

**the “F” is silent**

**short stories by**

**sean c. mintus**

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## contents

everything in its right place	1
yonaguna	23
river on fire	41
over charlotte	50
andy hausler ruined my life	74
a long slow drag	87

58.9

one hundred six

caleb's story

127

*for saskia*

**we are here and it is now. further than that,  
all human knowledge is moonshine.  
- h.l. mencken**



**the “F” is silent**

Everything in its Right Place



Saturday was Nana's laundry day. My sister, Amy, and I took turns driving Aunt Nana to Schrader's Laundromat in Youngwood. There was a perfectly good washer/dryer set in our basement, but Nana insisted on Schrader's. Nana didn't trust any machinery made after 1976 and was always looking for an excuse to leave the house.

It was supposed to be Amy's day, but she complained until I switched with her so that she could get sufficiently whored out for her date with Tony, a bartender from the A & B Club. We knew Tony from way back in high school. He'd been a senior when Amy and I were sophomores. Last I'd heard, he dropped out and enlisted when he turned eighteen – just three months away from a diploma. Amy loved to date losers. I told her it was because she had such a massive inferiority complex that she always dated beneath her. The truth was, she just didn't have any other options. Turned out the Marines didn't want Tony. But New Stanton did. New Stanton would take anybody, so long as they'd agree to stay there forever.

“My neck hurts,” Nana groaned as I tossed two standard issue duffel bags full of hand-me-down dresses and cardigans into the trunk. I slammed it shut and the newly-formed ice broke away, sending slivers skittering across the asphalt driveway.

“Lymph Nodes swollen again?” I asked out of obligation as I walked around to the passenger side and helped Nana into the car.

“No, I think my jugular is pressing on my windpipe. I can hardly breathe.”

By the time I had gotten back around to my side of the car and climbed in, Nana had already lit her cigarette. I slid the car into drive and turned up the radio, trying to forget about Nana and my hangover.

The night before, Jim and I had met these two girls from Derry at the movies. I didn't want to go, but Jim said he couldn't get any unless he brought someone along to run interference. At 22, it seemed slightly pathetic and incredibly creepy to be dating eighteen-year-old girls. But Jim preferred the young ones and I didn't care enough to protest.

“Derry girls always put out,” Jim assured me. “All we need to do is flash some green and their panties'll fly off.”

I burned close to twenty bucks on a movie ticket and dinner for Cindy, my half of the Derry sex cake. All for a potential blow job in some filthy discount movie theatre. She spent the better part of the evening sobbing about some punk named Phil from Latrobe while Jim and Angie necked in the seats a few rows back. I swore that I would take all twenty of those dollars out of Jim's ass. I couldn't help but look at Cindy like a prostitute during the entire drive from the theatre to her place. We dropped the girls off and headed to Denny's. We walked underneath the neon yellow sign and slid into a booth at the back of the smoking section. I watched Jim peruse the menu as though he didn't know each page by heart.

“What do you have planned?” I asked.

“I don’t know. ‘Moons Over My-Hammy’ looks good.”

I stuck my hand out and slapped his menu down on the table. He smiled at first and got ready to smack me upside the head, but stopped short when he saw I was serious.

“Don’t start this shit again,” he whined, “every time you strike out with a girl whose name you wouldn’t have remembered anyway, you start bitching about losing your scholarship and getting stuck here and it makes my fucking head hurt.”

A portly waitress in a crooked red apron who looked as though she was on the tail end of a four-day shift waddled up. I watched the helpless prisoner in her glide through the specials and the soup of the day in a gravelly voice while looking down at us unimpressed, her pen perched over a small tablet. Thin stitching that barely clung to the apron spelled out *Marissa*.

“Seriously, though, what do you have planned?” I pressed.

“King of Spain. I’m going to be the King of Spain. Can we fucking order now?”

“You can’t sling cases forever,” I yelled.

“Should I come back?” Marissa asked impatiently.

“No,” Jim said. “Give me the Big Texas Barbecue Burger with seasoned fries and a Sprite.”

“Appetizer sampler. Fries instead of onion rings. Coffee,” I countered.

“That’s not technically a sampler if you have onion rings,” Marissa mused.

“I don’t want to get into a semantic dialogue here. I just want the fries, *Marissa*,” I hissed.

