

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Peter W. Starr for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing presented on April 23, 2004

Title: Foodmaster and Three Stories

Abstract approved:

*Redacted for Privacy*

Tracy Daugherty

The purpose of this thesis was to create a sustained piece of fiction that both represented my growth as a writer throughout my time at Oregon State University, and wove together a mixture of imagination, language, and creativity. My hope was to write a novella that incorporated and drew from themes including work, community, and family relationships, and also was an exploration in the very structure and form of literary fiction.

After completing the novella, I found that similar themes continued to appear within my fiction during my ongoing growth as a writer. What I ended up with was a novella and collection of related stories that reflected the influences of my advisor Tracy Daugherty and his tutelage, the courses that I took at this university and my undergraduate university, and my own personal history.

This thesis was written over a two-year period, during which drafts of this novella and stories were written and rewritten. Each story and chapter was submitted to a writing

workshop, read and edited by my major and minor advisor, and carefully reworked and redrafted after much scrutiny and attention.

During the course of writing this thesis, many things influenced me, the most prominent being the world of fiction that existed all around me. I was influenced by fiction that I was reading in my course work, such as Donald Barthelme and Philip Roth, but writers that I had grown up with, like Edgar Allen Poe and Ray Bradbury also influenced me. Beyond the world of published fiction, I found not only influence, but also more importantly inspiration from the work and criticism of the writers and students within the Creative Writing Program here at Oregon State University.

The end result of these two years of work, study, writing, and criticism was a piece of fiction that I am proud of, and plan to publish. This collection of fiction represents not only a sustained study on the craft of creative writing, but also serves an exploration of my own voice and style, and an awakening of my identity as a fiction writer.

# Foodmaster and Three Stories

by  
Peter W. Starr

A THESIS

submitted to

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APPROVED:

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Major Professor, representing Creative Writing

*Redacted for Privacy*

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Chair of the Department of English

*Redacted for Privacy*

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Dean of the Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Peter W. Starr, author

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The author expresses his deepest and most sincere thanks to his parents, Anne and Bill Starr, for their guidance, inspiration and motivation. He also wishes to thank Tracy Daugherty, Keith Scribner, Jennifer Cornell, Marjorie Sandor, and Lisa Ede for their knowledge and patience. But most importantly, a big thanks goes out to Timothy Platt, and all of the employees of Kline Village Farmer's Market.

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## Steelteeth

Mark Mollar wakes up every morning to check his teeth, and make sure they are where they should be. He fears their loss – always has. When he lost his first tooth he believed his body had begun to decay. Feeling it slowly loosen in his mouth filled him with fear. His first impulse was that he had done something wrong, something to deserve this. Maybe he had eaten too much candy, or he drank too many soda pops. When it finally fell out during a game of tag, he spit the tooth into his hands in a splatter of blood, and immediately ran home screaming. He hid the tooth in a shoe box in his closet, and refused to open his mouth for what felt like days.

Mark watched as his childhood friends tied their teeth to doorknobs, slamming the door shut and squealing as the rope became slack and their teeth danced across the floor. He watched them yank and pull and twist until blood turned their white teeth pink, and a smile of victory, of development, or sometimes of horror appeared on their faces.

Refusing to ever pull any of his baby teeth, Mark let them hang from his mouth by strands of tissue until they fell out in his sleep. He'd wake up and scramble about his bed attempting to find them, but never did. Instead, he noticed them one by one in the toilet, wrapped and packaged in human waste, processed through his body. Staring into the bowl, Mark Mollar debated fishing through his mess to pluck them free, but he never did.

Instead he waited for the next pearl to push through his gums. Eventually it would, and he'd spend hours staring into his bathroom mirror pulling the sore red flesh

apart and dabbing the small pools of spit and blood with toilet paper. Every day he went to the mirror and imagined the new tooth, its angle, placement. He envisioned whether it was going to be symmetrical with its opposite, whether it would balance the rest of his teeth. What if it came in sideways? What if it was discolored, or jagged, or chipped. What if it stood out from his other teeth, or if it was larger, or smaller?

In the summer at the welding station, Mark dresses in thick Carhart double-layer pants. On his upper body and arms he wears leather, creating a nearly impenetrable second skin to protect him from the heat of his welding torch, which burns at temperatures over three hundred degrees. On his head he wears a welding helmet over his safety glasses, shielding his eyes from the blinding white light of the torch.

Many summer days the temperature in the mill is around one hundred and twenty degrees. Within his shell of protective clothing it is much hotter. When welding, a person is required to create a flawless weld by holding his position and remaining completely still for long periods of time. For Mark it is a test of his will. Holding a weld while salty sweat drips into his eyes, while his arms burn from holding them in the same position, while sparks shower him, sometimes sneaking in underneath the hood of his welding helmet tests his mind and body. The shower of sparks seems endless at points, and the pain and stiffness unbearable.

His own odor sickens him. It fills his eye shield and seeps slowly into his mouth until he can taste the sourness. Sometimes Mark thinks that perhaps his own scent is better than the smell of the steel mill. In the mornings, the scent is almost enjoyable. All the steel covered in dew, smelling of the oils that preserve it while it waits to be



fabricated into offices and churches and schools and bridges gives the mill a sense of youth and rebirth. It is the smell of a new day. It is the smell of commerce and manufacturing. However, by the end of the day the odor of the mill changes dramatically. The scent takes on the odor of coolant and chemicals, and of hot metal and gas. But these smells are not what bother Mark. It is the combined smell of the sweat of the thirty men who work in the mill that he hates. The stench of generations of manual labor smells like soil. It smells like what Mark imagines the magma that flows beneath the earth must smell like. It smells like eternity. It smells like it has every day that the mill has existed, and it smells like every day will until the doors of the mill finally shut forever.

Mark's only relief is being called away from his welding station to go out in one of the trucks to run errands and pick up gear or drop off finished pieces to the job site. It gives him a break from the heat and the stench and the backbreaking work.

What few people know about steel fabrication is that most of the work is done in a warehouse or mill, then shipped in giant chunks to a construction site, where the pieces are put together like a puzzle. Mark rarely sees his finished product; he never sees what he had sweated and worked for. Even if he does get a chance to go to the job site, he rarely views the entire structure, only progress – never conclusion. When the job ends, usually his work is quickly covered in concrete or insulation, covering any evidence that he once held pieces of that steel in his hands, that his suffering built this corner, or that support beam.

I dream I lose my teeth. I dream that I go through the day, and one by one they loosen. I'm old enough to not have baby teeth in the dream, but still young enough to not worry about losing my permanent teeth. But it is real – the dream is real, I feel it.

I feel my front teeth become loose. Am I at work? School? All I know is that I can feel them loosen. I don't dare touch them for fear I may lose them, but my tongue brushes against one and I can feel the root slide from its casing, and the tooth falls into my mouth. Instinctively, maybe to save embarrassment, I swallow, and lose my front upper-right tooth forever in the pit of my stomach. I can feel my gums swell and seep blood. But this is just a dream, and I know it – but it feels real. I feel the absence of my teeth. I slide my tongue around the vacancy in my mouth, and at first I enjoy it, but then I realize that this hole will always be there. My tooth will never come back.

I have always dreamed about losing my teeth. I don't remember what my dreams were like before I dreamt about my teeth. I guess that I dreamed about the same things that other little kids dream about, like baseball and ponies and things like that, but I don't remember. All I can remember is the nightmare of teeth, every night. When my teeth finally started to fall out, I felt like the dreams were real.

\* \* \*

Mark is one of the youngest people in the steel mill, at age nineteen. Most of the others he works with on the line have children, and some grandchildren. He wonders how many false teeth he is surrounded by, and then remembering his dream erases that

thought. When he was eighteen he got his welder's certificate, so he could fill the vacancy that his father left on the line. Since his father had worked for the mill for so long, the foreman saw no problem with his son being his replacement after an I-beam crushed his right leg in a crane accident leaving him alive but unable to work.

Mark likes the guys who weld on either side of him. He feels as though he fits snug directly in between them, as though he had sprouted from this spot and grown here. To his right is Wayne, to his left is Slim. He does not know if these are their real names, or even what their last names might be. Mark defines them by their titles: Wayne the Welder, Slim the Cutter.

Wayne and Slim like Mark as well, largely because they liked his father. Almost every day one of them will lean over to him and tell a joke or share some gossip, and in doing so accidentally address him by his father's name. "Geez, this cross-weld is a bitch, Alan," or "Hey Al, gimme a hand with this."

Wayne has worked at the mill for nearly forty years, and has a stuttering problem. He wears a train engineer's hat and blue denim overalls. He is a black man who has two daughters. He usually doesn't say much on account of his speech impediment; this might be why Mark loves to work next to him. Wayne is quick to smile and shake hands, and seldom complains or makes waves within the mill. At lunch break Wayne and Mark sit silently near their station and eat lunch together without saying a word. They always eat the same thing – for Mark, tuna on white and iced tea, for Wayne, bologna and cheese and chocolate milk.

Slim is exactly that, tall and slim. He has a gray beard with lines of brown in it, looking like something has dripped from his mouth and stained his beard. Slim wears

jeans and a flannel shirt, that both seem to stretch to cover his entire body. Slim has extraordinarily small eyes. They hide behind tinted safety glasses that may have been a prescription for someone else. Slim is a pack rat. Every day at the end of the day Slim empties his pockets and shows Mark the contents, offering him the left-overs of his take for the day. A couple welding rods, thirty-seven cents, a rubber band (broken), a paper clip, two Jolly Ranchers, his pocket knife, Marlboro's, a Zippo, and several candy wrappers. Mark grabs a cigarette and a candy almost every day.

Sometimes it seems days can go by without any of them speaking. The only noises are the sounds of the mill: grinders grating on steel, saws buzzing through beams, dills humming through steel plates, the clanging of scrap as it crashes to the floor. All of the men on the line work through the noise, and the heat, and the pieces of metal in their snot and spit, and the blackness around their noses and mouths, and the injuries, and the overtime, and the repetition, and the repetition.

\* \* \*

The dream gets worse. More teeth lost. I can't stop having the dream no matter how hard I try. I drink to have dreamless sleep, but still the dream comes. Different places – different times, same result. In one dream I'm in high school, walking through the halls pulling my own teeth out and throwing them to the ground, smashing them under my boot heel. In another dream I am old and in a hospital. My teeth begin to drop from their places and tumble into my windpipe, nearly choking me to death.

Every dream is different – every result is the same. I end up losing all of my teeth in nearly every dream now. In one dream I try to save them, and then run home trying to shove the roots back into my skull, causing more and more blood to fall from my head. In another dream I see my mother, and she is collecting my teeth as they fall and giving me shiny quarters for each one. She takes them and places them in a small container in the kitchen cupboard. I believe she plans to make soup with them soon.

\* \* \*

“Ya dreamed ya lost all yer teeth? What the shit?” Slim says to Mark one afternoon while they eat with Wayne. Slim stands over Mark and Wayne and towers above them.

“Yeah ... What the hell ya suppose that means, huh?” Mark stares into his tuna salad on white, and sips his iced tea. “I’m starting to lose sleep over this, man. I’m afraid I’m gonna come in here and do some stupid shit like drop an I-beam on good old Wayne here.”

“Y ... you ... ya ... you do an ... and its yer ass.”

“Hell ... I don’t know what that shit means, I ain’t no Doctor Ruth.” Slim still refuses to talk to Wayne because he’s black. Most times when Wayne speaks, Slim stares off into space, or when Mark speaks of Wayne, Slim simply brushes the comment off and goes on talking about a previous subject. Mark believes this is why he was placed between them, and suspects that his father may not have mediated quite as nicely as he does.

"I'm just saying, this shit is seriously bothering me. I don't want to screw up because I'm thinking about my teeth. And the thing is, that's probably the last thing I need to be worryin' about round here."

"I tell you what." Slim smiles. "I'd much rather lose any of my other senses than my teeth."

"What the fuck?" Mark says, and Wayne has stopped eating bologna to hear Slim out.

"I'm sayin' I'd rather have my teeth than be able to see, er smell, er hear, hell I'm half deaf already, might as well maintain my chompers." Slim gives a big smile and shows both Mark and Wayne his teeth.

"That makes no fucking sense, Slim," says Mark. "If you were blind you couldn't work."

"You got that shit exactly right, Mark. Then comes the workman's comp. You lose some silly fuckin' teeth, you not only gonna be eatin' through a straw, you ain't getting no workman's comp. You can still bust ass if you ain't got no teeth, but if you blind, well, then you in fat city."

\* \* \*

The dreams occupy every moment that I'm asleep, and now every moment I'm awake. I tell whoever will listen to me about the dream, and no one has any interpretation that satisfies me. I even went to the Dauphin County Public Library to look

at one of those Dream Encyclopedias, but it said I wanted to have sex with my mother. I know that can't be what it's about.

When I lay awake at night I'm afraid to touch my teeth. I'm afraid I no longer know where the dream ends and the day begins. Every morning I expect to have lost my teeth, but every morning when I look in the mirror, there they are. They stare at me. I have stopped taking care of them, stopped brushing and flossing, knowing that they will soon fall out.

I have started to examine other people's teeth, fearing those who are evidently missing them as though they possess a contagious disease. I search for signs of false teeth in people, viewing them as infiltrators of modern, tooth-oriented society. I tape commercials for dentures and Poly-dent, knowing soon that I will need them. I feel the loss of my teeth, even though they still cling to my gums.

The dreams continue. Now they include Slim and Wayne closely examining the empty spaces where my teeth once were. Each of them holding several teeth in their hands offering them to me, but I cannot accept them. Instead I awake and go to work worrying about my teeth.

\* \* \*

Mark begins to grind his teeth incessantly while he works. He grinds them so hard he can hear the friction in his temples. When he listens to other people talk he drowns their voices in the clicks and groans that his teeth make when they smash against

each other. The grinding makes him feel satisfied, like he knows his teeth are there in his mouth where they should be.

He continues to grind his teeth for a week until he feels a tooth loosen. What has he done? Has he sped the process up? Mark decides the only way to keep his teeth in his mouth is to buy a mouth guard.

One day, on his way home from work he stops at Big Sport, and wanders through the aisles until he finds them. He stares at the racks, the colors, and the shapes. All of these will save teeth, he thinks to himself. He takes one off of the shelf, a blue one, and puts it up to his nose. He inhales deep and smells the fresh plastic through the wrapper. He opens the package to get a better whiff, and inhales deeply. He smells the oils, the plastic, the wrapper, and then he puts it into his mouth. The plastic against his teeth feels comforting and safe.

Mark takes the mouth guard home, and follows the instructions on how to mold the mouthpiece to his teeth. He starts a pot of water to boil the plastic piece for several minutes before he sinks his teeth into it. He stops and wonders what it will feel like to have his teeth coated in plastic for the ninety seconds that he must encase them. What if the plastic holds tight to the tooth he has already loosened and pulls it from his skull. The thought alone makes him cringe and throw the plastic mouth guard to the counter. Despite this hesitation, when the water boils he throws it into the pot.

After ninety seconds he pulls the mouthpiece out and shoves it into his mouth. The boiling water burns him momentarily, but soon the warm plastic covers his teeth and they sink into the mouth guard. He presses his teeth together tightly and waits, afraid to pull the plastic out of his mouth. After a few minutes when he is sure the plastic has



cooled, Mark slowly opens his mouth and pulls out the guard. All of his teeth are still in place.

Mark looks at the impressions of his teeth in the plastic. He measures the symmetry, looks at the angles. He looks at his thick back teeth and examines the peaks and valleys of each miniature mountain range. This is what it would look like if I bit another human, he thinks. This would be the mark I would leave. He looks at the small gaps and curves, wondering how many pounds of pressure his jaw could apply. Could he pierce flesh? Could he penetrate steel?

Mark picks the mouth guard back up and shoves it into his moth, biting down hard. He walks to the bathroom and looks into his mirror. He smiles a big blue smile at himself, and walks into his bedroom for another night of dreams.

\* \* \*

I dream that I can't stop biting. I bite everything, as though I can't help myself and I believe I must sample every piece of matter I can find. I'm at home in my dream, and I chomp through the sofa. I'm back in high school chewing on the pretty girls. I'm a child and I eat my bike. I go to work and I snap through I-beams, and plates, and cranes, and blueprints. I see Slim and Wayne, and I snap them both in two. I can't stop.

I see my father in this dream, standing on his own two legs at my welding station. I open my mouth and close my eyes and consume him, gnashing him between my bicuspid, and slowly beginning the digestion process.

In this dream, my teeth are strong. My teeth shine and reflect whatever it is they are about to bite. My mouth is huge, and so are my large reflective teeth. I feel like a python, like I'm able to separate the hinges of my own jaw and wrap my teeth around whatever I please. My teeth feel like they are indestructible, and they are lodged firmly into my jaws.

When I finally stop snapping them, there seems to be nothing left. It seems as though I've bitten through everything in my life. The only thing I seem to be left with are my teeth, reflecting all of the things they have ripped through, and all of the people in my life that I have eaten.

\* \* \*

"Wh ... wh ... whatcha go ... got in yer mouth, th ... th ... there Mark."

Mark spits out his mouth guard and shows it to Wayne. Slim pretends not to notice what is going on. Today Wayne is wearing a red and white striped engineer's hat with blue stars on the brim. The plastic matches the color blue of the stars. Wayne looks at Mark and a huge smile smears across his face.

"T ... tee ... t ..."

"Yeah, Wayne," Mark smiles back, "for my teeth. I got it yesterday at Big Sport. I figured, I was afraid of losing them, why not do something about it?" Wayne keeps smiling and nods several times at Mark, as though Mark has solved a riddle they have both been working on.

“I ain’t never seen nothin’ like that in this here place. Yer father didn’t need one of them pacifiers.” Slim has stopped working and is looking over Mark’s shoulder at the mouth guard.

The foreman calls: “Slim, Mark, yer goin’ to the job site.”

Mark tells Slim to head over and start loading the flat bed, he just has a little more of this weld to finish. Slim looks at Mark as though he is not only disgusted by his new blue mouth guard, but at the fact Mark thinks he can tell him what to do. Mark looks at Wayne, who is jealous of the fact that he and Slim get to leave the inferno, but he must stay. Wayne looks at the ground as they walk away, and kicks at some thin ribbons of steel on the ground. “Sorry, brother,” Mark says, pushing the blue plastic into his mouth, and he drops his hood to finish his weld.

When the weld is finished, Mark lifts his hood and peels the leather sleeves from his arms. He is happy to have found relief from the heat, and to be able to drop some of the many layers he wears. Mark walks over and stands by the water fountain and watches Slim load the steel. Two small cranes lift large steel plates, and place them on the flat bed of the diesel truck. When they are finished Mark calls to Slim.

“Hey ... You need my help?” he says and scrunches his brow in the bright sun. Slim shakes his head no, and begins lashing down the plates with rope and a heavy steel winch. What happens next doesn’t surprise Mark. It is as though he has seen this series of events a thousand times before. Slim pushes the handle of the winch high and pulls down with all his might, squeezing the plates to the bed and pulling the rope tighter and tighter with every click. When the handle gets past his chest, Slim puts all of his weight on top of it, and presses it to the ground between his legs. Mark watches as Slim loses

his grip on the handle, and the pressure shoots the steel rod straight upwards. In what seems like a second, the handle is buried in Slim's mouth. He steps back from the winch, looking shocked and almost laughing at the chances of this happening, like he has just walked into a surprise party. He then crumbles to the gravel of the steel mill parking lot.

No one says anything, but the foreman, Mark, and several others run toward Slim. When they get there they realize an ambulance must be called. The steel handle has swung up and hit Slim square in the mouth. Teeth and blood are scattered over an eight-foot radius. Some of his front teeth have been imbedded in what is left of his lips, sticking out at strange angles. Slim is delirious and attempts over and over to talk to Mark. Mark thinks he is saying, "Workman's comp," but it comes out as blood and teeth and jawbone chunks, all over his shirt. By this time Wayne has also arrived by Slim's side, and Slim gives him a toothless smile. Wayne looks at Mark, and Mark expects him to say, "Serves him right," or "I have been waiting for this moment," but Wayne will not speak. Wayne will not attempt to force out a stuttered retort to Slim. Instead he just smiles and takes Slim's hand, waiting with Mark for the ambulance to come and take him away from the mill.

