hidden.

The brunette continued to suck in nitrous. The men continued to stare at her. The rat woman had given up; at least, I didn't see her anywhere. There was only one other woman in the room, a large blond with a voice to match her attitude. She was busy explaining all the pictures of children around the room. “The state came in and got ‘em,” she said while she lit a joint. “My goddamn parents got all five of ‘em now. They won't even let me see ‘em.” A man standing beside her nodded as he leaned over to look down her shirt. I remained hidden.

Suddenly, someone yelled, “She's fishin'!” With sighs, the men began to get up and move towards the nitrous tank. I tried to move. I wanted to help her, but I couldn't. My body wouldn't obey. Through a break in the crowd, I could see the brunette flopping around like a fish. Her eyes rolled back as the seizure grabbed a tighter hold. A few faces peered at her while a couple of men bent down and held her arms.

It was then that a man walked toward me and roughly picked me up. I tried to protest, but the commotion in the room drowned out what few weak words I could manage. Busy with the brunette, the others didn't see him lift me from the shadows.

He took me past the party. I was completely numb and couldn't feel the contact of his body. We moved down the hall. I felt like I was floating as he carried me down the dark hall. I stopped trying to protest.

He walked into a bedroom and flopped me on a mattress with dirty covers. I closed my eyes and lost myself in the darkness. When I opened them again, I was slightly surprised to find his face in front of mine. For a few seconds, or a few hours, I watched the colors and lights stream off his head. It wasn't until he walked out the door and zipped his pants that I realized I was naked.

The Dream Trees

When Jessie Michaels was ten years old, she lived in a house surrounded by three majestic ficus trees, trees she imagined had the power to make all her dreams come true. Now, at the age of forty-one, with two failed marriages, one bankruptcy charge, and countless other heartaches behind her, she knew better. She was a cashier at the local Jiffy Mart. It was a little late for big dreams.

Jessie glanced at her reflection in the glass door before entering the bar. She knew she wasn't kidding anyone. She looked her age, despite the long hair she couldn't bring herself to cut, and the jeans she had struggled into were no size six. Hell, she wasn't even sure they were a twelve. She squinted at her image. Her skin was lined and freckled from too much sun, and there were dark circles under her eyes, the perpetual combination of lack of sleep and last night's eyeliner.

But her therapist had taught her to always find at least one thing she liked about herself, and tonight it was her breasts. Thank God she had some. Life could have been a lot worse if she'd had to spend it running around with A cups. The new top she had splurged on, picked out for its

red, lacy trim and deep V neckline, showed off her D cups nicely. So there you had it. Thousands of dollars in therapy for that one realization. She liked her breasts. Now maybe next week they could progress to solving real problems, like how she was going to make next month's mortgage payment and why she always fell for men who were assholes.

There were only two people sitting at the large, square bar. Everyone else was eating dinner in the booths that lined the walls. She gave a short smile to the approaching hostess and moved to the empty side of the bar.

She glanced at the two men across from her. Large and comfortable on the tiny bar stools, they hung heavily over their drinks and peered into them with sad, unshaven faces.

Her arrival caused a momentary stir, and the men watched as the bartender approached, flipping a cocktail napkin toward her with a spin.

“Your usual, Jess?”

“Thanks, Carl.”

She watched as he peeled the foil from a bottle of Kendall Jackson. She always drank Chardonnay. She'd been drinking Chardonnay ever since she'd been drinking, and that had been awhile. It was her mother's drink, too. Jessie remembered big jugs of it in the refrigerator when she was a kid, bottles with handles - too large to be of any quality - that had to lie down across the bottom shelf. But Jessie bought smaller, more expensive bottles that fit daintily into the side door. It was an important distinction, more proof that she was *not* turning into her mother. Her mother was an alcoholic. Jessie just liked wine.

What else was there, really? Mixed drinks were too complicated, and beer was too filling. Besides, she preferred the look and feel of a wineglass, the way its smooth curve fit into her hand, its delicate stem. If she were going to order a mug of beer, she might as well move to the other side of the bar and saddle up next to the two sad sacks. But she didn't

belong over there. She was only here early because her cable had gone out. And besides, it was nice to get a good stool before the place got crowded.