“Sorry for not knowing better, *Billy*,” she said, reading the name off my letterman’s jacket, “I’ve seen you play, you know.”

“Yeah?” I perked up.

“Sure. Five years ago.”

“So much for a tip,” Jim laughed.

“So much for eating food that hasn’t been dropped on the floor,” she grinned.

Marissa huffed and walked back toward the kitchen, obviously not amused. Jim was trying to find anything but me to look at. He was tired of my whining. But I was tired of his whoring and I put up with it. For the life of me I couldn’t fathom how he maintained any self respect while dating those prepubescent sluts. That type of behavior had been barely acceptable in high school. Half a decade later, it just struck me as pitiable.

We ate in relative silence, stopping occasionally to bitch about Mario’s cancer or how poorly we imagined the Steelers would look come playoff time. After finishing we drove home and split a bottle of Southern Comfort. He swore that he’d make it up to me the next night.

“Seriously, man, show up at the rink tomorrow, bring your skates, and I’ll hook you up with a Central Catholic chick; one who could suck the paint out of the ice, I swear,” he boasted as Jim tends to do when loaded. I told him I’d think about it. I figured he’d know better. I hadn’t touched the ice in years.

“This weather will be the end of me,” Nana wheezed as she took a long drag and let the ash fall into her lap. “Most days, my joints ache so bad I can’t get out of bed.”

Schrader’s was almost empty, as usual. A woman was folding underwear in the far left corner and didn’t even raise her head when the tiny brass bell mounted on the door announced our arrival. I carried Nana’s laundry to the back section of washers and tossed it down in front of the vending machine. Fluorescent lights flickered unevenly, casting odd shadows on the yellowed tile floor as the attendant, a young, slender brunette who wore so

much makeup it looked as though a parrot had exploded in her face, cracked her gum and paged through the *Weekly World News*.

“Quarters,” Nana whispered with an eager look in her eyes as she began to unpack and sort the bags. Washing clothes was the only facet of her existence that she didn’t treat like a chore. I walked over to the change machine and came back with twelve quarters. Nana joyfully slid them into the slots and pulled half a dozen plastic bags of pre-measured powdered detergent out of her purse, setting them in neat rows on top of the washers.

“You can go now,” she said, “I’ll be fine.”

“No, that’s okay, Nana. I have work to do anyway.”

I didn’t have work to do. But my mother had told Amy and I that when we took Nana out, we were never to let her out of our sight. Five months earlier, Amy made a munchie run to the Sheetz down the street after Nana had given her an “I’ll be fine.” When she came back, an ambulance and two squad cars were in the parking lot. Nana was doubled over in pain next to a dryer full of old blankets. It didn’t take long for the paramedics to figure out that Nana was faking it. Her pain mysteriously switched sides three times and maintained its intensity only when Nana could gather enough breath for a good scream.

I plopped down in one of the plastic folding chairs at the end of the room and pulled out my Physics book.

“This tumor just keeps growing,” Nana yelled across the room.

Both women looked over at Nana, then at me.

“I think by March I’ll be done,” she added.

I slammed the book shut and marched back over to where she was standing.

“You don’t have a tumor, Nana. Remember? The doctor said there isn’t anything wrong with you,” I quickly said as I threw the rest of the bundle she was holding into the

machine and shut the lid. Her eyes sunk to the floor and she reached down to pull out more clothes.

“He said you’re in perfect shape for a 29 year-old,” I added, forcing a smile.

“You keep kissing my ass like that and your breath is gonna smell like shit for the rest of your days,” she smiled. “Good thing you’re cute, kid, cause that attitude ain’t getting you nothin’.”

Without another word, she walked over to where I had been sitting and creaked into a seat, making sure that I saw her knees buckle forcefully. She reached down and rubbed them, moaning more about the weather. I walked straight past her and out of the Laundromat. The cold January air smacked me square in the face as I stared out at the gray sky. I hated that weather. I hated Nana. I wished for a freak blizzard, for snow and sleet and freezing rain and hailstones the size of basketballs. I’d run headlong into the mess, my forehead raised to the sky, hoping beyond hope that one of the ice chunks would crack my skull open so I could show Nana what real pain was.