Soon the rest of the worker's attentions have left Slim, and work resumes. No one seems to mind the fact that Slim's face was just smashed by a winch handle, and everyone seems to be more interested in the lunch truck that has recently arrived. Mark stays by Slim's side, collecting whatever teeth he can find amongst the gravel and sliding them into Slim's shirt pocket. "You'll need these," he says through the mouth guard, and Slim mumbles something back. By the time he is loaded into the back of the ambulance, Slim is barely conscious. Mark watches as the paramedics slam the door and start the

siren, throwing gravel as they pull out of the lot. Mark pushes his teeth deeply into the grooves of his mouth guard and thinks of the day his father was taken from the mill in an ambulance. Now he watches Slim be taken away in the same manner, as though it is the only way to escape from the mill.

Mark turns around. The crowd has left the lunch truck, and all of the workers sit on steel drums eating their lunches, watching Slim go away. They eat bologna on wheat, tuna on white, ham and swiss, BLT's, bags of chips, pickled eggs. They eat the same thing they eat every day, and the same thing that they will eat forever.

## **You are Alfred Stone**

### 1.

Alfred Stone was born in 1908 in Chicago exactly three weeks after the Chicago Cubs won what the city believed would be the first of many World Series. Today he, with the rest of Chicago, waits for their next victory. Like millions within the great state of Illinois he waits patiently for the return of the title World Champions, more and more sure each year that this is the year; this is the year the Chicago Cubs will win.

I first heard Alfred's story through his grandson Luke. Luke, like Alfred, believed that the universe began and ended in Wrigley Field. He also believed like his grandfather that the Cubs' losing ways were not only a curse on the city of Chicago, but more specifically on the Stone family. Before I met Alfred, Luke had told me not to talk to him about the infamous Cubbies curse. The last time anyone outside the family brought up the Cubs, Alfred in his weakened state lost the ability to speak and began to tremble in what Luke described as seizures. Though at the time I found this hard to believe, knowing what I know now, I am surprised this was the extent of his reaction.

It seemed that Alfred's father in his youth blamed the Cubs' losing ways on his son's birth, and never let him hear the end of it. Imagine your father watching a ball game and with every mistake cursing your existence.

"They were winnin' before you were born, Freddy," he would shout. Or, "Goddammit Fred, who the hell brings in a rookie reliever in game five of the

playoffs!?!” I can only guess what Alfred’s youth must have been like, full of fly balls that resulted in belt lashings, and errors that meant black eyes. I can imagine nothing that would motivate a fan to cheer for his team and be passionate about their success more than punishment for their losses and mistakes.

Sometimes I imagined Alfred listening to the old Cubs games on the radio in his room. *It’s a beautiful day here at Wrigley as the Cubs take the field!* I imagine him praying for a victory, willing fly balls over the wall in center field, and hanging on every word of the play-by-play. *That’s a long fly ball headed for the ivy!* And then, the inevitable moment of loss. *And another Cubs defeat. Well Harry, it is never too soon to start thinking about next year.* Shouts come from the room below where his father listens to the same game. The sound of the crowd in the background on the radio as the door kicks open and his father enters, pulling his belt from his waist. *Join us again for another Cubs Baseball broadcast! Remember kids, drink your Ovaltine!*

Years later, after Alfred had spent time in the military, he received word of the death of his father, and returned to the states to his aging mother. Upon his arrival he promptly moved his mother and himself out of Chicago, out of the state of Illinois, and into the backwoods of northern Vermont, far away from the Cubs. Despite this, the team continued to lose. Although he would never admit that he did it to prove his father wrong, or even to distance himself from the team, I believe that in some way he thought that he could break the curse by leaving the city and the Cubs behind. He believed that by moving far away from Wrigley, the next year would be the year. Now they could win the World Series.

They didn't. Instead they teased him, coming close in 1945, and steadily competing and losing in the playoffs for the years that followed. The critics replaced the cursing voice of his father. "They're cursed!" they would say. "The Cubs will never win another World Series!" Alfred only hoped that they would not believe what his father believed: they weren't cursed, Alfred was. No matter what combinations of players or coaches they had, no matter where they played or what the circumstances, they would lose. They wouldn't lose because they were bad, but because Alfred was alive.

I finally met Alfred the day Luke and I graduated from college. By the time I met him he was ninety-two, and confined to a wheelchair. His hair had gone white, and he looked pressed and taken care of. He looked comfortable, and like he was enjoying himself. Up until then he was the stuff of legend to me. Luke believed as his great-grandfather believed: that the curse began with Alfred. He would tell me stories about growing up watching Cubs games with his family and their reactions to the continual losses.

His father, Alfred's son, became a fan of the Cubs to give his father a shoulder to share his burden. In doing this he became obsessed with the existence of the curse, devoting all of his time to disprove it as it ate away at his father. Always the optimist, every year he would tell Alfred why it was that this was the year they would win it all. After years of optimism and positive thinking he had nothing to show for these sunny predictions.

Alfred's wife, Alice Stone, refused to watch the Cubs. Instead she knit furiously through the games in another room with earmuffs on, so as not to hear Alfred's cursing and screaming. She tried when she first met Alfred to sit through the games with him,



but by the seventh inning she would inevitably be crying. To this day, Luke claims that any time she hears “Take Me Out to the Ball Game” she breaks into tears.

Luke watched the games with the same fervor that his father and grandfather did. Throwing bottles at the television, cursing the players, the fans, the ownership, the city, Luke picked up where other male members of the Stone family had left off. He once told me that he actually believed that the losing ways were in fact Alfred’s fault.

“I don’t know how or why, man, but you can’t deny history,” he would say to me, and you couldn’t. Baseball for the Stone family became a ritual sacrifice. With every loss, Alfred’s health worsened and a part of their family disintegrated. They waited as a family for victory, but they would not get it. Instead, each year their suspicions that Alfred was the cause of the curse grew, until it became undeniable. Despite logic, despite reason, they began to believe Alfred’s father: they were winning before Freddy.

The day Luke and I graduated from college we were living together in a small house in Geneva, New York. Our families were there to celebrate with us, and the guest of honor was ninety-two year old Alfred. Fortunately, I thought the Cubs were playing that day. After the ceremony, our families returned to our house to barbecue and watch baseball. Luke’s mother cautiously pushed Alfred into our living room, placed him far away from the television so that he could not destroy it, and turned on the game. Despite the fact that Alfred was ninety-two and had nearly completely lost the ability to walk, he still was capable of destroying a television, as Luke’s father had found out the hard way. One evening he had come home to find three of the four legs of Alfred’s walker jammed through the screen of his thirty-two inch television, with Alfred sitting quietly observing his work. His only justification for this violent action was two words: “They lost.”

As my family grilled burgers and talked about my future plans, one by one the Stones moved indoors as the innings grew late in the Cubs game. My father, an avid Phillies fan, was even surprised by the fervor with which this family watched baseball.

“They love that team, huh?” he said to me.

“Trust me, don’t ask.”

“But don’t they all live in Vermont?” As soon as he had said these words, a plate filled with hot dogs, potato salad, and steamed vegetables came whizzing through the side window of my house, smashing into the grill and shattering at my father’s feet.

“Yeah, but they love the Cubs.” But did they? I often wondered if they watched this team because they loved them, or because they hated them with a greater passion than I could ever understand. I would never get an answer to this question, mostly because I was afraid to ask it, but I knew in my heart that only love could make a man throw away perfectly good potato salad.

## 2.

Two years after I had met Alfred, the Cubs were making a run at the World Series. Their curse had become Americana. They were the “lovable losers.” They were the team you loved to hate. Finally, they seemed poised once again to play for the title. I remember after the Phillies were out of the playoffs, I called Luke to offer my support.

“So I guess I’m a Cubs fan for the rest of the playoffs,” I said.

“Yeah, well you better be. I’m not sure how much more of this my grandfather can take. He actually told me the other day he hopes that they win so that he can die peacefully. I gotta say, it freaked me out a bit.”

I had known Alfred’s health had gotten progressively worse since I had last seen him, and that Luke’s family had hired a live-in nurse to take care of him. After the first two weeks of the baseball season she refused to work while the Cubs were playing. “For my own safety,” she had said.

“I’m starting to think he’s just hanging on to see if they do it this year.” Luke never spoke the words ‘World Series’ for fear it may further the curse. He always used phrases like ‘do it,’ and ‘take it all.’

“That’s a little scary. I mean, struggling to stay alive to see if your team wins? I hate to say it, but what if they lose? ... Hello? ... Luker? Are you there?” He had hung up on me. I thought it best if I didn’t call again until after the playoffs.

Instead I watched the playoffs with Alfred’s passion. I watched the Cubs win in the first round, and then dominate in the National League Championship Series. It seemed to me as though this was it.

I imagined the Stone family around Alfred’s bed watching the games. I imagined Luke and his father smiling as they dominated. This year they were the whole package, the Stones would say: dominant pitching, powerful hitting, tight defense. This was it. I imagined them all there, sitting with Alfred. His smile growing larger on his face with every out, each one getting them closer to the Series, and Alfred closer to peace. I imagined all of the furniture in one piece, all of the windows a solid pane of glass, the television working properly. I imagined what Alfred’s father would have said. *Well boy,*

*maybe you ain't that cursed after all.* I imagined the Stones, all smiling, watching their Cubs.

But they must have known. They must have known like I knew, like the rest of the world knew. Somehow they would find a way to lose. They would find a way to keep Alfred alive, and waiting.

### 3.

*And the Cubs are only five outs away from the World Series. They haven't been this close in a long time, and I would imagine that there are a lot of anxious Cubs fans out there. Here's the two – two pitch ... and it's a long fly ball hit by Alex Gonzalez deep down the left field line, looks like Alou will be able to make a play on this...*

Where Luke and Alfred and their family were at this exact moment I don't know. I do know where Moises Alou was. He was standing in foul territory on the left side of Wrigley Field watching what would have been the second out of the eighth inning fall directly toward his glove. I know where I was. I was watching the game in a bar in Oregon, rooting for the Cubs like almost every other American. Most importantly, I know where Steve Bartman was. He was sitting next to the wall in left field foul territory, directly above Moises Alou with his arms outstretched.

*It looks like Alou will make this catch and ... what the ... it looks like a fan interfered with the ball! Alou is furious! He's jumping up and down and slapping his glove on his leg and pointing at the fan. The umpire hasn't signaled fan interference and*

*it doesn't look like he will! And we're in Wrigley! It looks like a Cubs fan interfered with that! Let's see if we can get a replay ...*

I watched the replay in disbelief. The fan in question, Steve Bartman, reached out into the field of play and literally stole the ball from Alou. While all of the other fans around him backed off, Bartman saw an opportunity. He stretched his arms out and pulled not only a ball into the stands, but with it he pulled all of the Cubs' chances. Afterwards he sat quietly, perhaps unaware that nearly every television in America had his face on it.

I remember thinking how average Bartman looked, how he looked like everyone else. Black sweatshirt, green turtleneck, and jeans. On his head he wore a Cubs hat and glasses, and also a pair of headphones. I often wondered when it sank in just what he had done. What was he listening to on those headphones? One could only guess that it was the play-by-play for the very game that he had just ruined for Cubs fans everywhere, on which no doubt the announcer was crucifying him. What could he have been thinking at that moment when the security guards came to escort him from the stadium?

After Bartman's catch in left field it was pretty much over. The Cubs fell apart. They lost to the Marlins, who were the eventual World Series winners that year, and their season ended. Most people never saw Bartman again, but the rumors swirled around Chicago. Some said that when the security guards escorted him out, he was immediately put to death at Wrigley Field. Some said that he was still in the stadium hiding for the next several months, inside some storeroom somewhere too ashamed to show his face. Others said he went into the witness relocation program, and was living under an

assumed identity somewhere in the United States. I called Luke three weeks after Bartman had destroyed his family.

“Hey, man, I’m really sorry. That might have been the worst thing I’ve ever seen in my life,” I said, trying my best to be as sympathetic as possible.

“You don’t gotta tell me,” he said. “This has been the worst few weeks of my life. My dad won’t eat, my grandma cries all day, I mean what the hell? What was that guy thinking?”

“I don’t know, man,” I said, and I didn’t.

“It was in Wrigley! Our home field! We were five outs away!”

“I know,” I said. I could hear Luke’s voice cracking like he was holding back tears. His tone wavered and it sounded like he was having trouble catching his breath. “How’s Alfred?” I asked, knowing this wouldn’t be good.

“He’s still alive, but he’s lost it. He sees Steve Bartman everywhere. He even claims that he thinks he moved into the house next to ours. I don’t know what we’re gonna do with him. My dad is talking about putting him into a home, but I wonder how much time he has left. He won’t even leave his room anymore. He just sits in there and looks out the window. The only thing he talks to me about is how he saw Bartman raking the leaves outside his house yesterday, or he saw Bartman washing his car last Tuesday. He’s really starting to go, man.”

“Well, I guess this is the part when I say, ‘There’s always next year,’ huh?”

“Maybe not for my grandfather.”

I imagined Luke as he hung up the phone and went to check on his grandfather. I could see him as he walked down to the guest bedroom and knocked quietly on Alfred's door. He heard nothing. Fearing the worst he opened the door a crack, and peeked inside. There on the bed sat Alfred. There he would be, staring out the window through a pair of binoculars. In my mind I could see the end of Alfred. I could see seasons of loss, criticism. I could see years of torment

"Gramps, what are ya doin'?" Luke said. He received no response. He walked up to the window and looked out. There, on their neighbor's lawn he saw a man raking leaves wearing a black sweatshirt, and a Cubs hat. He looked at his grandfather, and then back out the window. "That can't be who you think it is, Gramps. There is no way he could be here. Besides, if it were him do you think he would still be wearing a Cubs hat?" His grandfather looked up from his binoculars with tired eyes, and said nothing to Luke. "I'll prove it to you that it ain't him," and Luke walked out.

He walked down the stairs to the front door and outside into the cool fall air. The first signs of snowfall were showing in Vermont, and it was cold even for the fall in New England. He walked down their driveway to the neighbor's house and around back to where his grandfather claimed to have seen Steve Bartman.

Once there, he stopped and looked at the man raking leaves. He was small, like a child. He raked the leaves harshly, pulling up grass and throwing pebbles at his shins. Luke slowly walked in his direction, and began to try to get his attention.

"Hey, man," he said, but he got no response. As Luke got closer he noticed that the raker wore headphones, so he was unable to hear his calls. Luke raised his voice.

“Hey! Buddy!” he shouted. By now Luke was only a few feet from him, and when the man raking leaves looked up and saw him he jumped a few feet back with surprise.

When the man regained his composure, he looked up from his work, taking off his hat and headphones.

“What can I do for you, friend?” With the sweater and the hat, if Luke didn’t know any better, he would have said for sure this was Bartman.

“Look, I know this sounds strange, but my grandfather is ill, and he seems to think that you are someone that you are not. See him up there?” Luke pointed to the window in which Alfred’s face shielded by binoculars appeared.

“Well, who does he think I am?”

“I don’t know how to say this, but are you a Cubs fan? I saw your hat, did you watch the games?” Luke began to wonder why he had taken off his hat when he approached.

“Yeah, I watched a few.”

“Well, my grandfather seems to think that you are that guy who reached over the wall and caught that ball in game seven. I know it sounds crazy, but if you could just come over and prove to him that you aren’t Steve Bartman, well that would really make an old man happy.”

“I can’t do that,” the man raking leaves said.

“Why is that?”

“Well, because you see that man up there?” He pointed to a second story window in his own house, where a man stood with binoculars watching them. “He’s not gonna let me leave the property.”



In that second Luke knew. This was him. This was the man who had ruined the Cubs. This was the man who was keeping his grandfather from a peaceful death. All at once he felt rage build inside him. His fists clenched. His teeth began to grind and he inched closer to Bartman. As soon as he took his first step, he saw two men come around the side of the house, both with earpieces and sunglasses.

“Look, I’m sorry, if that helps. I’m going to have to insist that you don’t tell anyone what you saw here today. I really don’t want to have to move again. This is the third place that I have lived since Chicago, and I’m really tired of moving.” Bartman looked tired. Luke could see it in his eyes. He looked tired and afraid.

“I’ll make you a deal, Bartman. You come say hello to my grandfather, and not a word of this will be spoken to anyone. You can live peacefully next to my family. You don’t, and ESPN will be here within the hour.” Luke looked up at the two men who continued to walk towards them.

“Deal.” Bartman walked over to cut the two men off, and said something to them. Afterwards he handed one of them his hat and headphones, and followed Luke over to his house to see Alfred. By the time they had reached his room, Alfred already knew his suspicions had proven true.

Bartman and Luke stood at the foot of Alfred’s bed, looking at the man who represented ninety-five years of lost baseball games. Alfred looked the two of them over, and motioned for Bartman to come closer. Bartman looked at Luke anxiously.

“Its okay, man. He’s ninety-five, he ain’t gonna bite you.” Luke shook his head and motioned for Bartman to get closer to Alfred. When Bartman was close enough, Alfred grabbed his black sweatshirt and pulled Bartman’s ear to his mouth. At first

Bartman struggled, and even let out a little yelp, but then he relaxed, and listened to what Alfred was saying. Luke couldn't hear what Alfred had said, but he could see that it took a lot of energy. Luke imagined all of the things his grandfather could have said. He imagined what a man that had waited his whole life to be let down would say to the face of his disappointment. He imagined his grandfather as a younger man, angry and red-faced, grabbing Bartman by the scruff of the neck and tossing him out his bedroom window. He imagined his grandfather unable to speak with anger.

When Alfred finally released his grip on Bartman, he closed his eyes and lay motionless. Bartman backed away, and the heart monitor around Alfred's neck rung a steady beep.

At this moment, the nurse, Luke's father, and his grandmother came bursting into the room as Bartman and Luke were hurried out. The rest of the Stones didn't even notice their guest, and moved right past him to get to the silent and still Alfred. When they were both outside again, Luke grabbed Bartman's arm and stopped him.

"What did he say to you?" Luke said. Bartman looked at his feet.

"I don't really understand it. I don't know if he was making sense."

"I need to know what it was, Steve."

"He said, 'They're your team now, your burden.' Then he said something like, 'Drink your Ovaltine, you bastard?'"

Bartman smiled and put his hand on Luke's shoulder. Luke wasn't sure what to make of his grandfather's last words, other than the fact that they were his own, and didn't have to make sense. Luke wondered whether or not his grandfather had actually said these words, but in the end it didn't matter.

After saying good-bye to Bartman, and ensuring him that he would keep his end of the deal, Luke turned around and walked back to the front door of his house. Inside he heard his father's voice, and his grandmother's cries. He looked back outside, and slowly closed the door, leaving Steve Bartman, the Chicago Cubs, the curse, the World Series, and Wrigley Field outside in the cold Vermont air.

## 5.

Maybe that wasn't how it happened. Maybe I was just trying to make things easier for me to understand at the time. Maybe when I hung up the phone with Luke, he went to his grandfather's side and sat with him for his last few breaths quietly, without mention of Bartman or the Cubs. Maybe Steve Bartman wasn't the Stone's new neighbor. Maybe Alfred's life ended with the burden of the Cubs' losing ways heavy on his heart. I like to think he did not.

Bartman may never really be found, or he may be living in rural Vermont under the watchful eye of the federal government, his protection falling somewhere between national security and welfare on their priority list. Maybe he never existed. Maybe he was planted there, in that seat, specifically to close the final chapter on Alfred's long life. Maybe he was a terrorist, placed there to destroy American morale by foiling the lovable losers' chances at ending their eternal curse, his Cubs hat and glasses nothing more than a clever disguise.

The year Alfred died changed the way not only I watched baseball, but the way the world watched baseball. There were others like Alfred. There were others in

Chicago who believed that it was not the Cubs that were cursed – they believed that it was *they* who were cursed. There were other families who grieved together, but none like the Stones.