She flipped her hair over her shoulder and leaned in to accept the light Carl was offering for her cigarette. She took a long drag and looked across the bar, but the men had turned back to their beers. The wait staff hurried in and out of the kitchen's double doors. Jessie took long sips of wine and watched the easy way they joked and flirted with one another. Well, hell, they were twenty-something. Flirting at her age would just feel like pretending. Pretending you didn't know how it was all going to turn out anyway. Pretending you didn't know the truth: that weak-in-the-knee kisses always lost their power, and men who swore they'd never leave did just that.

A few glasses later, the dinner folks were leaving, and the drinking crowd was beginning to arrive. A few couples doing double duty, dinner *and* drinks, wandered over from their booths. The band began setting up their equipment.

You could always judge an evening by how many glasses it took to get interesting. If things were hopping, if the energy was charged and bouncing around the place midway through the first glass, then the night had high potential. On the other hand, if on a night like tonight you were on your fifth and still buying them for yourself, you might want to pack it in. Jessie considered this as Carl gestured toward her empty glass. She nodded, and he reached for the bottle. It was still early. Even if no one talked to her, she was better off here, surrounded by a jumble of restaurant noises. The sound reminded her of the canned laughter from sitcoms, but it was preferable to the silence of an empty house.

A group of young women breezed by, each wearing a different little black number and trailing a sweet wake of perfume. They settled a few feet from Jessie and clustered together like small birds, sending nervous sideways glances at the cigarette lying in the ashtray. Jessie considered

jumping up and waving it at them maniacally, imagining the way they would flutter and scatter about. Instead, she took a long drag and blew the smoke in their direction. Screw them. She knew she should try to quit, but this wasn't California, for Christ's sake. She remembered reading something in one of her magazines that said 68% of the men surveyed would not approach a woman they found attractive if she were smoking. Well, someone would have to find her attractive first. And sitting next to these smoke-free little wrens, it wasn't likely. She might as well enjoy her smokes.

She looked at her full glass and wondered if she should order another. Now that the place was filling up, it would be harder to get Carl's attention. She looked for him across the bar. The sad sack brothers were still there, hunched over their drinks. One of them lit a cigar and nodded at her, as if they were old friends sharing a secret. What secret could she possibly share with *them*? The secret of what this place sounded like empty, maybe. The thought depressed her, and she let her eyes drift lazily around the bar. She was beginning to feel drunk. Good.

At first, she noticed him because he was a good-looking man, and she noticed all good-looking men. He stood a head taller than most everyone around him, and his hair fell to his collar in grayish-blond curls. He was listening and nodding to someone, and Jessie watched him, curious. There was something familiar about him. Then he laughed. His grin broke wide and childish across his face and his eyes, still crinkled up in laughter, met hers. It was Mark Connelly.

Mark had lived next door to Jessie and her mom in the first house, her childhood house. He came to live with his father right after her own father had left and everything started to change. Back when her mother did nothing all day but sit in the old papasan chair and let the house grow dark and sad around them. Jessie would sit with her into the evening, growing hungry and listening to the wooden walls creak.

In the months that followed her father's departure, the grass grew tall and wild, and the pool turned a blackish-green and grew tadpoles. Things that broke or fell apart with age, like the screen door that hung on one hinge, were no longer fixed. Jessie wondered if a house could crumble with sadness and neglect, and she escaped outside for long periods of time, so as not to be caught beneath it if it finally fell.

There was one place, though, that was still safe. Up in the trees, things remained the same. She and Mark would climb, playing for hours into the long summer evenings until she heard her mother calling. Then she would have to run in, fetch the Chardonnay from the fridge, and deliver it to her mother in the papasan, before running back outside. Mark never went home. He always waited for her.

She glanced at him again. Years ago, she had heard he was working on Wall Street. Jessie remembered thinking Mark had embraced the corporate world simply to spite his father. Jeffrey Connelly was a successful sculptor whose top priority had always been his art. Mark had taken a back seat for most of his childhood, but their relationship had endured, it seemed. He was back for a visit.

He seemed to recognize her, too, and she hastily crushed out her cigarette, knocking over her wineglass. Carl was there in an instant and began wiping up the bar. She tried joking.

"I was just about ready for another one, anyhow."

He smiled but said nothing. He placed a fresh glass and napkin in front of her. Her head felt thick and heavy, and she straightened to concentrate on Mark's form, now moving through the crowd.