I was on fire during the last game of my junior year. I had four goals and an assist going into the third period against Jeannette. In retrospect, it wasn’t all that impressive. Jeannette hadn’t had a winning season in over a decade, and their goalie played about as well as Nana faked a cardiac arrest. Just after the start of the third, my left winger tossed a lollipop into the right corner and I went in after it. Dump and chase was our plan all game long. The Jeannette defenseman were big, dumb, and slow, and I knew I could skate halos around them. As I squirted between two of their forwards and toward the corner, bound for glory, I lost my edge and slammed head-first into the boards. Just like that.

When I woke up several hours later, the first thing I saw was Nana. She was slumped over in the chair of my hospital room, rocking back and forth and wailing like a

banshee. Two nurses rushed in and tried to straighten her so that the doctor could hear what she was saying. I sat up in bed and immediately fell back down as the room ebbed and flowed around in the iridescent dance that I've since known to accompany a skull fracture and detached retina. My monitor started beeping something fierce and Nana stopped immediately, stood up, and ran over to the side of my bed.

“Bout time you woke up, boy,” she grinned.

A very angry doctor proceeded to ask me the list of concussion questions, most of which I'm told I answered correctly. Four months later, that same doctor told me that I was done playing. The day I was released, I came home to find my equipment stacked neatly in the corner, aired out and wiped clean, my jersey neatly folded on my bed. My mother told me that Nana washed it for me while I was in the hospital. She always got a charge out of watching me play hockey. “Hockey the only thing you seem to like at all,” Nana would say, “even more than girls. Certainly more than Nana.” That same night, I packed everything away in the bottom of my closet.

I stared in through the glass door at Nana, who was busying herself by trying to read through my Physics book. Every time she turned a page, her eyes would nearly close as she readjusted her coke bottle glasses and moved the book either closer to or further away from her face. I lit a cigarette, careful to hide it from Nana, and started to pray for that storm again. That's the problem with southwestern Pennsylvania. There's plenty of cold to go around and more moisture than most can take, but when humidity comes, it comes in sheets of rain or a steady three-day drizzle that leaves the world soggy but no better for the wear. I began to envy those thousands of students at Michigan. Michigan, where they had real snow. Mountains of it. Soft, white, powdery, luminescent, roll-around-in-it-without-getting-drenched snow.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Nana yelled through the glass door, rapping on it with a closed fist. I hadn’t even seen her get up. I polished off the cigarette and walked back inside, passing an indignant Nana en route to my Newtonian sanctuary.

“Your mother would kill you if she found out-”

“Go do your laundry, Nana” I barked.

I grabbed the Physics book and slouched down in the chair.

“Why you still messing around with school books? You’re not in school,” she yelled.

“Yes I am.”

“Community College,” she cheered, hands flailing. “Big deal.”

“I like it,” I said, not looking up from the book.

“Shithead,” she huffed as she waddled to the back to check on her load.

After fifteen minutes of silence punctuated by the slow whirr of the machines and cracking gum, I grew tired of universal gravitation and walked back toward Nana. She stood with her back to me, mesmerized by the whirling multicolored bubbly mass in front of her.

“You gonna yell at me some more, tough guy?”

“No, Nana, I’m not.”

“If you’re so tough, how come you ran into the wall like that? Then you just quit.”

“Nana, you know I’m not allowed to play anymore. The doctors said-”

“Doctors. What do they know. Look at me. Cancer. And they don’t even have the guts to tell me.”

“Nana, you don’t have cancer. You don’t have anything.”

“I got much. I can feel it, Billy. I got much. You’re too young, that’s all. Too young and stupid to know I got much,” she huffed, crossing her arms and turning away



from me. The brunette had apparently taken interest in our conversation. Her gum had fallen silent and the paper lay flat on the counter next to her elbows.

“Stupid kid. I seen you play. Then you just stop. Why? Headache? I have a million headaches a day and I still keep going. I keep fighting.”

“Nana, if I took a hit like that again, I’d be paralyzed or dead,” I said as calmly as possible. She turned around to face me, a defiant look smeared across her face.

“You’re dead already,” she said, pressing her crooked pointer finger into my chest with each syllable. “You’re dead already.”