No matter what happened to Luke and Alfred after that phone call ended, I know what happened to me: I became a Cubs fan. Like many others in the country, the Cubs wooed me that year. Maybe it was the curse, or Bartman, or the pageantry of the media coverage, but I don't think so. I think it was Alfred. I felt myself sharing the weight of the burden of losing with Alfred. I felt the snap of his father's belt, the years passing by without success, the criticism, and the newspapers. I became Alfred, young and full of hope for every new season, sitting and listening to the games on the radio, knowing their losing results before the final pitch.

After Alfred's death, I watched baseball differently. In the years that followed I opened the sports pages and ripped ahead to the Cubs' box score from the previous day, examining the balls and strikes, counting the errors and hits for each player. The mosaic of at-bats, runs and RBIs pulled me to them in their tiny newsprint. The minuscule numbers that so many people passed by I would scour over, reliving the game. I followed the Cubs with a passion, complaining about management and screaming at the television. I grabbed and pulled at my hair when they lost, and laughed and drank beers when they won. I was a Cubs fan. I was Alfred Stone.

Some time after Alfred's death, right before the beginning of the next season, Chicago looked to cleanse itself. With each spring, a new season begins. The "next year" that Cubs fans so crave to be their saving grace always arrives with the budding leaves on the trees. For the city of Chicago there could not be a new season this year

while the ball that Bartman caught still existed. A small bar in Chicago purchased the ball at auction and placed it in a plastic cage, awaiting its execution like a prisoner on death row. After much pageantry and publicity, they filled the ball with explosives and destroyed it on television for the entire world to see. The fire from the explosion smashed the twine and leather from the ball against the glass, turning the ball that brought so many Cubs fans to their knees into string and dust.

The Cubs may never win. The curse might live forever. Luke may spend his life waiting for their chance like his grandfather did, but he won't be alone. I'll be watching, knowing that the curse exists, and that Steve Bartman is out there somewhere, praying for a Cubs win.

## **Son of Wonder Woman**

### *1.*

#### *I Know You Wonder Woman*

I know you, Wonder Woman. I know you're a hero at your own expense. Though you try to hide behind your secret identity as Alice Cecilski, wife, mother, daughter, artist, crimefighter, welder, sister, teacher, healer, sculptor, I know who you are. You can pretend all you want, but I'm not fooled.

I've always known. Even when I was in the womb I was surrounded with the sense that this was no ordinary organ, this was a super-womb. Like Superman plummeting to Earth inside a meteor, I arrived with a crash, not in a hay field in Indiana, but in Lancaster Community General Hospital in Pennsylvania. Before I opened my eyes, before I screamed that first piercing cry of life and spewed the contents of the super-womb across soiled hospital scrubs, I knew. I knew it was you.

The comics are wrong, as they usually are. There are no super-villains, and contrary to popular belief, Wonder Woman, my mother, is not now, will never, and never has had any sexual relations with Superman. They have a strictly platonic relationship. All rumors anyone may have heard were created in the tabloids and there are lawsuits pending.

My father is a Superman in his own right, especially to have put up with 'The Big W.' Even more specifically, he is a man-of-steel.

My parents met in my father's steel mill on a partly sunny day. My father, in his glorious, innocent, accident-prone ignorance was standing under a crane full of I-beams, when one of them fell nearly thirty feet, pinning his legs to the ground. Near death, the last thing he can remember seeing, as he always tells me, "was an angel of mercy, in a red-blue and gold leotard, wearing a tiara of gold and holding a glowing lariat." Wonder Woman saved my dad, her future husband, Harry Cecilski, that day, and although his prosthetic legs are made of titanium alloy, I know he's a man-of-steel.

So the romance began, as did the daughters. I know you, Wonder Woman, and I know this was all you wanted. Wonder Girls galore. Wonder Girls of all ages, surrounding you, learning from you, trying on your tiara, becoming everything you ever wanted them to be. My sisters were born in two-year increments, each appearing like the previous one, clothed in leotards with long dark hair, not a cry from their mouth. My father cried as he became more and more outnumbered, the odds stacking against him with every additional Wonder Girl. And how you laughed, knowing he would love them all just as he loved you, totally and unconditionally. For ten years you assembled this armada of Amazons, each one more precious than the last. Then, a cloud formed over the house, and you knew. *This one was a boy.*

I know you, Wonder Woman, but I'll never know how you felt that cloudy day. If only I could have seen the look on your face when out of the blue, you knew. You knew this one was different, this one wasn't like the last. It must've hit you like a foul odor, like decomposition wafting into your home amongst your daughters. A disease. The thought taking over your body and affecting you, scaring you. The resolution you must've come to, to treat this one like the five daughters that had come before him, to

raise him like a son. How would this be done? Your perfect army soiled by a male child, a male heir to the man-of-steel. I know you, Wonder Woman, and now I know that you loved me like you did your daughters. You loved me like a son. You made me who I've become: The Son of Wonder Woman.

## 2.

### *Earl*

I couldn't tell you what I wanted to be named, after all I hadn't been born yet and even if I had been, I would have been incapable of speech. So you decided for me. You and my father defined my personality, my expectations, and my future with a single word that would follow me through thick and thin, sickness and health, until death when it would be etched upon my headstone and become a symbol of the life I had led. Forever my life would be entwined in this single word, and I had no decision in what that world would be. So of course no matter what you chose, I would despise your decision, and therefore you, for the curse that would inevitably lie upon me.

You could have named me anything. Something out of the Bible: Mark, Peter, Matthew, or Abraham. You could have added expectations, and named me Adam, the first man. A name of power. Or even Cain, or Abel. Predator or prey.

You didn't name me John or Paul or George or Ringo. You didn't name me Jerry, or Garcia. Not William or McKinnley. Not Howard or Taft. Definitely not



Franklin or Dealanor or Roosevelt. The expectation of a life in politics would have ruined me from birth.

I wouldn't be a super-hero like my mother, so of course you didn't name me anything like Aquaman, Spiderman, The Hulk, or God forbid, The Silver Surfer. I would never be a villain, so they surely couldn't name me Dr. Doom, Lex Luther, or Penguin. I wouldn't be a sidekick, so Robin was eliminated.

I would spend my life wondering what a life with a different name would be like. Would I be richer, poorer? Would Sally Reber have kissed me when I was twelve if I would have been named Brock or Chip like the men from the soap operas? Would I be more mysterious with a name like Antonio? I would never know, but I would dream of my many lives as Mick and Clinton, Aquaman and Moses, Fernando and The Joker. I would dream of these lives and in a single day, play rock and roll while saving a mother and her child from a falling boulder while parting the Red Sea and serving as the President of the United States of America, all the time making women faint and scream simply by being in their presence. I would live all of these lives, yet have only one name, one truly given name passed down to me by you, Wonder Woman herself, and that name would be Earl. Earl Cecilski.

### 3.

#### *Dinner Party with the Justice League*

When Wonder Woman had a dinner party, all of the Justice League and their spouses were invited to attend. My sisters and I were always banished to the basement,

but inevitably, all of the super-heroes would want to see how pretty all of my sisters looked with their long black hair and matching outfits, each one a slightly smaller version of the oldest. I hated the dinner parties with the Justice League. Partially because of my sisters harassing me all night and getting all of the attention, partially because the house was always such a mess after them, but mostly I hated the preparations.

Dinner parties at the Wonder Woman household were quite an event. What with Superman flying down from Metropolis, and Batman and Robin coming all the way from Gotham, the entire process was truly draining on Wonder Woman, and quite a logistical nightmare. Needless to say, no crime was being fought on the night of her parties. The pre-party ritual consisted of Wonder Woman spending the entire previous week planning her every action for every day leading up to the party, and employing all of her daughters and me to do the leg work.

Once when I was about thirteen, she threw a party for Captain Marvel's retirement. He was moving to Vietnam to do work with the Peace Corps in a few weeks, and Wonder Woman thought it would be a nice going away party for him. It seemed that even in retirement super-heroes needed to be actively being philanthropic. As always, Wonder Woman decided to call the Justice League and have them all come to celebrate before his departure. She used the week leading up to the party to plan and execute the party.

On Monday she planned the theme. For this party, the theme would be origami; several small origami creatures, which could be folded by her young Wonder Girls, would surround each place setting. She could make small talk during the party by

exposing the secrets of origami folding which she would have to research, and spend at least one afternoon in the library.

On Tuesday she planned the menu. The menu must be related to the theme, and thus this party's menu would be Asian. Seared Ahi tuna, sushi and sashimi with a sesame peanut sauce for appetizers, a Thai salad, and an extensive series of courses and desserts to follow. Of course she would have to account for Aquaman's lactose intolerance, and Iceman's recent experiment with being vegan. Of course Spiderman didn't eat red meat, and Superman would only eat red meat, and all of this had to be considered.

On Wednesday we cleaned the house. This cleaning became a team effort among the entire family. I'd usually be required to polish the silver and prune the hedges and cut the lawn. Sometimes I would vacuum or dust, and sometimes wash the invisible jet, which was one of my most hated punishments. Just when you would think you were finished Wonder Woman would walk out, look at the jet, and inevitably point out at least three spots you had missed.

For this party, we also had to decorate. We hung streamers and signs, and walked around the whole rest of the week seeing "Congratulations Marv!" in giant silvery letters. Wonder Woman brought in a tank of helium to fill balloons, and had all of the balloons stenciled with origami swans.

On Thursday the final preparations were made. The airstrip was lit up and cleared off, the tables set, the prep work done for the cooking (which Wonder Woman would all do personally) and the animals groomed. Wonder Woman hand-made all of the menus and place cards, putting cute little jokes on some, and tactfully declining to do so with

others. Everything was in its place, and perfect for the Justice League and Captain Marvel.

The night of the party, everything seemed relatively typical. Gossip was spoken about super-villains, and the debate between spandex and lycra outfits raged. Crime fighting tips were traded, and past battles remembered. The party was just like all of the others before it: vast table of super-heroes, all enjoying a semi-formal (though they all wore their outfits) dinner with each other. This party was different for me though. When the inevitable happened, and the girls were called up to see the guests, Wonder Woman brought me along as well.

“Earl, why don’t you come along and say good-bye to Marv as well?” she said, and I of course obeyed so as not to disappoint her. I sheepishly followed my sisters up the stairs from the basement, my head down, groaning the entire way.

The same ritual of praise and amazement for my sisters’ beauty occurred. I stood idly by as they told the Justice League and Captain Marvel how they all were pursuing careers in either crime fighting or medicine, and how they all wanted to be just like their mother. Everyone said, “How wonderful,” and, “Oh, aren’t they cute,” and I think I even remember Captain Marvel crying. Finally, the dinner party came to the end of the line, and they all looked at me.

“What about you, Earl? What do you want to be when you grow up? A super-hero like your mommy?” Superman said in his gently booming voice. I stood silently, staring at all of the masks and capes, and the wine stains on the outfits, and the origami swans strewn about the table, and at Wonder Woman, who looked back at me smiling.

“Go ahead, Earl,” she said softly, “tell Superman what you want to be when you grow up.”

My stare went from her to the eyes of Superman, who stared back at me sternly. I couldn't think of a single thing. My mind was blank. Looking back, I remember wanting to be a fireman, an astronaut, an architect, a welder, my future occupation changed by the day. I couldn't think of any of these. Instead, at that moment, I said the only thing that I could think of.

“I want to be a clown.”

Captain Marvel choked on the wine he was sipping and spit some of it onto the table. My sisters all looked down the line at me, each one scowling harder than the next, burning me with their eyes. Superman tried to hide the laughter, but couldn't hold it and burst with spit and chuckles. Everyone at the table then started laughing at me, and I nearly began to cry. I remember wondering why it was that I had chosen a clown as my answer. Maybe it was all of those bright outfits in front of me at that moment. Maybe it was because at that moment I felt like a clown next to my wonder-sisters.

Amidst the laughter and frowning faces, I remember seeing Wonder Woman staring back at me. She rose from her chair and walked over to me, wrapping her arms around me as I fought back the tears. She pulled away and looked right into my eyes.

“I'm sure you'll be the best clown ever, Earl,” she said, and everyone stopped laughing. She hugged me again and rose to go back to her spot at the head of the table. Superman blushed, Captain Marvel wiped the wine from his chest, and all of my sisters went back to smiling with their noses in the air. A feeling of joy and comfort overcame me. My mom had made Superman blush for laughing at me! I remember the power I

felt, like somehow I had defeated the Justice League with the help of Wonder Woman. I would be the best clown ever.

We were dismissed to return to the basement, and as I returned, I actually started to want to be a clown. With my mom on my side, I felt as though I could do anything, even be the greatest red-nosed circus clown of them all. I spent the rest of the night dreaming of squirting flowers and polka dot trousers. I vowed to wake up the next morning and teach myself to juggle. I would start small with balls, and then eventually work my way up to chainsaws.

The party ended like all of the dinner parties with the Justice League did. Everyone hugged and vowed to call more often. Everyone wished Captain Marvel a safe journey and told him to write them. Most importantly my sisters and I were left with a mess to clean up, but I didn't care. I spent the whole night with a cherry tomato on my nose, telling knock-knock jokes to my sisters while we cleaned. Wonder Woman laughed at everyone, and my sisters never whined or complained about it. For that night it was like I was a super-hero. I was invincible, a super clown!

In a few days my dreams of a life in the circus were gone, replaced by dreams of being a cowboy or a football player or a welder. I don't remember now. I do remember Wonder Woman coming to my rescue, and saving me. I remember her making me feel like a super hero at a dinner party with the Justice League.

## Foodmaster

### Part I

#### 1.

One morning, Aldous Fortney reads in the newspaper that a supermarket has burned to the ground. He is ecstatic. He knows that the destruction of this mega-market means that his friend Eric Platt has a future. He knows this fire means that Platt's Fresh Fish and Seafood will continue to stay open and provide a job not only for his friend, but also his younger brother, Thomas.

Aldous reads the article carefully, examining each sentence, savoring each word. When he reads in the last paragraph, "Construction has been postponed indefinitely," he smiles slyly and sips his coffee.

Aldous puts down his cup and pulls his untrimmed fingernails through his hair. He is self-conscious about his hair turning a premature gray, so he looks up from the article and at the strands that have come out in his hand. He feels like his age does not balance with his mind, and though he may be nearly thirty, he feels nearly sixty.

Aldous still carries the look of a child about him. He is a teacher and a writer, however, he deems himself miserable at both. This morning he is preparing to leave to teach at the university, but this article has slowed his departure. As his attention turns

back to it, he brushes his fingers gently together, sending the strands of hair at his fingertips tumbling to the floor.

He places this hand in his pocket, taking inventory of its contents. He feels the rough faces of coins, the smooth plastic of a lighter. He feels the pen his mother gave him that has spent most of its existence without ink. He feels the keys to his home, his office, his car, and the key to Kline Village Farmers' Market, where Platt's Fresh Fish and Seafood does its business.

Aldous rubs his fingers against the key to feel the sharpness of its grooves, feeling the edges pull at his fingerprints. He thinks of Eric standing behind the stand with his brother Thomas, smiling at the demise of the giant Foodmaster. He remembers the day he left the market, and how he had tried to give Eric back the key. Eric only laughed at him, and told him to keep it, saying, "You'll never know when you'll be back, man." That day, Aldous heard this statement as a curse. He had worked for years to be out of his hometown, studying and working for Eric to get together enough money to leave. He had felt like these keys were a leash that someday might snap him back into the cage of his childhood. Now, he liked the feeling of always having the key. It reminded him of Eric, his friend, and Thomas, his brother.

Aldous remembers the first time he met Eric Platt. It was the first time he had ever entered Kline Village as a young boy. He would go on Saturdays with his mother and father, before his father's death, when things from his child's eyes seemed flawless, and each morning he awoke with a passion for life that would dwindle with adolescence. His brother would be with them too, a newborn, helpless and innocent, cooing at the meat and vegetables and fish, but it wasn't these things that he remembered clearly. These



were things that he came to know through routine and repetition. The market was a ritual. This same pattern of his family walked through the aisles of Kline Village, until it there was only three of them, and then two.

What Aldous did remember were the sounds, the smells, the tastes. He remembers the bakers handing him and his brother slimy glazed doughnuts, the icing dripping from their hands and then their faces. He remembers the smell of flowers at the produce stand, and the sweet juice of honeydew. He remembers the low rustle of families buying food together, children buying groceries for their parents, and the lonely buying meat for themselves to cook in single portions. He remembers the blue-haired ladies with their baskets shopping in swarms, he remembers the homeless with their shopping carts stolen from the big grocery stores standing outside the market, and dashing in when they had enough money to buy corn, or chicken, but not both. He remembers his parents stopping between stands to talk and gossip with their neighbors, their local police, their ministers, their cousins. He remembers the market, and he remembers Eric Platt, the fish man.

Aldous and his brother met Eric when Aldous was ten, and Thomas was three. Aldous loved the fish stand the most of all the places in the market. He remembers that first day he saw the bulging eyes of the salmon and trout pushing through the case at him. He remembers Eric pulling one of the big fish from the case and walking into the aisle with a finger slipped under one of its gills, the fish seemingly dangling in the air. Aldous remembers touching it gently and pulling his hand back fast, then running to his father's side. For years Aldous would come back to the market and beg Eric to take the fish out

of the case, but he rarely would. Instead, he would smile and say, “Maybe we’ll get you back here cleanin’ these guys someday.”

Aldous stands in his kitchen, lost in his past and in his memories. While he reads and rereads the article from the paper, he doesn’t hear his phone ring until the answering machine picks up. He quickly reaches for the phone when he hears Eric’s voice.

When Aldous answers the phone, he doesn’t think Eric sounds as happy as he should. Instead Eric seems sad and reserved, which are two things Aldous would never expect from the man who expressed outrage and cried conspiracy at a one cent per pound increase on the wholesale price of Sea Trout.

When he hangs the phone up, he sees the message light blink on his answering machine. He presses play and listens to the same conversation he just had with Eric fumbling out of the machine in robotic, mechanical tones. When the voices finish, he plays it again, and again, until he finds himself writing down the dialogue in a notebook that sits next to his phone. It looks like this:

Conversation between Eric Michael Platt, and Aldous William Fortney

Recorded 11-18-02:

Aldous Fortney: Hello?

Eric Platt: Hi, Al.

Aldous Fortney: Let me guess, you prayed and prayed, and God sent a bolt of lightning down to destroy the Foodmaster. No, no wait, aliens landed and fuckin’ zapped the thing. (laughter)

EP: Aldous...

AF: I'm sorry man, I just wanted to call and congratulate you. I mean hell man, you're saved. This is exactly what we prayed would happen. Oh shit, tell me Jeff Hummer's son burnt it down. I always knew that little bastard would go pyro.

EP: Al...

AF: Remember the time that little psycho broke the glass on the front of Jeff's cooler? Man was that a mess. What's even sicker is that Jeff picked the glass out of all those steaks and sold every last one of them. I wonder if anybody died because of that. I guess that's not something you suspect a butcher of. You know, putting glass in steaks to kill his customers. It isn't so good for business. (laughing)

EP: Al, will you shut the hell up?

AF: What's up, Platt?

EP: It's yer fuckin' brother, man.

AF: What about him? He didn't unplug the freezer again? Man I told that little shitball if he fuckin'...

EP: Aldous, no. Just shut up a second. It's your brother who started the fire.

AF: Jesus...

EP: I know. He's hurt pretty bad. Your mom's the only one who's seen him, and she ain't back from the hospital yet. The cops are all over me like it's a fuckin' conspiracy. Apparently dumb ass Jeff told them I was talking about burning the place down, but I was just fuckin' around. I would never do that shit.

AF: (sigh)

EP: You know me Al, you know I had nothing to do with this. I don't know about Tommy. He must've just snapped I guess.

AF: Snapped?

EP: I don't know. Maybe you should come out here.

AF: I guess I should. (sigh) Fuck. (silence) I'll call you when I get there.

EP: Alright.