She remembered how her mother had suggested she introduce herself to the new boy. Mothers could be so ancient about things like that. Ten year olds didn't just introduce themselves like adults. Did they? Well, she hadn't. She had spied on him instead. For days, she watched him from her vantage point in one of the smaller trees that bordered his

backyard. She made a game of trying to move from one limb to another without rustling any branches and drawing his attention. She took notes in her coloring book and logged his activities, recording any suspicious behavior. She was Nancy Drew, famous private eye. Then one day he looked up at her. She had just been sitting there, barely daring to breathe, as he walked across the yard to stand directly under the tree. Then he looked her square in the eye and waved.

“Jessie?”

He was next to her now. She wished she had worn something different, something more feminine than jeans. Her new lace top looked cheap now, next to his expensive sports jacket. Why couldn't she have worn something black and strappy like one of the bird girls? Mark Connelly probably loved fluffy women like that. Young things who were skinny and didn't smoke. One of them was probably his girlfriend.

“Little Jessie Michaels,” he said, shaking his head in wonder.

“Little!” she responded, indignant. “I was just as old as you and a much better tree climber, if I recall.” Her words surprised her. Was she flirting? She was too old to flirt. She hoped he hadn't caught the slight slur in her words.

He didn't seem to notice.

“Yes, you were,” he agreed. “But then, you always had the best trees in the neighborhood.” She wondered for a moment if he hadn't said “best boobs on the block.” Then, she remembered she hadn't even *had* boobs back then. These were a new addition, as far as he was concerned. She sat up straighter, throwing her shoulders back ever so slightly, as if to say, “So look what I grew.”

Again, he seemed not to notice.

“Those trees were *awesome*,” he said.

It sounded childish, but it was true. They *were* awesome. There were three of them, gigantic ficus trees that surrounded the house. Trees

with massive trunks and branches spreading so wide you could play hide and seek in them and never have to touch the ground. The roots grew down from the limbs in different places so you could swing or slide down on them. And the underground roots were growing, too, so thick and deep that they were winding under the house and pushing up through the parquet flooring of the living room. She had to bring Mark inside because he didn't believe her about that part until she showed him. Her mom explained that the roots were growing toward the water in their pool because they were thirsty. But Jessie imagined they were trying to help support the house. Her trees were like giant monsters, the friendly kind, trying to hold her family together and keep the house from crumbling. Maybe one of those long root tentacles would unfurl into the world to find her father. She dreamed of how it would wrap around him and bring him back home.

Mark believed her about the trees, and so she let him climb them on his own, without asking. He needed their protection. Mark didn't know she knew about his father, but she had learned things from her days of spying. She had heard things, too. Sometimes, the two of them would hide for hours while Mark's father stomped around the yard, yelling and cursing. They pretended they lived in the trees, away from their real homes, and they huddled together, scabby knees drawn up to chins, holding hands until dark.

"Little Jessie Michaels," he said again. His green eyes looked into her face, but then trailed lower, slowly down over her body in a way that was unmistakable. She tingled.

Mark slid onto the open barstool next to hers and let his arm cruise over her shoulders, leaning in. "You know, you were my first real crush. I couldn't believe a girl as pretty as you would be hanging from the trees just to get a look at me."

His words were better than the wine; they had the same effect

in only a fraction of the time. She *had* been pretty then, with blonde curls that rivaled his own and fair skin that hadn't yet seen too much sun. Her eyes were her father's, big and brown. "What a pretty contrast! So striking!" everyone had said. But her hair turned darker during her teenage years, and she had all but forgotten that fair, sunny girl. It was easier to believe she had always been the sad, heavy person she was now.

But Mark was looking at her as if he *could* see that little girl, and Jessie realized it was the only part of her he knew. None of her mistakes were visible. She had a do-over, a clean slate. Life was funny. Here she was, crossing paths with Mark Connelly after all these years. Maybe it was fate. But she didn't believe in fate anymore. Did she?

They ordered more drinks. It wasn't Chardonnay. Mark was handing her shots now. Tequila. Things were getting confusing in a lovely way, and she was laughing and licking the salt off his neck. She had a nagging sensation that they were being watched and whispered about, but it barely registered. She felt wonderful. She leaned on him heavily and raised the shot glass he put in her hand. This one was clear pink.

"To oll frrienns," she slurred, tapping her glass too hard against his own. The liquor spilled cool over their fingers and trickled down their arms. "Oops," she giggled and turned to look for Carl. He was nowhere to be found. She searched the sea of faces in confusion, and the images she saw were disconnected from what she felt. Mark's lips were on her knuckles. His tongue darted between her fingers.