“Better being dead than wishing I were,” I yelled a little too loud. Nana’s eyes widened and she stared me down. I gave her the look I used to give to hotshot freshman who thought they could take me because they lucked out and made varsity their first time out. The washer rang out a long, loud “beep,” and Nana immediately turned to grab her things.

I marched back out of the Laundromat and lit another cigarette, this time making sure that she could see me from the other side of the room. I took long, thick puffs and blew them straight at the glass door. Nana tried not to look, but every now and then, she’d sneak a peek and I’d be waiting, lungs full of smoke just aching to be shot at her.

The drive home was pleasantly quiet. Nana ignored me and hummed along to the oldies station she always made me play when I drove her someplace.

“I don’t want you to drive me anymore,” she finally said.

“Is that right? Do I drive too fast for your heart?” I sneered.

“I don’t want no coward driving me places. Amy can do it. Amy loves her Nana. She’d never talk to me like you did, embarrassing me in front of my friends like that.”

“Nana, there was one person in there and she doesn’t give two shits about—”

“Watch your fucking mouth,” she yelled as she smacked me across the cheek.

I brooded as the car steered itself down route 136 and up Thomas School Road toward our housing plan. We whistled past Lotterdam trailer park, where the less-evolved hicks lived out their days gossiping amongst themselves about only themselves and putting work into engines that would never run again. Half a mile away was Doe Run, a new filing cabinet housing plan designed for young professionals who didn't want to live in Allegheny County because of the higher taxes. It was the perfect demographic trap just waiting to be sprung. In another year, the cookie cutter houses would be filled to capacity with twenty-something financial officers or upper middle management types all too eager to find somewhere safe and sterile to raise their children. For now, it was a ghost town littered with half-shingled roofs, exposed neon pink insulation, and plastic tarps that flailed in the wind.

As I downshifted and got ready to turn onto our street, Nana reached over and grabbed my elbow.

“Don't turn. You keep going.”

“Why? I asked, wanting to get rid of her as soon as possible.

“I want to show you something,” Nana smiled, confident in that way only the criminally insane can understand.

We drove on through the hills, past the High School and its tall wire fencing. After Columbine, the school board had decided that Hempfield was just the type of school to foster such a depraved and violent outlook on public education. Instead of forcing the administration to take a long hard look in the mirror, the board elected to fence in the school with nine feet of chain link topped off with barbed wire and to build a small brick guard shack in the middle of the only road onto school property. It made the parents feel better and got the county commissioner reelected, but didn't do much to make the students

feel any safer or less enraged by the prison environment made worse by an armed guard and a fortified perimeter. After all, the Columbine people had been students. And while the entrance guard could certainly stop and question anyone driving a car onto the premises, he never so much as lifted a finger to examine the hordes of students walking up to the building, backpacks crammed with God knows what.

We made a left onto Banner, which I knew led out toward Twin Lakes, a small state park that hosted the county's Arts & Heritage festival every summer. Six years before, I had stood on the main stage with my team as we held up our state championship metals for pictures and handshakes – fifteen healthy young athletes and one crippled freak in a neck brace.

I started to think about horsestepping across the red line, about stretching out to corral a cross-rink pass, dancing around a defenseman, and undressing the goalie with a slick wrist shot thrown like a rope into the corner of the goal.

“Stop!” Nana yelled, snapping me back into the world.

“Jesus, Nana. You could've given me a little more warning.”

“You looked happy. Smiling. Didn't want to interrupt 'til I needed to.”

I drove on while Nana barked directions and told me over and over again how beautiful the lake was during the summer months. We eventually reached a small gravel driveway that led to the northwest end of the upper lake. Odd thing about Twin Lakes, the lakes are two reservoirs originally meant to sap up the mine runoff from the mountains. They are about equal size, but one is perched a good two hundred feet above the other, the dark pits separated by a massive mound of dirt and rock.

“Stop now!” Nana yelled.

I brought the car to a halt on a small perch two hundred feet or so from the upper boathouse. I had been out this way dozens of times in high school. It was a good place to drink beer without being bothered if nobody's parents happened to be out of town that weekend. A light snow began to slide out of the gray sky and skitter across the frozen ground. Tiny flickers of white disappeared into the jet black surface of the water. Brown leaves entering their second or third month of decay clung to the ground despite the strong wind.