(end of conversation)

Aldous feels detached from his own words and from Eric as he writes down the dialogue, including pauses, sighs, and laughter. He feels the shock of the substance of this conversation, but not the involvement. It is someone else's story, not his own, and not his brother's.

How could his brother have done this? Is it possible that the shy boy who did as he was told without question could have done such a thing? Aldous feels sickened by the thought, and feels the need for answers and logic. He feels the pull to make this story work, to make this story make sense. He has to find out how his brother could turn from the boy he had shared so many memories with, the brother with whom he had dealt with the loss of their father and the boy that he had left behind when he went out into the world, into the arsonist that had been in the paper. So he decides what he must do. He must collect the facts.

The facts are simple. They are easy to collect, easy to spot. They come to Aldous in the form of pictures, newspapers, police reports, receipts, and lease agreements, insurance forms, and burnt two-by-fours. The facts are the things that do not waiver in

the telling of a story. They are there like fossils, below the surface of the present. The facts are what Aldous has left to put together the life of his brother, Thomas. But they are not all that he has.

Along with the facts he has his flawed memory, and his imagination. He has what he knows of his brother. He has an image of him as the young, troubled boy in his own shadow, following Aldous wherever he went for what seemed like the majority of his youth. He can see the boy who followed in his own footsteps, even to the same job at the same fish stand. He can see the boy that attached himself to Eric Platt just like he had after they had lost their father. In Thomas, he can see himself.

He can see the facts surrounding his brother, but see past them and see the images and characters that surround them. Years of an avid imagination and a career as a writer have taught him to do this. Aldous can barely see a single photo or object without thinking about its story, its history. When Aldous looks at a picture of his brother when they were young, he can see their mother. She is taking pictures of Thomas and Aldous on Easter morning, her hair long and brown, and to her waist. Aldous can see her raise her Nikon to her face, and rock her head to the side to push her hair from in front of her eyes. He can see his mother point the camera at him and Thomas, Thomas crying, and Aldous, there standing next to him, holding his shoulders square and beaming a bright smile. He can see his mother's smile from behind the lens. Her hair slowly sliding back over her shoulders, hanging down around her big teeth and silvery black camera. He can see all of these things as he looks through the pictures of his youth, but he knows his memories and his imagination have it all wrong.

As a writer, Aldous has learned that memories enjoy betraying a person, and like to do so on a regular basis. They pull at the mind, and make it look like a fool. They lack context and meaning, showing Aldous only snapshots and tidbits of his life, and omitting the emotions, and the feelings of the past. But if he can't trust his own memory, then whose recollection of the past can he trust?

## 2.

Aldous remembers his memories fooling him as he stands still in his kitchen, falling deeper into his mind, and staring at the notebook in front of him. He remembers telling a guy a story in the back of a dirty bar called *The Backyard*. He remembers the bar was built entirely of large cedar logs, but the ceiling looked like his high school with its insulated water stained tiles and fluorescent lights. Aldous used to sit in the back of this place and play pool with pinball junkies that drank cheap beer, and would only shoot with him when they ran out of quarters for the *Star Wars* machine. He remembers telling them a story.

He told the story as he remembered it.

“Chuck was on the wrestling team in my high school back in Pennsylvania. For one match, he was three pounds overweight the day before the weigh in. Instead of biting the bullet and fasting until the time that he had to weigh in, Chuck took laxatives to force the pounds off.” About when he got to this part of the story, one of the pinball junkies spoke up.

“Let me guess. In the middle of his match, he started shitting all over the place. All over the mat, all over himself, all over the guy he was wrestling? Am I close?”

“Yeah, man. That’s exactly what happened. How’d you know that?” Aldous put his beer down and waited for the guy to say he just guessed, but he didn’t.

“Man, my older brother told me that story, like three years ago. He told me that shit happened at a high school down in Ithaca,” the pinball junkie said.

“Well, your brother must’ve heard that story from somebody from my school. That, or there is a laxative addiction rampant among wrestlers.” Aldous tried to laugh it off, but the pinball junkie wouldn’t let it go. He stopped his pool game to focus all of his attention on Aldous.

“Nah, man. I think that story’s an urban legend, or whatever. I bet kids all over the country have heard that same story, but with different names and different locations.” He snickered a little bit at the end of this sentence and Aldous was beginning to get irritated. Who did this kid think he was? To Aldous, he was just some chump wearing a tattered Nirvana T-shirt and black jeans who pushed quarters into a pinball machine all day. He was nothing more than an audience for the story.

“Well, whatever your brother told you, I don’t care. All I know is that I saw a kid crap all over another kid during a high school wrestling match in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania because he took too many laxatives.”

But had Aldous seen this story happen? As he stood there watching the haze of the fluorescent lights turn the felt of the pool table from a dark green to a pastel blue, he couldn’t remember if he had actually seen this event, or if he had collected someone else’s story and made it his own. Maybe he had seen it on television. Maybe he had

heard the story somewhere else. Regardless, somewhere along the line Aldous had convinced himself that it was true. He had convinced himself that this story happened, and he saw it. Deep within the recesses of his mind, he may have known it wasn't true, he may have known that it was a fib, or a legend, or a wives tale, but at that moment, it was the truth. This story was based on fact.

The pinball junkies didn't care. Their empty beer pitcher and their lack of loose change distracted them. Aldous cared. His memory had deceived him. He had deceived himself. From that day forward Aldous realized that every story he told, every memory he recollected, and every moment of his life that passed would live inside of his mind in a flawed and altered state. They would sit in there, decaying and twisting themselves up. His memories would slowly fade like photographs under the sun, bleached and disfigured.

### 3.

The weight of Aldous Fortney's influence on his brother pushes down on his shoulders, making him feel as though his entire face is pressed against the notebook in front of him. His arms feel heavy, and pull his whole body towards the floor. He stares down into the words on the page and spontaneously begins to write. He doesn't write down facts, he writes imaginings and memories. He begins to paint his brother in the days leading up to this morning, but he stops.

In order to truly feel and imagine his brother he must collect the facts. He cannot begin to piece together the moments that turned his brother into a fire starter without



seeing the facts. He must go home and gather up the fragments of his brother's life, from which he fled years before.

Aldous pulls a few things from his closet, calls his mother's house and gets no response, and then his office to tell them he is leaving town. As he walks out of the front door of his house, he sees the picture that hung by his door for what feels like the first time. The picture is of him and his brother on the Jersey shore. Aldous looks to be about ten, the same age he remembers meeting Eric Platt. They both stand with their chests sticking out in their matching palm printed bathing suits facing the sun. Aldous's hands rest squarely on his hips. His brother stands next to him in the exact same position, beaming the same smile.

They look like the same child at different ages. Thomas's stomach swells out under his chest, and he looks as though he is standing on the very tips of his toes. He looks proud to be in a picture with his older brother. Aldous remembers the day his mother gave him that picture. She had said, "Don't forget what is important." At that moment he felt as though he had.

Before leaving, Aldous finds the paper from that morning, and tears the article out. The title reads: "Kline Village Foodmaster Burns." He opens the notebook to the page after his conversation with Eric Platt and pastes the article inside. Without knowing, he has begun to take stock of the days leading up to the burning of Foodmaster, though he will do it in his own way. He will gather the facts, and use the only other tool he has to make sense of his brother's destruction and violence. He will use his imagination.

## 4.

Two hours separate Aldous from Penbrook. Two hours. Though it was only two hours of pavement, to Aldous it was an ocean. He was alone in a sea of people, anonymous. He wouldn't see his high school valedictorian behind the checkout counter at Wal-Mart; he wouldn't see the captain of the football team with two kids in his arms reliving his loss in the state championship every day of his life. He wouldn't see his high school sweetheart still trying to make him jealous. He would not see the man he had come to regard as his father slowly lose everything he owned to the Foodmaster. They would be separated by two hours, an ocean of Pennsylvania turnpike.

The Pennsylvania turnpike, or U.S. route 76, is one of the most traveled upon stretches of road in the United States. It runs across the middle of the state, connecting the state's two largest cities: Pittsburgh and Philadelphia. It is known for its vast amount of eighteen-wheeler traffic, frequent accidents, and massive continual construction.

Aldous sits in traffic somewhere between the Valley Forge and Reading exits. It has begun to rain, so he smokes with the windows up, filling the car with clouds and fogging the glass. By the time he reaches the source of the traffic back up, his driver's side window is completely fogged over. The glow of flares and spinning police lights filter through. Aldous rolls the window down, sharpening the image, and letting the cold fall air and rain hit his left cheek and forearm. The accident comes into focus.

An eighteen-wheeler has mangled a deer. Aldous can see the long red streak like spilled paint on the opposite lane. Parts of the deer lay scattered down the road. Aldous notices a hoof, an eye. The eighteen-wheeler seems fine, but the car parked behind it is

not. The various parts of the deer that shot out from the mud flaps of the truck's rear axle have battered the front of a caravan following the truck. The children sit on the side of the road weeping, while their father and several state troopers try to pull what looks like a leg out of the radiator. Aldous rolls the window back up and accelerates away from the mess.

The notebook lies folded to the article about the fire next to him on the passenger seat. He keeps looking back at it, as though he is missing something in the article, as though if he just reads it enough he may find something. He looks for his brother in the words. Aldous tries to figure out where Thomas fits in the paragraphs. He rubs the article, and smells the ink on his finger.

He thinks about the unnamed deaths in the article, the faceless members of his community. In the Philadelphia paper, they don't bother to give the details of deaths outside of the metro area. All of the tragedies of Aldous's hometown are glazed with pronouns and anonymity. He doesn't see the names he has struggled so hard to forget over the years, and today he is upset about this. He wonders who these faceless casualties of his brother's fire could have been.

Could they have been Amish? Aldous imagines two of the young Amish kids from Weaver's meats sneaking off to the skeleton of the Foodmaster to touch each other in ways that would make their parents squeal with disgust. Or maybe it was their parents? He imagines these same faceless Amish, fifteen years older, creeping into the Foodmaster to hide from the knowing eyes of their children. Then he sees them wrapped in flames and running from the falling structure, until they are finally crushed by the blazing bony structure of the Foodmaster.

Maybe it was one of the homeless that stagger through the market every day, looking for the scraps and the leftovers, and living off of the generosity of the customers and stand owners. Eric had no patience for them, but he and Thomas would slip them food, and share cigarettes. They have to make it a point only to give them food, or clothes, or coffee, and never give them money. Money would only add to their problems, and would usually be spent on alcohol or crack. Every once in a while, one of them would die or overdose, or run through the market screaming, and Eric would shake his head and say something like, “fucking savages.”

Aldous tries to ignore the notebook sitting next to him as he weaves through the mess of the cars and the deer parts. He passes the congestion of traffic and pushes on the accelerator to speed him back to his home and back to Kline Village Farmer’s Market. His mind is left to imagine his brother and the fire and Eric and all of the things he thought he could forget.

## Part II

### 1.

#### **KLINE VILLAGE FOODMASTER BURNS**

*Penbrook, PA*- Outside of Harrisburg in the small suburb of Penbrook, tragedy struck last night. A local man and one homeless veteran were severely injured in what authorities are describing as the largest single case of arson that Central Pennsylvania has ever seen.

The suspected arsonist was also severely injured, and remains as a minor in custody in the Hershey Medical Center Burn Unit. No details were released regarding his identity or motive.

“I been working the burn unit in Dauphin County for sixteen years, and this is by far the biggest structure fire caused by arson I have ever seen,” stated Gerald Raymond, Fire Marshall of the Dauphin County Emergency Response Team. Raymond gained notoriety in his four-story rescue of Ashley Clemmens last spring from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation Fire in Harrisburg.

The building itself was the nearly half-constructed *Foodmaster* in Kline Village, a local shopping center and Farmer’s Market. The *Foodmaster* was set to open in five weeks, however spokespeople for them say that the construction has been postponed indefinitely. Alan Caulding, owner of *Foodmaster Incorporated* was unable to be reached for comment.

Article from the *Philadelphia Patriot*, 11-19-02

## 2.

“Kids love fish. One of the reasons I opened this stand was ‘cause I used to love watching the kids’ reactions when I would pull a big old salmon out of the case. I remember the first time I pulled one out to show you. You just about shit yourself. Your brother though, Jesus when I showed him his first one I thought he would rip the shit right outta my hands.”

*-Eric Platt to Aldous Fortney, 11-19-02*

## 3.

A Croaker is a type of bass fish that commonly is caught in and around the Chesapeake Bay. It has a broad nose, and a perch-like body. Croakers have white bellies, and tend to be a reddish-yellow over the rest of their bodies. They have huge mouths. Their meat tends to be on the flaky side, and is not regarded as strongly flavored meat. At Platt’s Seafood, Croakers are commonly sold for \$2.59 per pound, and cleaned and scaled fresh in front of the customers. Today they are going on sale: five pounds for ten dollars.

Thomas Fortney arrives at Kline Village Farmer’s Market at 4:30 AM. He is not the first person there. The produce guys usually would show up drunk from the night before a few hours earlier than him, but when Thomas arrives it is still quite dark and he can’t find them but he knows they are there. He backs the fish truck up to the loading bay on the east side of the market, lazily puts on the emergency brake and hops from the

cab. When he reaches the back, he lifts the rusty latch and swings the doors open wide. He is not overwhelmed by the smell of raw fish because he can no longer smell it.

Thomas pulls cases of fish and bags of ice from the rear of the truck and loads them into the cases in the market. He lays a layer of ice, and then slowly begins building piles of fish. He is meticulous about his work. All of the fish must lie in the same direction. All of their eyes must be looking the same way. Thomas does this because he remembers when he first came to the market and saw the fish lined up like soldiers. He remembers his amazement that there can be so many fish in the sea that all look exactly alike, and sit here in front of the customer displaying their uniformity and symmetry.

Slowly the case fills up with Whiting, Black Bass, Ling Cod, Spots, Sea Trout. On one end of the case he lines up the long Atlantic Salmon and Halibut, waiting for Eric to come and filet them. He does the Croakers last. They are firm fish, easy to stack. They also tend to be relatively uniform in size, making them fit into a perfect rank and file. As he places the last Croaker in the case, the sun begins to rise over the Kline Village Parking lot and over the beginnings of the *Foodmaster*. Thomas watches a few of the workmen show up and park their trucks around the job site. The first pieces of the foundation is being laid today, Platt's Seafood is one step closer to being extinct.

#### 4.

### **KLINE VILLAGE CELEBRATES 75 YEARS IN PENBROOK**

*Penbrook, PA* – This weekend one of central Pennsylvania's oldest independently owned farmer's markets will celebrate its seventy-fifth birthday. Kline Village Farmer's Market

in Penbrook has a weekend of special activities and events planned to remember nearly eight centuries of service to the greater Harrisburg area.

Harold and Angus Kline of Lebanon originally opened Kline Village Farmer's Market as a place where they and other Amish farmers could sell their goods to people in the more populated city of Harrisburg. It has enjoyed tremendous success over the years, and has continued to offer fresh locally grown products to Penbrook and the surrounding communities.

Activities and events this weekend include live music, prepared food, a raffle and silent auction, and a petting zoo for the kids. Come out and help Kline Village and the Penbrook community celebrate this momentous occasion.

Excerpt from the *Harrisburg Senator*, Nov. 11-07-02

5.

Eric Platt usually arrives at Kline Village Farmer's Market at 6:30 in the morning, when the market officially opens. He parks his car alongside the fish truck, and usually grabs whatever remains stacked in the back and brings it to the stand. Eric is a rustled looking man. His hairline receding, he lets what is left of his hair go wild. He wears a worn Platt's Seafood shirt, turned lighter and lighter shades of blue with every washing, and shorts no matter what the temperature is.

Eric Platt carries a gallon jug of water in his left hand, and an enormous set of keys in the other. In his pockets he carries rubber bands, a stray dull razor blade, an old



piece of gum, several muscle relaxers and painkillers that float around mixing with the lint, a crushed joint, and a receipt from the knife sharpener at the hardware store. He wears soiled white Nikes that have several dried fish parts hanging from them. He smells not like fish, but like his dog.

Eric walks up to his fish cases and examines Thomas's work. He runs his hand over the sides of the slimy Whiting, and slaps the Croakers. Thomas doesn't look up from what he is doing.

"Did you see that shit in the paper this morning." Eric walks to the register and begins counting change into it. "I can't believe these bastards are celebrating at a time like this. And can you fuckin' believe that there was not one mention about the shit that Caulding is trying to pull."

Thomas says nothing, and is busy dumping bags of clams and mussels into the shellfish case. Shellfish are seasonal. There is an oyster season, and of course crab season. All year long clams are pretty consistent.

"I hear his white-collar ass is making some speech at the shit this weekend. Probably talk about community, and healthy business competition, while his fuckin' jackhammers and machinery make a racket in the background." Eric licks his right thumb before he counts the fives. He is careful and precise, and always knows exactly how much money is in his cash drawer. "Your brother would be having fits right now if he knew that bastard was going to set foot in here."

At 7:00 AM the market is in full swing. The butchers are cutting, the produce guys are on their sixth cup of coffee, and the fish at Platt's Seafood lies in uniform rows, all of their eyes staring into the fluorescent lights that line the top of the case. Thomas

stands next to Eric with his arms folded listening to him complain, and waiting for the first customers of the day.

“I just can’t believe the balls on this guy,” Eric says. With that comment Jeff Hummer approaches the stand and leans his large arms onto the top of the glass filet case. Jeff wears all red to hide the blood from his butchering. His white apron carries the stains of several cattle.

“What’s up, fish dudes?” Jeff speaks with a southern accent, but was born and raised in Pennsylvania. He owns several butcher shops in several farmers’ markets, so he fears Foodmaster much less than anyone else in the market. “Ya’ll ready for the festivities?” He puts an extra emphasis on every syllable of festivities. He smiles from under his bushy mustache. Eric tries to ignore him.

“Hey Tommy, what swam up yer boss’s ass this mornin’?” Jeff smiles with his mouth wide open, proud of the question he has just made. “By the look of it, it might be an Atlantic Salmon!” Jeff erupts with laughter. Eric reaches for the salmon lying at the end of the fish case. When he pulls it out he knocks over a stack of Croakers sitting next to it. Thomas quickly walks over and begins to rearrange them.

“Jesus that’s a big ass fish. You ain’t gonna hit me with that, are ya Platt?” Eric looks over his shoulder at Jeff and then back at the fish. He slyly slips a filet knife into its belly and spills its insides across the cutting surface. Eric carries the big fish to the sink rinsing the blood and remaining guts out of the fish. He lays the fish on its side and with one quick motion cuts a two-foot filet from the bone. He holds it up to show Jeff.

“I would never hit you with this. I can’t afford to lose that kind of profit.”

6.

“It’s like I told Eric. To get by in this business you need to be constantly expanding and adapting. I ain’t gonna be no millionaire slingin’ meat, so I better at least have some god damn job security. I mean Christ, my kids gotta eat.”

*Jeff Hummer to Alan Caulding, 11-06-02*

7.

*Excerpt from a speech given by Alan Caulding, 11-07-02 in Kline Village*

*Farmer’s Market*

Greetings friends, shoppers, farmers, and stand-owners. I stand in front of you today to help usher in a new era of food service and supply in Penbrook and the greater Harrisburg area. In a few weeks, my newest *Foodmaster* will be open for business directly behind where I am standing now. It will offer wholesale groceries at unbeatable prices, combined with an unbeatable selection. Together with the help of the historic Kline Village Farmer’s Market, we can help to fulfill the vision that the Kline brothers began with seventy-five years ago.

Today we celebrate the vision of the Kline Brothers in honoring the stand-owners and farmers that have made Kline Village so successful over the years. Stands like Pete’s Produce, and Hummer’s Meats have helped to make this farmer’s market an

institution that will last another seventy-five years, and today they get the recognition they so badly deserve.

I would like to take this moment to announce the future of Kline Village, and to announce that Hummer's Meats has been subcontracted to run the new butcher shop in the soon to be opened *Foodmaster*. His union between Foodmaster and Kline Village Farmer's Market illustrates our undying commitment to the Penbrook community and to small businesses everywhere.

8.