"I'll get that," he murmured, sucking the sweet liquid away from her skin with small, moist kisses.

She giggled again and stretched her body along the bar to reach over the side for napkins. Mark had one hand on her leg, steadying her as she groped. The neck of her blouse dipped lower, exposing more flesh as she bent forward. Then she noticed the bird girls nudging each other and pointing. They met Jessie's heavy-lidded gaze openly and with snide

grimaces, their hands perched on thin hips.

“What!?” Jessie demanded, struggling to pull herself up from the bar. It was bad enough these girls had cornered the market on attracting men, with their perfect bodies and cute little outfits, but did they think they owned the right to all the fun, too? Was she just supposed to sit here all night, not drinking, not smoking, and not enjoying herself at all?

She pulled away from Mark and began moving in their direction, but tripped over the barstool. It toppled over with a crash. The people around them grew quiet. Mark grabbed her shoulders and turned her toward him.

“I think it’s time we get you out of here,” he said, reaching for her purse.

Jessie looked at him and smiled crookedly. Everything else faded. He was going to take her home. He was going to take care of her. He *wanted* to.

As he led her toward the door, she looked back at the crowd. Carl had reappeared and was watching her. He seemed to be mouthing something. She read his lips.

“Are you okay?”

Jessie waved at him and stumbled out behind Mark. “I’m fine!” she shouted. “It’s okay! We used to climb trees together!” She was laughing as the door closed, leaving them alone in the quiet of the street.

In the morning, Jessie was naked and not in her own bed – both unwelcome realizations when you remember little from the night before. She lay still and racked her brain for the missing pieces that would take her from that street outside the bar to the bed she was in now.

Memories came back in flashes. The car ride, the feel of asphalt scraping against her skin, and another, softer fall into grass cool with dew. Naked bodies, hers and Mark’s, moved together in the grass, wildly,

drunkenly. She cringed and turned to look beside her. Mark's curls were sneaking out from between the sheets. It hadn't been a successful pairing. They'd had too much to drink. She had gone through the motions on auto-pilot, her sensations so dulled by the alcohol that she'd given up any quest for climax and wished only for it to be over. But Mark, who was probably successful in all his endeavors, had not given up easily. She deserved an Oscar for her patience if not for her performance. But the role she had played was all too familiar. She closed her eyes.

Next to her, Mark stirred, and she looked at the smooth skin of his back. Maybe all was not lost. Maybe the damage could be repaired. Maybe he would roll over and pull her into his arms, and they would find each other again. In the sober light of day, they could make new memories to erase the ugly ones. She reached out to touch him, and he woke with a little jump. He turned his head to look at her, and she managed a smile.

"Morning," she said

He looked away.

"Morning." He gathered the comforter about him and rose from the bed in one quick movement. "Oh shit, what a hangover. Listen, I've got to get moving here. My dad's coming back from a show today, and I need to clean this place up."

Jessie looked at him, puzzled.

"We're at my dad's house. Remember? You insisted. You wanted to come back to the old neighborhood. I drove your car."

She sat up and twisted around to look out the window. Mark kept moving and talking, picking up articles of her clothing from the floor and tossing them to her on the bed. The new red top was smudged with dirt. "Get dressed, okay?" He walked out of the room and shut the door. Jessie was left with only the thin sheet covering her. The room felt chilled, and she became aware of a painful pounding in her head. Her hands stung where two raspberry scrapes marked the heel of each palm. She lifted the

sheet to inspect her body. There was a gash on one knee, now caked with dirt and dried blood.

Once dressed, she made her way down the hall, eyes drifting over the family pictures that lined the walls. Her eyes rested on a faded 8 x 10 in a gold frame - her and Mark at age 9 and 10, according to the pencil scrawl in the left-hand corner. Mark was hanging upside down from a tree branch, and she was standing on the ground next to him. Their heads were level and touching, and they wore big smiles, hers right side up, his upside down. She remembered when it had been taken. It had been one of those rare days when her mother was outside, watching them play. She had gone in for the camera, instructing them not to move a muscle, and Mark had complained, laughing while the blood rushed to his head, that he couldn't hang upside down for that long. Jessie leaned in to examine the picture closely. She looked at their faces, wide open and trusting.