"I don't give a good god damn about that market, Jeff, and if Eric keeps giving me shit and slowing down my development of this area he'll get what's coming to him. You're lucky I've included you in my plans, otherwise your ass would be moving back to Elizabethtown and peddling meat to rednecks on welfare."

*-Alan Caulding to Jeff Hummer, 11-07-02*

9.

Kline Village begins to slow down around 7:00 PM. Some of the stands close early around this time, but Platt's Seafood stays open until the market closes at eight-thirty. It usually takes some time to put away the fish, and to ice what is left in the cases, and around this time the stragglers and unwanted customers begin to arrive at the market.

By this time Eric is usually near passing out from exhaustion and over use of pharmaceuticals. Thomas stays energetic all day. He looks forward to the organizing and stacking that must be done at the end of the day.

This evening, there are several late shoppers. The first comes in at eight, when they are first beginning to pull fish from the cases and cover what is left in. His name is Andre, and he is a midget. He walks proudly to the counter and looks at Thomas before saying, “Hey, fish man, how ‘bout some a ‘dem oysters for me here?”

“Hey Andre. You just want six?”

“You betta’ make it twelve, Tommy. I got me a hot ass date to-night!” The market was filled with superstitions and home remedies. Andre, like many others, believed that oysters were an aphrodisiac. Every night he had a date, he would be in the market dressed up to go out in a suit and tie that looks like it has been worn all week, and slurping down raw oysters. Thomas knew him well enough that he knew to leave the oysters out until last, and only pack them away when they were about to leave. He also knew not to even ask Andre if he wanted any cocktail sauce, because he likes his oyster straight. “Fucks up the essence of ‘em,” he had once said.

The next to show up is Rita, a cop. She is a middle-aged black woman who hates Eric. She only comes late at night because she knows Eric will be lucid enough to ignore her, and Thomas will be waiting to take her order.

“Hey, baby fish.” Thomas loves when she calls him this. “What you think you can do for a tired old officer of the peace, hmm?” Thomas knows what she wants, and what she means. Rita helped Thomas out of parking ticket once, and since then demands discounts with her eyes.

“How ‘bout five pounds of Whiting for ten dollars, Rita?”

“Oh baby fish, you treat me right!” Thomas cleans the fish quickly before Eric can realize the discount on the cutting board. It isn’t much money, only a buck and some change, but to Eric it is a fortune.

The last customer of the night is Cash, an old veteran that sits at the entrance to Kline Village selling roses no matter what time of year it is. Thomas often wondered where he was getting all of them, and how he could have them even in the dead of winter. Cash wears an overcoat that is several sizes too small, and shoes that his toes poke through the front of.

“Hey Cash Man, you want a sandwich?” Thomas pulls a pre-fried crabcake out of the case and throws it in the microwave before Cash can answer. He has the bun out and is smearing tartar sauce onto it as Cash sifts through the change, cigarette butts and buttons that have come from his pocket. “Don’t worry about that Cash, your money ain’t no good here.”

“Aw, thanks Tommy,” Cash says almost whispering. “I really appreciate it, man. I really do.” Thomas passes the sandwich across the counter wrapped in a paper towel. “Someday I’m gonna come in here and buy me some lobster tails. I promise. I’ll just come in here and say, ‘Tommy, gimme all them tails in the freezer!’ and you just gonna wrap them things up for me, and I’m gonna have a feast!” Cash chuckles a bit at this thought.

“You just better be invitin’ me to dinner, Cash.”

“Aw, you know I will, Tommy.” Cash scurries out of the market, and the other workers are close to finishing closing the stand. The produce guys are skating around on

their pushcart forklifts, quickly stacking the vegetables and fruits in the big refrigerated trailer out back. Eric and Thomas stand watching the Jeff and the rest of the butchers having a cigarette next to their already closed stand.

“Can you believe that turncoat bastard. Goin’ right behind all our backs and signin’ on with that demon Caulding. The day he actually gives two shits about this market is the day that I fuckin’ give birth to kittens.” Eric leans against the cutting board. By this time in the evening, all of the employees at Platt’s Seafood are covered in guts and soaked in water. Eric has duct tape wrapping two of his fingers from where he has cut himself earlier in the day. On the same hand he is missing a fingernail, and has several swollen and infected puncture wounds from fish spines.

“That’s right Benedict, I’m talkin’ about you!” Eric yells toward Hummer’s Meats, and points his swollen and scarred hand in Jeff’s direction. He holds a knife in his hand as he usually does. Jeff looks up for a second and then continues to close his stand as quickly as possible. He can sense Eric losing his temper and mind. There is silence behind the Butcher’s cases. Jeff’s son works with his head down, and the normal banter that occurs every night is painfully absent. The market is quiet.

“Fuck this. I need to go home. Tell your brother what this fuck did next time you talk to him. He wouldn’t have stood by and watched this happen, I can tell you that god damn much.” Thomas cringes at the mention of Aldous. Eric makes these comparisons throughout the day, constantly belittling Thomas with the absence of his brother, and by telling him what Aldous would have done in every situation that the day brings. Without saying anything else to Thomas, Eric picks up the cash drawer and leaves the market.

Thomas moves toward the fish case and continues to close the stand as the dancers slowly begin to show up.

10.

### **LEARN TO SWING DANCE**

The Harrisburg Dance Conservatory has announced that it will begin a new program within the community, to try to encourage local people to get out and get dancing! Every Thursday and Friday night they will offer introductory dance lessons at bargain prices to help offer their services to a more diverse group of people within the community. All ages and skill levels are encouraged to attend.

The lessons will be held in the Kline Village Farmer's Market after the market closes at 8:30 on Friday and Thursday. Kline Village has generously donated the space for the next three months. Anyone interested in more information can contact the Harrisburg Dance Conservatory, or Kline Village Farmer's Market.

-Advertisement appeared 11-01-02 in the *Harrisburg Senator* Living Section

11.

"I love watchin' all these freaks dance." Chris Cabba works at Pete's Produce and spends most of his time throwing ice across the aisle towards whoever is working at Platt's. The produce stand is one of the biggest draws in Kline Village, and its proprietor



Pete Franly knows it. It has been there longer than any other stand in the market, and consistently takes up more and more space within it. It was Pete's idea to begin holding swing dancing lessons in the back of the market. His brother is an instructor at the dance school.

"These bastards are some of the most uncoordinated shits I've ever seen." Chris Cabba has bleached blond hair that he puts too much gel into. He has three piercings on his face: his nose, his eyebrow, and his tongue. His pants are baggy and he wears a Bloodhound Gang T-shirt. As he stands leaning on the cases talking to Thomas, the music and dancing begins.

Couples stand paired up at the back of the market, awkwardly looking towards their instructor for a signal to begin. The two instructors painfully stick out. They wear vintage fifties clothing, and are far superior dancers to the rest of the group. They throw each other around and snap their fingers and smile enormous fake smiles. They say, "Come on!" and, "You can do it!" and, "Feel the music!" It seems at times like they're ignoring their students, but really enjoying themselves.

"I'm gonna go get my groove on with these freaks." Chris struts back towards the dancers looking over his shoulder and smiling at Thomas. When he gets near the first couple, he pulls the girl away and begins swinging his hips toward her and laughing hysterically. Thomas continues to close the stand. He pulls the doors from the fish case and dumps ice on top of the fish.

"Hey Thomas."

"What?"

"Its unbelievable Jeff would sell you guys out like that."

“I know.”

“Eric is not handling this too well.”

“I know.”

“Maybe there is something you could do.” Thomas realizes he is talking to no one. He shakes his head and begins to put the doors back on the fish case. “Maybe you could help him.”

“Who the fuck is talking?” Thomas looks up and sees Chris being yelled at by the two dance instructors. He sees no one around him.

“I’m just saying maybe you could help. I think your brother would do it.”

Thomas stops and looks down to see a Croaker looking back at him through the ice. “I mean think of all Eric has done for you. Don’t you think he deserves better?”

“You’re not talking to me right now. Somebody’s fuckin’ with me.” Thomas slides the storage door under the case open and looks inside. He sees nothing. He stands back up and looks at the fish.

“I’m just telling you what you already know,” the Croaker says.

“Well I don’t wanna fuckin’ hear it, and I don’t talk to fuckin’ fish.” Thomas slams the door to the case shut and looks up to see the dancers and Chris staring at him. He finishes closing and walks past Chris Cabba on the way out.

“You fish guys are freakin’ weird, man.”

12.

“The only thing worse than a fish gutter is a fuckin’ butcher.”

## 13.

Thomas Fortney waits in the cold for a bus he knows will be late. Behind him the lights in Kline Village Farmer's Market are systematically turned off, row after row blinking out and hiding another produce stand, another bakery. Thomas waits outside because he'd rather be alone and risk a mugging than be inside with the produce guys and the Kline Village janitor who he knows only as Slick. While he stands he can feel them talking about him inside, talking about Eric and Jeff and their unsure futures, so he prays for the bus.

"Hey, Platt kid," Slick says as he busts out the doors to the market. Slick refers to everyone who works in Kline Village by the stand at which they work and Thomas was no exception. Slick stands much taller than everyone else in the market, and is considerably larger than everyone else. This does not set him apart as much as the eye patch he wears over his left eye. Slick once told Thomas he had lost it in a dart game. Thomas was never sure if he meant by a tragic dart accident, or by making a bet with the wrong dart player.

"What?" Thomas says, shooting a glance over his shoulder. He can see the produce guys stalking up behind Slick like hyenas waiting for scraps. Before they can reach the door Thomas can hear the bus approaching from up Market Street.

"Me and these jackasses are goin' to the strip club. You wanna come?" Slick spits a wad of tobacco juice onto the ground after the sentence as if to challenge Thomas.

“I’m all right, man.”

“You sure? I saw this chick last night who took a full Budweiser bottle...”

“Please man. I can’t hear that shit.” Thomas knows the club they are going to and has been there before. When he went, he had seen a girl he was in kindergarten with do atrocious things with ping-pong balls and a kiddie pool full of Jell-O, and could not only no longer go there, but could no longer here the J-E-L-L-O song without cringing. All he could think of was her at age five finger-painting and having naptime.

“Fortney, you pussy!” Chris Cabba says as he slams through the door throwing scraps of broccoli florets at him and charging at full speed. He tackles Thomas into the street, inducing the oncoming bus to lay on its horn and squeal its tires. Chris helps Thomas up and gives the bus driver the finger. “You can blow this horn, buddy!” he says and smiles while he tugs at his crotch. Before Thomas can take any more abuse he slides onto the bus, shows the driver his card, and crumbles into a seat in the back. The bus pulls away and Thomas sees Chris and Slick still saluting him with their middle fingers and laughing as they turn the corner.

14.

“My mom told me once that there’s a freak on every bus. I can never find them.”

*-Eric Platt, date unknown*

15.

The busses in this part of town have been the same busses for nearly thirty years. They remain monuments in an area that most of the city would like to forget. The people of Penbrook if they had the chance would most likely not give up on these busses, because they would be giving up on their town. They are happy in their neglect, and they are happy with their community. They would rather have practicality than busses they can't afford, and stores they can't shop in.

The bus doesn't travel far between stops, actually on average it only goes two or three blocks. The result is a long and whiplash filled ride home. The many stops and starts keep the Penbrook bus lines perpetually running late, and creates heavy feet among bus drivers. However this does create a kind of rhythm for anyone riding. Going from a complete stop to sixty-miles-per-hour for two blocks, to another screeching complete stop. But Thomas doesn't care about any of this, or about busses or strippers. He just thinks of fish, in fact one fish, a Croaker to be specific.

When they stop at Twentieth and Market, Thomas slinks down even lower in his seat. The Paxton Baptist Church sits at this intersection, and most of the churchgoers knew him as a child. When the doors swing open to let on the blessed ones, Thomas stomach rolls as he sees Mrs. Millen. She was his art teacher at Penbrook Elementary years earlier. Thomas always despised her because of her tendency to call him Aldous. She wears a pastel purple knitted hat on top of her head that from the drastic misproportions looks like it was knitted by her. She walks with a slight hunch and a constant smile, giggling and laughing with her church friends. The lenses in her glasses seem nearly twice the size of her head, and it is while Thomas ponders this that he accidentally makes eye contact.

“Lord bless me, is that you Thomas Fortney?” Thomas realizes his mistake and attempts too late to divert his eyes; she is already on her way to sit by him. “As I live and breathe, it is you.” She stops and her smile fades as she looks at Thomas. “Dear Lord you look just like your dear departed father.” She begins to cry.

“Now, Mrs. Millen please, don’t get all worked up now. It’s good to see you too.” With this Thomas stands and attempts to put a hand on her shoulder, but awkwardly pulls it back. “Look I...”

“Look at you,” she sobs, “you’re a man.” The tears continue.

“As opposed to...”

“Oh your father would be proud.” Mrs. Millen throws her arms around Thomas, slapping the side of his head with her handbag, and smothering his head into her fuzzy purple dome. “I can remember when you first walked into my art class you were as quiet and tiny as an ant. I thought I was losing my mind, because just a few years earlier your brother walked in looking the exact same way.” Other people now begin to notice Thomas with an elderly woman wrapped around his shoulders, including the bus driver. The speakers start to crackle.

“Uh ... please sit down, sir.” Thomas looks at the driver with pleading eyes.

“Sir, please sit down.” Thomas begins to panic. Mrs. Millen continues to sob. The bus driver stares at him through his rearview mirror. The wool from Mrs. Millen’s purple hat begins to make him break out in hives on his neck and face, so he does the only thing he can think of to do. Thomas extends his right arm, and gives the driver the finger.

The driver’s eyes quickly return to the road ahead and Thomas feels the bus drop into gear. Before he can brace himself the tires of the old Penbrook City bus grip the

road and throw Thomas and the tearful Mrs. Millen in a pile onto the back seats of the bus. By the time he can react, Mrs. Millen's face already lies in Thomas's crotch, and he can feel the pulses of her sobs against him. The speed of the bus continues to increase making it harder and harder for Mrs. Millen to lift her head and get into a seat. Every few seconds she lifts her head and looks at Thomas sobbing only to flop her head down once again on his tear-soaked, fish-gut-covered jeans. Finally the bus pulls to a stop, and Thomas helps her up.

"You okay, Mrs. Millen?" The tears suddenly stop and she stares at Thomas. She looks at him as though she will tell him the meaning of life, but she does not.

"Thomas, you smell awful."

"Sorry, I work in the fish market now." He hears the speakers crackle again as more passengers filter through the bus.

"Don't say I didn't warn you, asshole." The speaker cuts out and Thomas waves to the driver.

"At Kline Village?" Mrs. Millen says, but Thomas doesn't pay attention. Instead he stares at the driver in the rearview. "Just like your brother!" she says exuberantly. When the doors close again they continue at breakneck speed to the next stop, where Thomas plans to get off. "How's your mother? I haven't seen her in ages, seems like the last time I saw her was..."

"Alligators."

"Did you say alligators, Thomas?"

"Yes. Alligators. She was eaten by alligators in Panama." He continues to stare into her eyes watching the color fade from her blush-coated cheeks. "Very tragic. They

sent her home in two separate pine boxes. Apparently they don't have very good preservatives down there, you know, Third World and all, so when she got here she was pretty much not having an open casket. We kept the funeral in the family. You know how it is. Very tragic that is."

"What do you mean ... eaten by alligators?" Mrs. Millen stutters.

"I mean that she was consumed by large reptilian beasts."

"Do they even have alligators in Panama?"

"Oh yes. Lots of them. Actually my mom was down there trying to trap a few because they're having an alligator overpopulation crisis in Panama. You know how she is, being a nature lover and all. I guess she got a little too close to one and it chomped her right in two. Very tragic." Thomas watches as she tries to make sense of the whole thing but can't seem to get her mind around it. "I hear actually they're migrating north. I'd watch out if I was you, Mrs. Millen. I'd watch out." The bus again power brakes and slams to a stop causing Mrs. Millen to nearly fall to the floor again, but instead she stares back at emotionless Thomas.

Thomas quietly takes her hand from his knee and stands to leave the bus, staring into Mrs. Millen's eye, and watching it fill with tears for the second time. He evacuates the bus and stands along side it looking through the green tinted glass at Mrs. Millen. He watches her disappear again from his life for another ten or fifteen years, and wonders if she will live to their next meeting. She stares back at him and raises her skinny fingers to touch the glass.



Eric Platt's home looks something like a cross between a flea market and a wasteland. Dead trees and shrubs are scattered in no apparent arrangement around his dead lawn. A garden gnome stands by the doorway with his head smashed in, warding off any visitors. His house is painted several different tones of green and brown, and the skeleton of an addition, perhaps a bedroom or playroom for his kids, hides beneath clear plastic tarps on the east side of the house. By the time Thomas arrives it is getting late. When he rings the doorbell he thinks of Slick and Chris and the produce guys shoving dollars in his schoolmate's g-string.

Eric answers the door still in the same clothes that he wore to work, but noticeably more intoxicated. He grabs Thomas's hand and pulls him inside without a word. When they get inside Thomas hears his wife screaming at the kids upstairs in the bathroom, glass breaking, crying, and a dog barking. Eric puts a finger to his mouth and walks to the back of the house. The house smells like Eric smells, not like fish, but like the dog. It is filled with stacked newspapers and recycling. Bright children's toys lie scattered around the stained yellow shag carpet. Plates of half-eaten food occupy nearly every surface, and every corner of the ceiling shows the sprawl of water stains.

Eric leads Thomas into the backyard and to his storage shed. Thomas has been in this shed many times before repairing cooling units, looking for spare parts for the cases in the market, and filling it with all the homeless junk that flooded Kline Village every day. Eric could not pass up any piece of junk he saw. He would haul rusty engine blocks back to the shed, by dragging them behind his car if he needed to, but nothing escapes his

grasp. He lives his life constantly in fear that someday someone might tell him they will give him a million dollars for the fender of a '79 Gremlin, and he won't have one.

"I'm done, man." Eric lights up a joint and the flash of the match briefly illuminates his face. Thomas watches the tip burn intensely and fade when Eric pulls it away from his lips. He has heard this speech before. He has listened to Eric say the business was closing a thousand times before just like his brother had a thousand times before that. He says nothing and takes the joint from Eric. "I mean it, man, that's it. I'm cuttin' my losses. I can sell all the shit in this shed and all my gear at the market and take a desk job. Pushin' fuckin' pencils from now on, man."

This time was different. Thomas could tell Eric was breaking down. From inside the house he could still hear Eric's wife screaming at the children, the dog barking, and the sound of fire engine sirens in the distance. He takes the joint as Eric passes it to him letting the musty smoke fill his lungs, and then exhaling slowly and dramatically. It's late in the evening now and here sit Eric and Thomas, dressed in the same clothes they have slaughtered fish in all day, covered with souvenirs from the day in the form of blood stains and scales. Thomas pulls a bench seat from an old pick-up from one of the corners of the shed and throws himself down onto it.

"You know, I just feel like I been doin' this for so long, like I just been givin' and givin' and never receivin' man." Eric stumbles over and takes the smoke from Thomas' hands. "Everybody's comin' down on me, Tommy. Everybody but you." Thomas continues to be silent. Usually all he would have to do was finish whatever intoxicant he and Eric were consuming and usually by the end Eric would have forgotten what he was

talking about, but this time was different. Thomas sees the fear in Eric's eyes. "Just when I thought my head was about to be above water. Fuckin' Foodmaster."

Eric begins to calm down slowly, but every time he hears a scream from inside the house he flinches. Eric walks to the rear of the shed, and reaches into an old decaying cardboard box and pulls out a series of what look to be postcards. When Thomas sees them closer he realizes that they are not postcards, but snapshots from an old Polaroid.

"Check this shit out," Eric says excitedly, apparently forgetting his troubles for a moment. He hands them to Thomas and lets a giggle go as he does so. Thomas begins to flip through them and sees that they are in fact nude photos of a woman he has never seen. By the furniture and style of the house they were taken in, along with the feathered Farrah Fawcett haircut the subject has, Thomas guesses they are from the late seventies. The girl smiles brightly in every picture staring directly at Thomas, changing positions to reveal more and more of her creamy skin. Thomas flips through them fast and hands them back to Eric.

"Whaddya think, eh?" Eric says, but Thomas looks at him blankly, looking almost concerned for the girl in the pictures. "What's your problem, man? I thought you'd like these fuckers. I found them yesterday inside the old freezer case. I guess I hid them from Barb years ago and she never found them. If she ever did, she'd kill me you know. I can remember when I took those pictures of Barb's sister. Man, was she hot. Barb and I had gotten married the week before, and were having a party, and man, this little girl just grabs me and pulls me into her bedroom and just gets naked as the day she was born!" Thomas' stare turns to one of disbelief.

"You keep naked pictures of your wife's sister?"

“I didn’t know I still had ‘em until yesterday, man. Besides I didn’t do her.”

“*Do* her?”

“Yeah you know, like sex her up.”

“Sex her up?”

“Shut up, Thomas. I knew you’d be a prick about this. Why is it that you are such a constant prick all the time huh? I show you some hot amateur porn and all you can do is just be the same prick. I thought you’d like these.” Thomas actually feels bad that he doesn’t like them. He crushes the last of the grass and paper in the joint below his left heel and stares at the ground. He thinks of the Foodmaster, and then he thinks of Eric’s kids inside with his wife, while the two of them sit outside getting stoned and looking at Barb’s naked sister.

“I like them, Eric. I like your pictures,” Thomas lies.

“Whatever, man.” Eric pulls another joint from his pocket and fingers it in his hands, examining it more closely than the pictures. “I’m just trying to take my mind off of things. How’s your mom been anyway, man? Al told me she was in Guatemala with Ralph or some shit.”

“Skydiving.”

“What?”

“She died in a skydiving accident.”

“Shut up, Thomas. She’s just on her permanent vacation with Ralph.” Eric lights the tip of the second joint and puffs intensely. He seems to have relaxed now that he is not the topic of conversation.

“No, she was skydiving down there, and her chute didn’t open. Ten thousand feet to splat. I guess she died on impact, but the impact nearly took her head clean off of her body. A real mess, I guess.”

“Tommy, yer mom’s not dead, she’s on vacation.”

“They’re shipping the body back tomorrow, but the head got here yesterday. They used Fed Ex, so you know how that goes.”

“Tommy...”

“Al is making all of the funeral arrangements. You can come if you like, but there won’t be an open casket. You know, impacting from ten thousand feet and all.” Thomas reaches over for the joint but Eric pulls it away from his reach and looks directly into Thomas’ eyes.

“Tommy look, your mom ain’t dead.” Eric smiles when he says this like this is a game he’s played before and enjoyed.

“I think I’m gonna sue the skydiving company. Nice cash settlement to live on for the rest of my days. Maybe I’ll use it to buy the Foodmaster.” Just the sound of the word *Foodmaster* changes Eric’s expression. It is like Thomas has punched him in the stomach, or said something that crosses the line of their friendship. He feels terrible because he meant well. He meant for this lie to end up as a fairy tale for Eric, but instead he has brought back a defeated look to his face.

“Look that’s not funny anymore, alright? Knock it off.”

“Whatever. I’m the one without any parents.”

“Tommy, she ain’t dead, so shut up.” Eric’s tone takes on a definite seriousness, and Thomas finds it strange that the only time Eric addresses him like he’s his boss is

when they are not at work. They both go silent for a few seconds and stare at the back of the house, where now both of Eric's kids scream from the bathroom in a chorus of wails and cries. "Fuckin' kids."

"Whatever," Thomas says and shrugs. He thinks of Barb up in the bathroom with the kids, perhaps lowering them into vats of hot oil, or stretching them on the rack, or some other form of torture that could cause such screams. He wonders what the neighbors must think. Eric seemingly cannot hear his children's cries, or has simply learned to tune them out. Instead he flicks lit matches into a coffee can at the entrance to the shed. One at a time, each match firing through the darkness and burning out like a comet. Thomas watches and sits quietly.

Neither of them speaks. They just both sit marveling at the fire they can create with the flick of a wrist and listening to the torture going on inside. Eric flips through his pictures every once in a while laughing quietly at some and just staring at others until finally the screaming stops and the lights go out in the house.

Eric rolls onto the floor of the shed and onto his back. He sticks his feet into the air and shifts his pants down a bit to expose his rear end to Tommy. He farts a few times before he can even get a match lit. "You wanna help me out here, man."

"Not a chance, Eric."

"You really are a prick, you know that?" He finally gets a match lit and holds it to his ass. Thomas hears a slight hissing sound, and then a burst of flame. Eric screams as the fire runs up his leg burning his leg hair, pubic hair, and sizzling his skin. The fireball only lasts a few seconds, but Thomas can see the hairs on his crotch still burning after the explosion. Eric squeals and rolls around like a turtle on its back. In a mixture of

laughter and screams Eric comes to his feet and pulls up his pants. “Holy hell! That was somethin’ huh?” Thomas just stares and shakes his head.

“What in the hell?” It slowly dawns on Thomas that he has just witnessed a stoned middle aged man light his flatulence ablaze in a garage. Eric stands but clutches at his crotch and rear to try and calm the burning. He giggles every few seconds, and they both sit down on the pickup bench.

“That was some funny shit, huh?” Eric elbows Thomas hard in the ribs and picks up his pictures. Thomas looks at the pile of spent matches on the ground in front of him. He picks one up and breaks it in half.

“What if I told you the fish are talking to me?” Thomas sits back in the seat and looks at Eric’s queer juvenile smile fading from his lips.

“Huh?”

“What if I told you that I heard a fish talking to me today?”

“Right. Just like your skydiving mom. Or how about last week when you told me that one of the founding members of Steely Dan died in a tragic meat packing accident. Or the week before when you told me you saw Princess Diana in the market. Come on, Tommy. I’ve known you for way too long to listen to this crap.” Eric finishes the joint he was smoking and the grin of a thirteen-year-old with his mom’s credit card returns to his face.

“I’m serious, man. One of them fish was talking to me.”

“Bullshit.”

“It ain’t, man, I swear.”

“Tommy ... fish can’t talk, brother.” Eric lets a giggle escape with this statement.

“Yeah that’s what I thought. But this one did. In fact he was talkin’ about you. I couldn’t believe that shit myself but sure enough there it was talkin’ to me.”

“What kind?”

“What kind of what?”

“Fish, you idiot.”

“Oh. A Croaker.”

“So what did he say there, Tommy?”

“I guess small talk mostly, but it seemed like he knew about the Foodmaster. He definitely knew who you were.”

“How did you know it was a *he*?”

“It had a deep voice, I guess.” Thomas looks at his folded hands on his lap and realizes that Eric is only making fun of him at this point. It is useless. A lifetime of embellishment simply destroying his credibility in relaying the strangest thing that had ever happened to him. He knows Eric will never believe him. Eric erupts with laughter and rolls from the car seat.

“‘It had a deep voice,’ you said!!!” Eric rolls on the ground in the pile of matches and cigarette butts but seems to be oblivious. Finally he gains composure and stands again. “Look Tommy, tomorrow we can go in there and you can show me this talking fish alright, but right now these pictures are talkin’ to me, so I’m goin’ to bed.”

With that Eric walks back to the house and enters into its quiet darkness leaving Thomas outside alone. He sits back and smokes his last cigarette before curling up on the car seat. In the distance he can hear fire engines screaming through the city as he closes his eyes to dream of fish.



17.

HELP WANTED: FULL TIME JANITOR

Applicants must have experience in custodial services and references.

Position must be filled immediately – need janitor now.

Applications and resumays\* may be dropped off in the Kline Village Management Office,

located behind Lay's Poultry.

Salary and schedule negotiable.

*\*Errors appear as they did on the 'Help Wanted' sign*

18.

"I'm an artist man. Ain't nobody who can rip out guts and spines as quickly, or as cleanly as me. Shit. I'm like the friggin' Van Gogh of fish guttin'. But I still got my ear

I guess.

*-Eric Platt, date unknown*

19.

Thomas reads the help wanted sign posted on the south end of Kline Village Farmers' Market when he arrives at nine AM. He is happy that he didn't have to open

this morning, that he did not have to go through the peeling back of the slimy newspapers and deli wrap to expose the croaker that he dreamed of the night before, and that he didn't have to listen to Eric at six AM, freshly back from his fish run to Jessup. Thomas stands and examines the ad, trying to figure out how Slick could have gotten fired in the past twelve hours when he wasn't working for at least eight of them. He decides there are more reasons he is happy he didn't have to open the market.

As Thomas pushes open the door to the market he is struck by the same line up of odors he meets every morning. First he smells the health foods and the scent of salad dressings, oil and vinegar, and the sly looks from the middle-aged Greek woman Kay whose scents tend to overpower that of her salads. Ten steps later, the next smell is the bakery, a strong yeasty smell, but warm and like beer. Ten more steps mean fried chicken. The smell of grease and poultry this early in the morning begins to make Thomas queasy. The smell of fish five steps later, to Thomas, smells like home and like Eric.

The smell of the fish overpowers the other odors and fragrances, a heavyweight among lightweights. This morning it is a smell of freshness. The seafood smells like the wide Atlantic. Thomas has worked at the fish market for some time, and he has noticed that the only time he can truly smell this salty odor is when he first arrives at work. He cannot smell it on his clothes when he arrives home, nor midday when he is poised behind the cutting board. He cannot smell it when he goes to the dollar store to buy Scotchbrite scrubbies, and the woman behind the counter looks at him strangely and covers her nose, only to get off of work and walk directly to his stand. He can only take in this smell when he first arrives at Kline Village.

He stops and stares at the fish and watches the rhythm of the workers. There is only Eric and two others, one of which is his wife. This early, Eric hasn't medicated himself to the point of incoherence, so there is a spring to him and a vibrancy that Thomas enjoys. By three o'clock this spring will be gone. It will be replaced by oblivion.

The stand is an island. While most other stands line the sides of the market, Platt's Seafood is in the center along with produce, and a few other small seasonal stalls. Thomas circles the fish stand while he finishes his cigarette and looks at what the season and the catch has yielded today. More and more Thomas feels Platt's Seafood separating from the rest of the market. He feels it detach as though at any moment this island will become a boat and simply sail away.

The standard white fishes occupy the first case and sit positioned with the finest cuts on top. These fish, like Haddock, Scrod, and Flounder are all quite bland, as are the people who buy them. The farm raised catfish lie in piles next to these, all uniform and evenly cut, all weighing the same and all having the same peach tint of the last trickles of blood stopped in their small veins, each one a perfect clone of the one that lies next to it. The seasonals are next, Shad and Chilean Sea Bass, followed by the steaks: Tuna, Swordfish, and Halibut. About halfway through his cigarette Thomas rounds the corner to the shellfish. Chesapeake Bay Blue Crabs stare through the glass, their orange faces frozen in the same look they must have had when steam heated them to several hundred degrees.

How Thomas hates these crabs. Nothing more than mindless eating and mating machines. When crabs are trapped in a bushel together alive, they tend to begin to

cannibalize each other, pulling each other's claws and legs off as if to spite the seafood industry, ruining perfectly good whole crabs. Invariably the end of the week comes, and Thomas would be stuck trying to sell legless crabs to people for half-price.

"I don't want that one with no legs," they'd say. "All I like anyway is the damn claws."

"I can put some extra claws in with them if you like," Thomas would quietly suggest. "I got some floatin' around back here."

"Oh forget it. They're useless without the claws."

The cycle repeats. The crabs always win. When they aren't secretly sabotaging their postmortem sale, they're pinching the hell out of Thomas, or escaping into the drain pipes of the market, where Thomas is convinced they are preparing to stage an uprising.

## 20.

"*Callinectes sapidus* (which means "beautiful swimmer") are found in shallow water along the Atlantic coast from Massachusetts to Florida and off the coasts of all the Gulf of Mexico states. They are green-brown with a light underside. Blue crabs feed on small fish, clams, mussels, worms, and other detritus, and in turn are eaten by spotted sea trout, red drum, croaker, gars, sheepshead, and fresh and salt water catfish. Herons, diving ducks, and raccoons also eat blue crabs."

- Taken from, "*Seafood Lover's Almanac*," published by the National Audubon Society

21.

“Al told me once that nearly an entire bushel of crabs escaped under this fuckin’ market. Who knows where they went, the basement, sewer, hell, maybe they found their way the whole fuckin’ way back to the Chesapeake.”

*-Jeff Hummer to Rebecca Robinson, date unknown*

22.

Past the crabs and the clams and mussels, a quarter of a cigarette later and around the next corner of the stand Thomas comes to the whole fish – the cheapest way to shop. The line for service is violent. Those seafood shoppers who shop the whole fish stand are nothing if not dedicated. People who buy whole fish vary in Thomas’s eyes by the cut they request. The primary difference in the cuts are whether or not the fish will leave the stand with its head.

For no additional fee Eric offers to clean all of the fish that is available weekly in this case. This idea in its purest form relies on customers tipping those who clean their fish. However as the years pass, causing the price of fish to rise as Eric’s patience quickly falls, it becomes clear that this idea is quite flawed.

When people begin to stop tipping, Eric begins to habitually criticize his customers on their lack of fish-gutting etiquette. Pointing his knife at them he shouts, “I know your mother, and she used to give me a quarter a fish for chrissakes.” Or sometimes when the line was long and customers antsy, he throws down his knife

refusing to continue to clean until he saw some tips. The rest of the market began to notice this daily fiasco, and quickly made a rule that no market employee of any kind could receive tips for any of their services, simply increasing Eric's madness.

At this moment, Eric seems to be under control. His wife sternly takes the orders as Thomas smokes, watching the case, and Eric himself seems entranced in his cleaning. Thomas turns his attention to Eric. From the customer side of the case, you can see the cleaning counter, and Eric's artwork. The fish lie in piles around his bloody hands, a captive audience. He begins a fresh order of Whiting, slicing behind their gills and circling their heads, cleaning the most tender meat from the skull behind the fish's eyes with a quick flick and with that same motion sliding the head into the trash can at his hip. With a second motion of the knife, Eric spills the guts onto the board and quickly pushes them into the can. His fingers separate a starting point between the spine and the meat, in which his knife slips and filets one side, and then the other.

"Thomas," he says. "What the fuck are you doin' standin' there watchin' me work? You enjoy what you see? ... No, no, relax, and have another cigarette. I don't want to interrupt in any way." Thomas breaks from his trance and looks up at Eric. Eric stares back at him through his tinted glasses with a queer sarcastic smile on his face, performing for his customers, ridiculing Thomas. "Does this look like fun to you, Tommy?" he says. And it does.

“It is about time they got rid of that cycloptic janitor. All he did was fuckin’ stare at my ass all damn day. I swear I never saw him clean once. I’m convinced he had like a hidden camera under that patch. I swear to god.”

*-Rebecca Robinson, Assistant Butcher, Hummer’s Meats*

24.

When Thomas enters the stand, he reaches below the cutting board to find an apron and joins Eric at the cleaning counter. As he kneels at Eric’s feet, he can feel the run off from the boards trickling onto his back, with the occasional weight of a liver or stomach splattering on his shoulder. He stands and casually wraps the apron around his waist leaving his Platt’s Seafood shirt exposed, and folding down the top. He empties his pockets, and slides their contents behind the cash drawer: cigarettes, a lighter, a small bag of pot for Eric to share, his wallet and a set of keys. He reaches into a bucket and pulls a pile of rubber bands out, pulling them over his hand and onto his wrist.

“‘Bout friggin’ time, man.” Eric doesn’t look up from his work at first. He continues to effortlessly filet and decapitate Whiting in the piles in front of him.

“What happened to Slick,” Thomas asks, but Eric is deeply immersed in his work. Thomas repeats himself.

“That fuckin’ pervert? What the hell do you care?”

“I don’t, I guess. I just saw the sign and wondered. That’s all.” Thomas leans over to the filet case and strokes a long piece of haddock. His fingers catch on the rib bones, and he pinches one and pulls it out.

“Fuckin’ Slick.” Eric likes Slick. Slick doesn’t complain about the mess that Eric’s leaky fish cases leave across the floor in the early mornings, after the ice has thawed. Slick has been Eric’s connection to the management as well for the past five years. “I come in here this morning, and Jeff and Slick are goin’ at it. Something about whorin’ and boozin’. I don’t even know.”

“Oh tell him the whole damn story, Eric,” his wife shoots from the whole-fish case.

“Whatever, Barb, just cause somebody in here is getting laid doesn’t mean you gotta throw stones.” He looks at Thomas. “I guess when Jeff got here ... well ... I guess Slick was screwin’ some stripper on top of one of his steak cases.” Thomas wonders which of his elementary school classmates it was. “I mean, I told Slick, anytime you wanna do that, fuckin’ do it on my case not that Nazi butcher’s.”

Thomas wants to feel sympathy for Slick but he doesn’t. All that he can think of is the Croaker. It’s there in the case, he thinks. It’s there waiting to talk to me.

“Are you ever going to start working? And stop fingerin’ up that haddock filet. Who you think wants to eat that while you’re knuckle deep into it?” Subconsciously, Thomas has pulled five pin sized rib bones out of the filet, and mangled the topside of it. He stares at the filet curiously. “Anytime now sweetheart,” Eric says.

Thomas steps up and begins to clean. As he cleans he glances to the case looking for the Croaker from the day before. Eric’s wife stands in the way of the fish case taking orders, so she blocks his view of the far end where the Croaker would be.

In the time it takes Eric to clean three fish, Thomas has cleaned one. He is distracted. All he sees is that fish in his dreams. Amid this distraction Thomas makes a



classic fish stand blunder: his hands continue to move while his mind is elsewhere. As he tries to see past Eric's wife, his hand traces the gill of a Whiting in order to remove the head. However in his haste, Thomas slices through the neck, then the spine, then cuts off the last quarter inch of his left index finger.

Thomas pulls his hands away from the cutting board as fast as possible, so as not to get blood on the product. Only then does Eric notice: when Thomas has stopped working. No one else at the stand and no customers have noticed this event. Eric stops cleaning and stares at Thomas, looking for something to say. Instead of speaking he throws a roll of duct tape to him, and goes back to his work. Thomas looks at the duct tape and bleeds on himself, but stands motionless behind the stand.

"Hey, bleed on yer own time, we got fish to clean." Eric's hands carry scars so plentiful they look like the New Jersey Highway system. In the center of the state you can see highway 80 curling across his palm connecting Philadelphia and Trenton, a scar of great proportions left by a shattered fish case window. As you near the great city of New York, you see the thousands of hairline streets on the tips of his fingers, many like Thomas's wound, circling his fingers. Thomas wraps his finger in tape without looking at it and digs into the piles of fish as the customers begin to notice something wrong.

"What's wrong wit' dat kid?" a large black woman ordering Ling Cod bone-out asks.

"He okay, man?" a dusty white man clad entirely in denim ordering Black Bass head-on inquires, but Thomas and Eric ignore them and continue to gut. After a few fish however, Thomas's tape begins to leak. Blood drips from his finger onto the cutting

board, and eventually all over the fish. By now, the customers no longer care, and only want their fish as fast as possible, so Thomas and Eric clean them oblivious to the blood.

Thomas watches his blood mix with that of the fish, making rivers that flow from the cutting boards and onto the cement floor. He cleans gingerly, sticking his finger out trying not to let it touch the product, but the blood comes faster now. Eric sweats and cuts and doesn't care that Thomas bleeds. He cuts, cleans, and wraps, sending out packages of fish that include a part of Thomas. He sends his customers a part of the Atlantic and a part of Thomas as well. Thomas watches the packages of fish, laced with his plasma and blood cells go over the counter to the woman and the dusty man. He sees them at home baking and frying his blood. He sees them consume the flesh of these fish, flesh that runs thick with his own juice.

As Thomas intensely cleans with Eric at his side he starts to like this idea. He is a part of the cycle. He is a part of the machine of the ocean. For a moment he is pleased and forgets his injury and loss of blood, until he looks up at the scale. He sees Eric's wife piling Croakers onto the scale by the dozen, their pasty eyes staring at him from the top of the case. An old woman is ordering them. She seems so small she can barely see over the case. As the fish tumble to the cutting board Thomas's legs give and he falls to the floor of the market.