Her mind recalled the vision of their bodies banging together roughly, and she glanced back at the rumpled sheets in the bedroom. What had happened to the boy who had held her hand so tenderly? Maybe she was so far removed from the innocent girl she had once been that she didn't deserve to be loved like that.

She found Mark in the kitchen, rinsing dishes.

"How's your dad?" she asked.

"Great," he said, not bothering to turn from the sink.

"So he's still sculpting?"

She was going to force him to remember that she wasn't just some floozy he had picked up in a bar. Even if she had acted like it. This was different. She knew his family. They had been friends. They had more history together than this one drunken night. This was different. It *had* to be.

"Yeah, he is. Listen, I'm sorry, but you've really got to go. He's going to be home any minute."

It was exactly the same. Nothing ever really changed except the names and faces. His father was coming home, and he couldn't wait to get her out of the house. There wouldn't be any guess-who-I-bumped-into reunion. He wouldn't be showing her off.

She had done it again.

Mark paused at the front door, just long enough for her to begin to hope he would throw her a lifeline. Maybe he would ask for her phone number.

"Take care," he said.

"Right," she managed. "You, too."

She turned and stumbled blindly in the bright sun. She stepped through the gravel of the drive and admonished herself with each crunch, unsteady in her low heels. Her car was at the end of the driveway, parked in the grass outside the fence. He had barely pulled it off the street.

Her street. The thought came to her suddenly. She was on her street. Her old house was next door.

She walked faster now, past her car, along the shoulder of the road and toward her house. She looked down, watching her step. When she looked up again, she stopped. Standing where her tiny house once stood was a large, two-story brick house with grand columns, and. . . *The trees were gone.* How did you cut down trees as big as those? She imagined teams of people sawing and hacking at them for days, fighting and wrestling the roots from under the house, forcing them to give up their protective grip. The thought sickened her.

She ran around the side of the house as a dog barked from inside. She didn't care. Let them come out and ask her what she was doing. She'd give them a piece of her mind. Who were these people, anyway, that had murdered her trees?

But in back, standing safely behind the house, was the third tree. The one giant they had spared. It stood alone and solid, almost

bare-looking despite its leaves and branches, but every bit as big as she remembered. It looked...well, yes. It looked *lonely*.

Jessie ran to its base and peered up into it, her hands clutching at the rough bark. Then she kicked off her shoes and began to climb.



Submission Procedures

We are accepting submissions for our next issue of Fiction Fix, due to be published in April 2003. This issue will be open for submissions of poetry and artwork as well as fiction. Please submit each document digitally to fictionfix@hotmail.com, and by mailing a hard copy to:

Fiction Fix c/o Student Life
4567 St Johns Bluff Rd. South
Jacksonville, Florida 32224-3267

All Submissions...

Must have a cover page, including artwork. This is the only place the submitter's name should be present. The cover page should include contact information and a brief bio. Submissions must be in Word, double spaced for fiction and single spaced for poetry, in Times New Roman 12 point font. We do not have a word limit, but greater consideration may be given to stories under 3000 words. Art must be submitted digitally in jpg format and may be color or black and white.

If you would like a response and your manuscript back, please include a self-addressed, stamped, envelope.

The deadline for submission to the summer publication is midnight February 15th. Submissions received after that date will be considered for the fall publication.

Please email any questions to fictionfix@hotmail.com

We thank you for contributing to our publication.

The Crew at Fiction Fix

U.S. \$8.00

I didn't ask what your problem was, but why don't you tell me a story...

"I killed her cat last week. She took my daughter but left the frigging cat behind. I put a bunch of crushed Valium in his chow, then waited for him to drift off to sleep." ~ Freedom

"Her legs are spread a little, and her back is stretched away from the seat. My legs are crossed, matching my arms, and I'm sick of comparing our legs and our lives." ~ The Ride

"Knowledge gave us humanity; religion took it away." ~ Savior

"Jessie wondered if a house could crumble from sadness and neglect, and she escaped outside for long periods of time, so as not to be caught beneath it if it finally fell." ~ Dream Trees

"This is the truest thing Sarah has ever said to me: 'There will always be secrets. Secrets among friends, family, and especially lovers.' She does not remember saying this either." ~ Echo

"And then, I'm by myself in the blanket of the darkness. Justin's going to have to learn to create. He's going to have to give up his fucking science." ~ Guitar, Table, and Bottle

"Each blast of wind brought long skeletal fingers that held me tight and forced their way inside every gap in my clothing." ~ Fishin'

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