25.

Notes from dialogue between Dr. Herman Knackstead and Thomas Fortney during a psychiatric evaluation conducted 11-17-02.

*Thomas's mother suggested that he should begin to seek counseling regarding his recent inability to sleep, and his stress surrounding work and school. He reluctantly has agreed to see me on a monthly basis, and in our first meeting I attempted to get him to open up about his sleepless nights. He was hesitant to begin a dialogue about this, so I have asked him to write for me. I asked him simply to tell me about any dreams that he had been having in the past few months, and he wrote this:*

I dream I am underwater.

I see a lot of fish around, but I feel uncomfortable so I swim to the surface.

When I get there, there's a boat with no one on it but the Croaker.

I climb on board and feel immediately like I'm safe, but I can't see land and I don't know where we are and there's a goddamn fish driving the thing.

It is a smaller boat, like a sunfish or something.

Like the one I used to cruise around with Al when I was little.

The fish doesn't seem to know how to drive, so I do, but it is more like flying a kite than like sailing.

I have to do it all by hand.

When I pull we go faster and turn, when I let slack go we slow down. After a while I start to notice things in the water.

Dead things.

First it is just fish.

Bass, Salmon, Trout, Mackerel.

Then the dead things start to be people I know.

My brother, Eric, Hummer, my mom.

The whole time I have to concentrate on sailing because I don't want to stop and see all these dead people, but then it is like the Croaker starts to sabotage me.

He takes the jib line and throws it in the water.

He rocks the boat.

He laughs at me.

Finally he leans real hard to one side and flips the fucking boat over.

That's the end.

26.

When Thomas awakes he is standing outside of the stand. He doesn't feel like anything's wrong so he looks at his finger. There is no cut. He looks past his own hand and sees a Croaker standing on his tail fins next to him.

"Hey," it says.

"Hey."

"I can tell the future," the Croaker says. Thomas can see life in the fish's eyes. It doesn't look like it has been lying dead in a fish case.

"Look. I don't believe you're really there, and I'm pretty sure that I'm dreaming right now."

"This may be true," the fish states.

"So why am I dreaming you?"

“I can’t answer your questions, I can only tell the future,” the fish says.

“Why would I want to know the future? And why should I listen to a stupid fish? I chop thirty Croaker’s heads off in one hour. How can I trust you? Maybe you’re the ghost of Croakers past that has come to haunt me for the rest of my life. But why do you want me? Eric’s chopped up a lot more of your relatives than I could ever have claimed to.”

“I can’t answer your questions, I–”

“I know, you can only tell the future. So why tell me?”

“You are the only one who can change it. Look at the market,” the fish says, and Thomas does. He sees the fish stand running without him. He sees Eric smiling and cleaning fish. He sees Fran’s Fried Chicken, and the hippies that do the battering singing along with Jerry Garcia. He sees them laugh and bread and fry. He sees Lay’s Poultry, and Lay and his wife standing by their cases talking to customers. Only now does he wonder why Lay chose to sell the seemingly unrelated poultry and home-brewed iced tea. He sees the produce stand, and Chris and Pete smiling and pruning away at cantaloupes and honeydews, making a mixed pint of fruit to sell for one dollar as a shopping snack. He sees the Amish deli, all of the employees so excited to be this close to the city, watching the people and each other to see who is the most bold. He sees Kay the Greek and her health food, gossiping with the bakers about why Slick was fired. He sees the customers. He sees the affluent and the poor rubbing elbows. He sees the homeless safely resting on benches with no one to harass them. He sees the young with the old. He sees the people of the city.

“This is the present, Thomas. This is the world in which you exist. This is your home, your community and your family. In fact, it is mine too. I may be a simple Croaker, but I am a part of this cycle. I am sold, consumed, and digested to the same rhythm and pulse by which this very market exists,” the Croaker says.

“Yeah, I get it. So what?”

“May I show you the future, Thomas?”

“Go ahead ... what do I call you? Croaker? George? Fish?”

“You don’t need to call me anything.” Upon saying this, the Croaker turns and begins to exit the market. He slinks toward the south exit and walks into the parking lot, and off into the city.

“I thought you said you’d tell me the future!” Thomas calls, but it is too late. He turns and begins to walk towards the fish stand, but he notices something different. The lighting is different. It seems like the sun has been blocked out. He walks to the window and looks out across the parking lot. The Foodmaster, as if by magic, sits on the far end of the parking lot towering over the market, but no one seems to notice. Suddenly everything stops. There is silence in the market, and everyone stares at him. Thomas quietly walks away from the window trying to avoid the gaze of the market but cannot find a place to hide. He puts both hands out at his sides, as if to signal surrender, but gets no response.

“What?” he says to anyone, but before he gets his answer, a wrecking ball smashes through the north side of the market. First it crushes Fran’s Fried Chicken, knocking the bodies of the breaders and fryers around like rag dolls. It cleanly crushes the stand, sending grease and chicken everywhere. No one runs, they simply wait. Next

it hits Lays Poultry. Lay maintains the same smile as the wrecking ball plows through him, scattering his limbs and those of his wife. The fish stand is next. Thomas watches Eric get leveled by the ball, spewing glass and fish and ice from the case everywhere. On the back swing Hummer's gets destroyed next, and Thomas has a hard time discerning human flesh from that of a cow. The ball smashes through the produce stand, popping Chris and Pete like melons. It plows through the benches where the homeless sit motionless waiting for their fate. The ball bashes Kay's Health Food stand, and the Bakery before pushing out the wall.

Thomas looks around at the market he once knew, and it is destroyed. Through a hole in the wall, he can see the Foodmaster, its glowing sign shining down red, replacing the sun. The parking lot littered with carts, and its automatic doors awaiting the next customer.

27.

“Members of this large and varied family (Sciaenidae) got their name of ‘croakers’ and ‘drums’ because of their noisy habit of vibrating muscles attached to their swim bladders that produces a thrumming, booming noise. The few members of the clan who don’t have swim bladders make up for the lack by grinding their teeth. Some believe this sound relates to courtship and spawning. Others think it can also be a fear response, as they croak a lot when they’re caught and presumably quite scared.”

*-Taken from, “Seafood Lover’s Almanac,” published by the National Audubon Society*

28.

“Relax, homeboy. What the hell ya screamin’ for?” Thomas opens his eyes and before he sees who is talking, he recognizes the drawl of Jeff Hummer. “Jesus man, you’d think a fuckin’ fish gutter could handle a little blood, wouldn’tcha?”

“What the fuck happened?”

“You knocked out, fish boy. Shit, I ain’t never seen yer bro’ or Platt ever do that. You hit the ground like a sack of meat! Lemme see that finger.” Thomas sticks his finger towards Jeff, and looks at it himself. The tape is stained with blood, maybe his own, maybe fish blood. Jeff carefully unravels the soaked tape and looks at the wound. “Cut that shit clean off, huh.”

“I guess so.”

“Well, lemme just see what I can do for ya.” Jeff, unlike Eric, is extremely safety conscious. This may stem from the fact that he pays his employees with a check, as opposed to a pile of fish gut soaked cash and a few muscle relaxers. He pulls a first aid kit from under a case, and begins to dress the wound. “So how long ya think Eric’s gonna be sore at me?”

“About what?”

“About ... ya know ... the Foodmaster thing.” Thomas remembers. He remembers where he is, and the future, and the Croaker.

“Maybe forever, Jeff.” Thomas pulls his hand away from Jeff and stands up. When he stands he is behind the butcher stand. It feels alien to him; it feels like betrayal. When he regains his focus he looks at the market. It all still stands. It is slower now, but



only because the morning rush has ended. When he looks at the fish stand, he sees Eric staring back at him. Standing behind Hummer's Meats is too much for him. Here he stands with the enemy.

"Wait a sec, Tommy. Lemme fix ya up now," Jeff says. But Thomas walks from behind the stand over to the entrance to Platt's. He picks up another apron, and again wraps his finger in silver duct tape. He looks at Eric and sees him hide a smile.

"Fuck those butchers. And fuck Foodmaster." Thomas walks directly to the board, picks up a Croaker and hacks through its spine with speed and precision. Eric watches him with a sly grin on his face.

"Bout goddamn time," Eric says.

29.

"Our studies show that small businesses frequently thrive when they're in close proximity to a *Foodmaster*. There's nothing like a little healthy competition."

-Alan Caulding, CEO *Foodmaster Inc.*

30.

Thomas smokes furiously on his way home from work. He pulls at the cigarette between his forefinger and thumb with ferocity, making the filter burn hot and singe his fingertips. He smokes with his left hand because his right thumps with pain, and a single

finger sits awkwardly, wrapped in paper towels and duct tape. He thinks of the Croaker's message to him earlier in the day. He thinks of the cycle that the Croaker described.

In that moment, Thomas becomes the Croaker. He swims down the creek that lines the road on his way home and eventually reaches the sludge filled Susquehanna River. In this river he finds the pollution and waste of Pennsylvania and New York. He finds shopping carts, dead bodies, tires, salamanders like he caught with his older brother years ago. He sees steel barrels, water brown with human waste, water warm with chemicals. He sees Three Mile Island looming over the surface of the water, draining radium and uranium and steamy reactor water. He passes the steel mills, the iron works, their long I-beams stacked along the river, shavings of metal lining the shores like sand.

Finally, after miles of filth and feculence, Thomas reaches the Chesapeake and the Delaware River. He reaches the spot where the most populated region of the United States sends their waste, their unwanted, their refuse. It occurs to him that this is not only the place that they outlet their garbage, but also the place that they harvest their seafood. The same chemicals and secrets that they hope the Delaware River will wash away come back to them in the form of their children's food. Thomas imagines Three Mile Island picnics where all of the employees crack open crabs and feast on clams, all of their food tainted by their own poison. He imagines the parents telling their children not to go near the water, as they hammer down on another uranium enriched crab claw.

Thomas swims through the Chesapeake on his way to the Atlantic when suddenly his journey is stopped. He is being pulled to the surface of the water, and yanked out. He lies in a pile of other Croakers, all of them belching and flopping about, until they are packed and iced, and their consciousness slowly fades. He will not wake up, the cold

will stop his tiny brain and strong heart. Instead, he will be bought by Eric Platt, and taken back up the Chesapeake, back to the Susquehanna River, and back to the fish market from whence he came.

Thomas returns to himself, and realizes he has reached his home. He walks to the back door, peeling off layers of blood stained clothes in the cold night air. He places the clothes in a bag he keeps outside the back door, and walks into his house naked. He throws the bag full of dirty fish clothes into the hamper and stumbles to his bed, where he quickly falls into a dream filled sleep. He doesn't know that this very evening he will burn the Foodmaster to its very foundation.

31.

“Burn, and that’s both feet on the ground. Burn, and I think I’m goin’ down.”

*-Neil Young, from Burn, 197(?)*

32.

“I told both you boys, I want you to think about nothing but fish, all day long. I ain’t gonna be satisfied with you as workers until I feel like you are swimmin’ in the ocean with all the goddamn fishes. Shit, I think about fish so goddamn much, I dream about ‘em.”

*-Eric Platt to Aldous Fortney, 11-20-02*

33.

Notes from dialogue between Dr. Herman Knackstead and Thomas Fortney during psychiatric evaluation. Conducted 11-21-02.

*I agreed to reassess Thomas's mental capacity following the events of the days between our meetings. Further analysis of his mental state has led me to conclude that he was in a dream-like state when he committed the acts in question on the date of 11-19. It is my professional opinion that Thomas may have been in a state similar to sleepwalking during this time. I believe based on what he remembers of the incident, that he was able to function so normally because of his intimate knowledge of the landscape and structure of the Foodmaster. Furthermore, I do not believe that Thomas has any real knowledge of his actions or the consequences that may result from them.*

*During my analysis of his mental state, I asked Thomas what the last thing he remembered before the fire was. He responded by writing this on a piece of paper:*

The last thing I remember before that night was going to sleep after work and having a dream about the Croaker. I got home, took my shit off, and had this dream about him.

I remember being back in the market, but it wasn't the market. Instead of there being stands and shops and stuff, there were office cubicles. All of the people that had worked in the normal market were there, but instead of them standing behind their

normal counters, they sat at desks with computers. I tried to get people's attention, but nobody seemed to know me. Then the Croaker walked in, but he was different too.

Instead of looking like a normal Croaker, he was only fins, bones, and a head, and his eyes looked milky like rotten fish eyes tend to look.

He says: I'm rotten.

I say: I can see you are rotten. What happened to the market?

He says: It rotted away.

I say: What the fuck do you mean it rotted away?

He says: I mean it slowly decomposed until it was ashes and dirt and rock, and then a seed was planted and this grew in its place.

Then walks over and opens a furnace that sits in one of the cubicles. Everything about him looks like fire. The flames from the furnace scream out and lick him, singing his bones and crisping the skin on his head.

He says: Fire cleanses, and makes way for new growth.

*At this point Thomas stopped writing and put his head down on the table. I asked him if he remembered anything else about the dream or what happened afterwards, and he shook his head no and wrote: I'm done writing about this stupid shit. You are a friggin' quack.*

*Despite this violent outbreak, I firmly believe that this is the extent of his memory of this evening. I also believe that the next thing that Thomas remembers about the evening in question was when he awoke, handcuffed to a gurney in the hospital. His frustration with me did not seem to be triggered by any of my actions or words, but rather*

*by his inability to bring up any memories of his involvement with the fire. It seems the fixture of Thomas' guilt is not the fire itself, but instead his own memory.*

34.

"I couldn't believe it when I saw that fucker. I mean imagine nearly a solid acre of dried lumber, leaves, gas, and construction equipment just burnin' like the fires of hell. Every so often we'd see something pop, and blow lumber and fire all over the damn place. It was a fuckin' beauty alright, and it was a real fuckin' mess."

*-Gerald Raymond, Fire Marshall, DCERT, 11-19-02*

35.

*911 call made from the cellular phone of Jeff Hummer, 11-19-02*

911 Operator: 911, what is your emergency?

Jeff Hummer: Yeah, this is Jeff Hummer of Hummer's Meats out in Kline Village. I'm drivin' into the parking lot of Kline Village right now, and it looks like there is a small fire breakin' out in the Foodmaster construction site.

911: Okay sir, I am notifying the fire depart-

JH: Yeah, actually this shit's a bit bigger than I had expected.

911: Okay sir, just try to stay calm. Are there any people inside?

JH: I don't know. I'm still ... I'm parking my car here. (explosion) Mother Mary!

(grunt) This shit just blew!

911: Sir remain clam, and try to get away from the fire. There will be fire engines there shortly, just get yourself to safety.

JH: Man, I think ... I think there are some people in there, man.

911: I'm contacting an ambulance, sir. Please stay calm. Can you see how many people there are?

JH: Shit, I don't know. (screaming) I can't-

911: Sir please get yourself to safety immediately.

JH: I see one of 'em. (pause) Shit, I see somebody. (pause) Shit, I know that guy.

911: Sir please stay calm.

JH: I gotta go get Tommy ... (shouting)

911: Hello? Sir are you there?

(end of call)

36.

Thomas Fortney carries a bag of gasoline soaked rags in his left hand, and an unlit cigarette in the other. He whistles *Iron Man* by Black Sabbath, and periodically lifts the unlit cigarette to his mouth, pulling on it, breathing tobacco-filtered air into his lungs. Though it is not lit, he flicks it every so often, and rolls it in his fingers. He is walking down an access road behind a construction site in Penbrook, Pennsylvania, thinking about his friend, Eric Platt.

He is walking towards the skeleton of a massive building, a fortress of framing. Bulldozers and front-end loaders and construction cones litter the street around him. This road had been the road that he would take to work in the past, but when they started building the Foodmaster, they closed the road to through traffic. He doesn't notice any other people, and frankly doesn't care if they see him. He can't imagine what anyone would be doing on this construction site at three in the morning.

When he reaches the construction site he sets the bucket down, and slides the cigarette in between his lips, pinching the butt in his teeth. Thomas takes a deep breath and smiles, showing the cigarette in his teeth, grinning at the night air as though it was watching. He bends over and picks several rags from the top of the bucket, and begins distributing them around several support beams, spreading them out to get the desired effect.

He repeats this process until the rags are spread throughout what would eventually be the produce aisle, the butcher, and the bakery of the Foodmaster. He throws rags on checkout lines, the pharmacy, the canned goods. He throws them on the cheap romance novels and the tabloids. He throws them over what will become the dairy refrigerator. He dumps the remaining gasoline out of the gas can he has stolen from his mother's garage, and when he is finished, he walks from the pile farthest away to the nearest one, flicking matches into the piles and scurrying away as they ignite. By the time he reaches the last pile, the building has begun to fall on where the apples would be. The butcher shop is close to collapsing.

Thomas moves to the last pile on his way out and stops for a moment. He hears a voice amongst the falling two-by-fours and the dusty refrigeration cases that he



recognizes. Thomas turns and sees a man pinned beneath two large support beams, lying on a bed of roses.

“Cash!” he yells, as he accidentally throws his now lit cigarette into the pile closest to him. “Cash Man, I’m comin’, man!” But before Thomas navigates through the burning wood and smoldering metal, a pile of mismatched boards and planks and nails falls from the scaffolding above Cash. When Thomas gets to him, his arm is wedged between a piece of plywood and a cement mixer that sits next to a scrap pile, and it is mostly torn from his body. The left side of his midsection rests on a series of different length framing planks, and slowly slides down them. The rest of him lies at Thomas’ feet.

“Tommy,” Cash squeaks out, and Thomas is amazed he can speak. The sound of his voice nearly knocks Thomas out. The tone of a man he knows near death by his own hand is sobering. “Where’d all this fire come from?” he says, and laughs and closes his eyes.

Thomas stands up to realize that he is in great danger amidst the cracking and popping Foodmaster. He hears a loud explosion, and sees that the gas tanks of the generators that lie scattered around the floor of the Foodmaster have begun to blow up, showering shrapnel and bits of metal everywhere around him. On his way out, Thomas notices a generator in his path only a few seconds too late. He turns to find another exit from the now blazing Foodmaster, when the generator pops and showers Thomas’ back with flaming fuel and bits of steel.

“I thought anybody who was in that fire was dead for sure. I didn’t think nobody would come outta there. I mean forget the blazing flames and multiple hundred degree temperature, imagine all the shrapnel and timber fallin’ all over the place. It must have been like a battle zone, like you were caught in the crossfire or somethin’. Anyway, I thought that, ‘til I saw Jeff come draggin’ that ball crazy kid outta there with his one good arm.”

*-Gerald Raymond, Fire Marshall, DCERT, 11-19-02*

38.

### **Michael ‘Cash’ Cashen (1947 - 2002)**

Michael Cashen of Penbrook, formerly of Tampa, Florida, died Thursday in Penbrook. He was 55.

Dwight – Johnson Funeral Home will be handling the arrangements. Memorial donations may be made in his name to the United States Disabled Veteran’s Fund, 205 NW Market St., Harrisburg, PA, 17111.

*-Obituary, Nov. 21, 2002 in The Harrisburg Senator*

39.

### **LOCAL HERO DIES**

**Jeffery Adam Hummer (1959-2002)**

Jeff Hummer died Thursday in the Hershey Medical Center Burn Unit. Jeff Hummer was recently called a hero for his actions during the November 19<sup>th</sup> Foodmaster Fire, when he dragged fellow market worker Thomas Fortney from certain death.

\* \* \*

Jeff Hummer survived major burns and lacerations to his torso, face and hands as he dragged the suspected arsonist to safety following a massive explosion that left him unconscious, and fatally wounded homeless veteran Michael Cashen. He was taken to The Hershey Med Center late Thursday night and survived for nearly three days until he went into cardiac arrest late last night.

\* \* \*

A celebration of his life will be held at First Presbyterian Church on Monday, November 22<sup>nd</sup> at 11 AM. Readings and remembrances will be held at noon on Tuesday at the Hummer's home, 231 State St., Elizabethtown, PA.

Excerpts from the *Harrisburg Senator*, 11-21-02

40.

"I couldn't wait for that Foodmaster to open. All that selection and low prices. God I'm getting all flustered just thinking about it. My girlfriend Anne went to the one over in Carlisle, she said they have an aisle where there is nothin' but toilet paper. Toilet paper!

Can you imagine that? A solid aisle of just toilet paper stacked ten feet high! Now that is selection.”

*-Alice Wranglin, Kline Village customer*

41.

“We regret this tragedy, and our hearts go out to the families who have lost loved ones. I can also assure my stockholders and investors that we at *Foodmaster Incorporated* will recover from this tragedy, and continue to bring the consumer a quality, low-priced product, with a friendly and helpful attitude.”

*-Alan Caulding, CEO Foodmaster Inc.*

### Part III

#### 1.

Aldous Fortney wishes his brother were insane, or better yet, that his mind were tormented by a growing tumor, slowly eclipsing the boy he once knew in a fog of delirium. If this were true, there would be simple solutions, simple reasons. Aldous envisions his brother's brain cloaked in a cancerous veil, the surgeons slicing it away like a filet from a salmon, and throwing the excess away in a bucket below their cutting boards. Perhaps after the cutting and cleaning he would have his brother back, free of the unwanted waste and the burden of his troubled mind. Or perhaps the surgery would end in his brother's death, letting those who loved him bring closure to his troubled ways. But none of this is true.

Instead, Aldous' brother sits in a small hospital room in thick leather restraints holding his hands and feet in place. When Aldous arrives at the hospital, he must sit with his mother first and console her before he goes to see his brother. When she sees him enter, she weeps passionately, doubling over with pain in her ribs. Aldous thinks she looks as though she has grown sick herself in the time since he has seen her, but she simply has worn herself to a shell of what she once was through lamenting for her youngest son. He sits with her not only to comfort her and console her, but also to delay the moment when he must walk through his brother's door, and see what remains of the young man he knew. He stays with his mother to delay the moment when he walks through the door and this becomes real. He fears the moment when his imagination will

no longer comfort him, and he will be faced with the most gruesome fact of them all: his brother is a murderer.

Finally, after several hours with his mother, Aldous picks himself off of the red vinyl waiting room seat, and walks toward the police officers outside his brother's door. As soon as he stands, one of the officers looks his way and watches him until he gets to the hospital room. As Aldous reaches for the door, the officer speaks.

"Al Fortney, right?" the thick man says. He stands next to the chair outside the room, one hand resting on its back, the other on his gun. "I saw the name on the door and I wondered if this guy was related to you." The officer smiles. "Name's Ronny Miller. We went to East High together, we had Royer in gym class." He pauses. "You remember, we had gym with the special kids? You know, the retards?"

Aldous stares coldly back at the man. He seems too old to have been a fellow classmate, but Aldous says nothing. Instead he forces a snicker, and begins to move past the officer.

"Look, man," he says as he puts his hand on Aldous' chest. "I'm really sorry about your, what is he, your brother?"

"Yeah. He is my brother."

"Well look, I'm real sorry." He pulls his hand away from Aldous and drags it below his nose, wiping the slime from his upper lip and nostrils. He then drags his hand up his right pant leg, leaving a streak of liquid up his leg. "By the way, all conversations inside this holding room are subject to taping and any information received from these tapes may be used in a court of law. Do you have any weapons or narcotics on you, sir?" Aldous stares at the streak of mucus on the man's trousers. "Al, did you hear me?"

“Yeah. I don’t have any weapons or drugs.”

“Visiting hours are over in eighteen and a half minutes, so make it quick.” The officer pulls a ring of keys from his belt, and opens the door to Thomas’s room. “Don’t expect him to talk much. He caught a piece of rebar in the mouth that was so hot it burnt his lips and tongue and knocked a shitload of his teeth out. See you in eighteen minutes.” The guard pushes Aldous through the door and locks it behind him.

Thomas looks dead. He is hooked up to a variety of machines. Aldous sees ones that pump, some that drip, and several that are beeping at different times and tempos. He sees tubes and wires that lead to the sea of Thomas’ body like rivers, bringing life and food, and removing waste and excrement. But it doesn’t seem as though it is his brother who is alive in this room. Instead it is the machines and monitors that seem to be vibrant. Lost in the organism of these pipes and tubes somewhere is his little brother. A murderer.

He walks up to the side of the bed and past the machines to what looks like a pile of sheets on the bed. Aldous cannot see Thomas’s face. It, like the rest of his body, is covered in thin gauze, like cheesecloth. For all that Aldous knows, this person is not his brother. It is a faceless murderer strapped to a bed. It is a man from a three-car pile-up, or a sky diving accident. Or it is a hero, burned nearly to death while saving the lives of his friends and the well being of his community. It is anything but his brother.

Aldous stands for a moment and listens to the humming and beeping and chirping and breathing of the machines that surround him. He reaches his hand to his brother’s side and lifts up his mittened hand.

“Sir, please don’t touch the prisoner,” a voice crackles through the intercom.

Aldous drops his brother’s hand, startled by the interruption of his thoughts. He wants to ignore the faceless voice and shake his brother awake. He wants to ask him why. He wants to ask him why he had to burn down the Foodmaster, why did he become what he is. He wants to hold his brother. He wants to pull the leather-padded restraints from his wrists and throw Thomas’ arms over his shoulders and hold him in this bed. He wants them to be young and be anywhere but here. He wants them to be with Eric at the market, laughing and chopping. Instead he is here, and he can’t touch the prisoner.

It is in this moment that Aldous doesn’t care about restraints or about faceless voices or about gym class cops. It is in this moment that Aldous wants to see his brother’s face and know this is real. He wants to feel the pain, the loss. Aldous reaches for the gauze around his brother’s face, and begins to unravel it.

“Sir, don’t touch the prisoner.”

Aldous doesn’t hear anything. He doesn’t hear the voice, or the beeps of the machine, or the breath of the respirator. He pulls at the gauze, ripping and tearing it from his brother’s head furiously now.

“Sir, we asked you nicely. We are going to have to remove you from the room if you persist.”

There is only a few wraps left and Aldous feels relief. This is not his brother. He has no hair, no eyebrows. His face is disfigured and smashed in places. His skin is covered with black char marks and bubbles of plasma and pus. This could not be his brother. He pulls the last strip away and looks into the glazed eyes of the boy who he taught to ride bikes, chase girls, smoke cigarettes, clean fish, play baseball, and build



sandcastles. He knows then that this is his brother Thomas. The door swings open behind him, and Aldous turns to a charging Ronny, nightstick drawn. Aldous raises his hands in the air, still holding the blood soaked gauze in one.

“Let’s go, Al. Visiting hours are over.” Ronny slaps the gauze from his hands, and is followed into the room by two nurses, who quickly get to cleaning Thomas up and rewrapping his head. Ron grabs Aldous by the arm and Aldous resists, craning his head over his brother to look at this face that seems so familiar, but he has never seen before.

“I’m sorry Tommy,” he says.

“I guess its gonna be the hard way then,” Ronny says, and wraps his night stick around Aldous’ throat, pulling up on it and pinching his Adam’s apple. When they get into the hallway, Ronny throws Aldous to the ground, as he must have over and over during their high school gym class. When Aldous looks back up at Ronny, from this angle he begins to look familiar.

“Get the fuck outta here, ya fuckwad.” Aldous stands and walks back down the hall to his mother who is asleep on a chair in the waiting room. He is glad she didn’t see Ronny throw him out. Aldous walks back to the seat next to her, and slides his shoulder under her head, wrapping his arm around her and feeling her spastic sobs as she dreams of her lost son.

## 2.

Jeff Hummer’s funeral is held on a Monday, the only day that the Kline Village Farmer’s Market is closed. Eric Platt does not attend. Instead, he sits at home with his

wife and children, wondering how Thomas Fortney, a boy he virtually raised, could be responsible for the death of his friend and fellow stand owner Jeff Hummer. He wonders now not if the Foodmaster will destroy his business and the market, but when it will do so. The delay of the construction of the Foodmaster will not be as “inevitable” as Caulding had said. In fact, Caulding and his corporation began reconstruction the day after the fire. They cleared and leveled, preparing the way for the new Foodmaster to rise from the ashes like a phoenix.

While Eric sits with his family contemplating their unsure future, Aldous Fortney attends the funeral of Jeff Hummer. The funeral is held at a small Presbyterian Church in Elizabethtown. The church is stark white on the inside and outside. Aldous enters quietly as the service begins, and sneaks up to the balcony to avoid being seen. The room is laced with flowers, covering the walls, the pulpit, and the windowsills, blocking the sun. There are all varieties and colors, but Aldous recognizes the style of the arrangements and most of them look to be from Pete’s Produce.

As the minister gives the sermon, Aldous looks down at the tops of the heads below him. He recognizes the bald spot of Lay the poultry guy, the round figure of Fran the fried chicken man, and sees a whole section of bonnets and simply parted hair that can only belong to the Amish deli workers. He sees the eye patch of Slick, and the spiked blond hair of Chris Cabba. He sees the Hummer family and their workers sitting beside the pulpit arm in arm, consoling the quiet sobs that come from their friends’ and family’s chests. He sees the people of the Kline Village Farmer’s market in tears, grieving the loss of one of their own together.

The service is short. Rebecca Robinson says a few sentences about Jeff and begins to cry. Aldous has never even seen Rebecca wince, even when she sliced a quarter-sized circle of flesh from the palm of her hand in a sandwich meat slicer, but here she weeps openly. When she regains her composure she says, “I just wanna ask everybody to pray for Tommy. He needs all our help and we don’t want to lose two members of our family.” Jeff’s oldest son helps her from the pulpit.

The last to speak is Jeff’s wife. “Let Tommy know we love him in our prayers, and hopefully this tragedy will end with the death of my husband.” Aldous looks at his shoes as she says this, so as not to make eye contact with anyone looking to the heavens.

When the service is over, Aldous walks to the front of the church still unnoticed, and looks at the pictures that surround Jeff’s casket. There is one that looks like a high school yearbook photo, but it was taken recently. Jeff sits at an angle with a blue backdrop and an American flag behind him, smiling broadly in his butcher’s apron. He wears a red T-shirt below it, and there are some stains at the top of the apron.

The second picture is of Jeff and his sons. They are all dressed in camouflage kneeling down in front of a pick-up truck. Jeff and his oldest son each hold an antler, and have the deer’s head cocked up and facing the camera. They look like warriors.

The third picture is of Jeff standing in front of the butcher stand in Kline Village on the first day it opened. Aldous looks closely at this picture, and thinks that he can see a reflection in the cases behind him. There are two figures, and one of them is unmistakably a young Eric Platt. Eric stands next to the photographer with his arms crossed at his chest, his apron around his waist, and a long filet knife in his hand.

As he looks at this picture, Aldous feels a hand grab his shoulder. He turns around and sees Slick staring back at him with one eye.

“Hey Platt kid,” he says, and shoves both hands in his pockets. “Let’s go have a smoke, huh?” Without answering, Aldous follows Slick out of the doors of the church and into the sunlight. He pulls a cigarette from his pack and lights a match. He pauses to watch the sulfur burn and crackle, and then pulls deeply inward into his lungs and sets the tobacco ablaze.

“How you been, Slick?” Aldous says.

“I got fired from the market.”

“I heard.”

“I got the janitorial job over there at the Foodmaster before the fire. Now they got me doin’ construction and shit, tryin’ to get the place open soon.” Slick smokes and kicks at a stone on the sidewalk.

“Foodmaster, huh? I guess a man’s gotta eat.”

“So what’s Platt gonna do? Move downtown, or to the west shore?”

“If I know him, he’ll stay right where he is until they pull him outta that market kicking and screaming.”

“Well, he ain’t gonna have anywhere to stay much longer, unless he wants to be bulldozed and wrecking balled.” Slick has given up on kicking the pebble at his feet, and now grinds it into the concrete.

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t hear?” Slick looks up from the pavement. “The Kline Foundation sold the property to Caulding. He gave all the stand owners jobs in his corporation and is gonna tear the place down next week. I guess he felt bad and all.”

Aldous can barely speak. He realizes that this isn’t just Jeff Hummer’s funeral, but it is also Kline Village’s. He realizes that all of these people from his past, from his community, have gathered here to not only mourn the death of one of their own, but to mourn the death of their entire existence as farmers and butchers and fish mongers and chicken fryers. Finally Aldous squeaks out, “He felt bad?”

“Look, man, a lot of these people want to get out of the market while they still can. If Foodmaster opens and they still have all of their life savings invested in perishable goods and their stand’s reputation, they’re pretty much screwed. These people are just trying to survive, you know?” Slick smashes his cigarette under his heel.

“So you think this is a good thing?”

“We all do, Al. It’s the only thing we can do.”

### 3.

Four days after Jeff Hummer’s body is put into the ground, the Kline Village Farmer’s Market is leveled by bulldozers and wrecking balls. Aldous is there, but he is one of the few old employees that show up to watch their home reduced to broken glass, crunched concrete, and shattered refrigeration units. They smash through the walls, the ceiling, and haul big loads of Kline Village away in dump trucks. It doesn’t take them long to destroy the dreams of Harold and Angus Kline. It doesn’t take them long to

destroy seventy-five years of fish and beef and pork and produce, seventy-five years of delis and eggs and milk and flowers.

It is as though a divine hand has come down and wiped the market's history from the earth. Aldous can see the last evidence of the market in the dumpster. He sees bags of lettuce and bones from the butcher. He sees the unmistakable sight of a bag of fish waste, the bones and heads pressed against the slimy clear plastic of the bag. He can identify the fish simply from their remains. He sees a whiting, a sea trout, and a croaker.

Across the parking lot of what was once the Kline Village Farmer's Market not a hundred yards away from the crashing walls of the market, the scaffolding of the new Foodmaster rises into the sky. He sees men hammering and piecing together a new structure, as though the fire had never happened. And soon, it would be as though Kline Village, Hummer's Meats, and Platt's Fresh Fish and Seafood never existed either.

#### 4.

Aldous goes to see Eric Platt. He drives the familiar road from the market to Eric's house, the same road that he has driven to pick up his Eric's children for baseball practice, to take his dog from his house to the vet, and to take Eric home from and intoxicated evening at the market. Aldous has done it so many times he is able to drive it effortlessly, blindly.

He arrives at the house as the sun sets, popping lights on around the neighborhood. He hesitates in the car only to remember. He remembers the first time he ever came to this house, and Eric answered the door in his underwear with a kid in one

hand, and a bong in the other. He remembers realizing that this was now his boss, and his teenage brain rejoiced.

He remembers the last time he was there. He had brought a girl home from college, and Eric had prepared a feast for them on the grill. As soon as he had put the food on it began to storm terribly. Eric dragged the grill inside filling the entire house with smoke, and cooked the entire meal as planned. He cooked fish and meat and chicken and vegetables on the grill, saying things like, "I'm grilling inside from now on!" and "I think if you grill indoors you get more flavor!" Eric was much too proud of Aldous to not grill every item of food he had in his home that day.

Aldous remembers Penbrook, and believes that this story, the story of his brother Thomas must be heard. This community, this place has become his family. His blood runs down the sewer grates, these houses hold the memories of his life and of his brother's. He looks at the front of this house and remembers the first time he felt like it was his own, and that coming to it and working with Eric became visiting with his family. But now, this family is gone, this community destroyed, and all Aldous has left are his memories and the stories that surround them.

This day however, things have changed. This day when Aldous arrives there are no indoor grills or bongs or half-naked fishmongers. This day there is Eric, unemployed, with two crazed teenage boys, an angry under-appreciated wife, and bills he can not pay. This day Aldous knocks on the door, and does not know what to expect, other than despair. When the door opens, there is more than enough of it.

"Aldous Fortney, as I live and breathe." Eric is wearing sweatpants and a stained T-shirt that says *Stone Harbor, New Jersey*. He holds his hand over the mouthpiece of a

phone as he opens the door for Aldous to enter. "Sit down, man, Barb and the kids are out. Lemme just finish this call." Eric walks into the hall closet, and shuts the door. Aldous can hear him whispering on the phone in the closet. After a few seconds, he comes out.

"Hello, Eric," Aldous says. "I just watched the market crash."

"I heard about that. They told me on Monday that I had to get my shit outta there, but I said fuck it, and left all that fish sittin' in them cases to rot." Eric Platt smiles and walks over to sit down across from Aldous. There is clothing and food everywhere, so Eric has to push what looks to be a pair of jockey underwear and a twinkie off to the side before he can sit.

"You left your stuff in the market?"

"Hell yeah. Caulding was pissed when he sent people in there to inspect the place before demolition. He called me and demoted me already." Eric impatiently stands back up and paces around the room.

"What do you mean demoted? Did you take a job with that shithead?" Aldous scowls at Eric as he says this, and Eric wants nothing more than to laugh and say no. But he doesn't.

"Yeah. Fucker didn't even give me a job sellin' fish. He put me in their office down on Third Street."

"Tell me you are kidding." Aldous stares at Eric's nervous smile and scarlet cheeks.

"I had to, Al. I gotta take care of my kids," he says instead, and Aldous looks away from him and at the shag carpet stained with grape juice at his feet. "So I took the



fuckin' job, so what? It's real easy for you to be all self-righteous and shit, while you're sittin' down in Philly, and I'm here with your brother burning down buildings."

"Look, all I'm sayin--"

"Bullshit, Aldous. I gotta work. That's the way it goes. If it isn't guttin' fish, then it is pushin' pencils for Caulding." Eric says. His face is red with shame and fear and sadness.

"I'm sorry, Eric." Aldous stands in silence with Eric Platt for what will be the last time they will see each other for the rest of their lives. He walks towards the fish man and wraps his arms around him. "I wish I could have been here."

"You being here wouldn't have done any damn good, Al," Eric says, and he believes he is right.

"I'll be in touch. I gotta go see my mom before I go back down the turnpike." Aldous doesn't wait for Eric to respond, and walks out the front door. When he gets in his car he begins to cry hysterically. He doesn't cry for his own pain, but for the pain of his friends and his family, and for his inability to control their fates.

Aldous cries for his brother, who sleeps this night away in restraints, strapped to a hospital bed. His brother will lie in that same bed through a long and painful recovery, his skin a rough and mangled copy of what it once was. Thomas will finally leave this bed to go sit in a cell for years on end, until he is a hardened shell, scarred and bitter. He will spend his days hiding his torn and battered face from children and lovers, for fear they might shriek and cry at the sight. Thomas will live the rest of his nights with the weight of Jeff Hummer's death pushing down on him. He will spend long sleepless

nights hearing his drawl, and seeing Jeff pulling his own flaming body from the wreckage of the Foodmaster.

Aldous cries for Jeff Hummer, who lies in a coffin in the First Presbyterian Church Cemetery in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. He cries for Jeff's sons, and sees them in the picture with the deer, but their father is absent. They sit lost, barely able to lift the deer's head. Gone from their faces are the smiles of victory and conquest, they are replaced with the look of loneliness and abandonment.

Aldous Fortney cries for himself. He sits in his car leaving his home with nothing more than a notebook of facts and imaginings remaining of what was a community that he was a part of, a community in which he belonged. He leaves Eric's house with nothing but a story.

But more than he cries for himself or anyone, Aldous Fortney cries for Eric Platt. Tomorrow, Eric will wake up at six thirty, put on a tie for the first time in fifteen years, and go to work for Alan Caulding. He will walk into the Foodmaster Offices on Third Street a defeated man. He will not cut the heads off of croakers, or clean soft-shell crabs. He will not be covered in scales and guts at the end of a workday, and he will not smell like the Chesapeake Bay. Instead, Eric Platt will make cold calls promoting the opening of a new Foodmaster in Penbrook.

"Hello! I'm calling to let you know that a Foodmaster is opening in your town! Foodmaster is famous for its low low prices, and for its courteous and polite service. Grand opening week only, get a pack of Oscar Mayer franks with any purchase!" he will say. In fact he will say it three hundred and twenty-five times that day.