“What are we here for?” I asked.

“Shh...” Nana interrupted, staring out at the lake. “Know why these are here?”

“The lakes? Because the Parks Commission decided they should be.”

“Wrong. You read all that stuff and you never learn anything. They're here because they don't have nowhere else to be. They fit.”

I kept stretching to comprehend the nugget of life-affirming truth I suspected Nana was trying to lay on me. All I could stare at was that stage, still barely visible in the distance. Nana must have known that's what I was looking at.

“They fit. If they fit, they don't need to go nowhere. They could've stayed in the hills or the mines or the clouds. They knew better. They knew where they fit. Everything should.”

I didn't so much as look at her as we drove home. I'd never been so angry at someone for being right.

\* \* \*

The evening went on just as I knew it would. Jim and Shannon sat close, sharing French fries and all but fucking in the booth. I was sick of my date about five minutes in. We barely spoke, only occasionally exchanging a few sentences about whatever song was unevenly filling the air at the time. Elise was a painfully plain girl, her scraggly red hair pulled back in a haphazard ponytail. She wore lei jeans and a pair of burgundy cowboy boots that looked like they had been fought over in line at the Goodwill. On her spindly chest hung a faded red sweater whose neck had been stretched out of shape. She talked in choppy clauses that were almost always cut off by Shannon's screeching and yammering. I watched Elise pick at her sandwich and avoid her onion rings. Great, I thought, another anorexic trying to fit into size two jeans just to ensure they'd end up crumpled on the floors of bedrooms of hick assholes with no direction like Jim.

At the rink, Jim spent most of his time fumbling around the ice with his hand on Shannon's ass. I sat in the lounge drinking flat Pepsi and watching the Pens beat the Maple Leafs like a gong. Elise sat awkwardly beside me, eyeing the TV suspiciously.

"I don't understand," she said flatly. I stared at the TV and tried to ignore her. "How can you even follow it?" I felt her eyes on me. My heart soared as I watched Kasparaitus put Ty Domi's face through the back of his head along the near boards. The silence persisted just long enough to lull me into thinking my point made. She stood up and moved in front of me, barely blocking the TV with her thin frame.

"I'm not supposed to talk while the game's on, is that it?"

"Very perceptive," I said as I leaned around her.

She walked away. I had won. As the game broke for commercial, I watched her slink up to the concession stand. I recognized the cashier. Joe Ellen. He had played a year behind me. Fast little kid, but no bulk. He quit just before my junior year. I could tell he

was about as thrilled with how his life had turned out as he was about whatever it was Elise was proposing. He shook his head dismissively and someone else took over the register. He threw on his oversized yellow SKATE GUARD jacket and waved as he passed, but I was busy pretending not to notice him.

Elise strode back over and sat down next to me.

“That was a total failure,” she sighed.

“Didn’t work out as planned?” I asked, still looking at the game. There was less than a minute left in the third period. The Pens were up four. No overtime. I needed a new excuse to ignore the emaciated hayseed breathing in my ear.

“I asked him to turn the game off.”

“You should’ve known better. This is a hockey arena.”

“Not now it isn’t. It’s an ice skating rink. Which means you should be okay with actually going out onto the ice.”

I stared over at her and she shrunk back a bit from whatever evil expression I was throwing out.

“Easy there,” she said, her palms up and facing me. “Jim told me about what happened. I think it’s sad.”

“Well I am over-fucking-whelmed,” I shot. The horn sounded and the Pens won.

“I think you should come skate with me,” she purred. Here came the act. All girls did it. At least all of the girls Jim and I ever chased. The chin dips a bit, one eyebrow shoots up, the eyes widen, the shoulders slide down, the hands fold neatly in the lap, and the voice jumps an octave. It’s marvelous to watch.

“I remember watching you play, you know,” she smiled. “My older brother was Central’s goalie.”

I felt a sudden twang of celebrity rise up from God knows where. It had been a long time. In high school, the hockey team had been fairly well-known and respected. That meant women. Most of the girls couldn't wait to latch onto anything with a letterman's jacket. That was back when faces were brighter, back when I knew people whose fires were fed more by hope than routine. I had loved it. This new wave must have brought a smile to my face, as Elise's lit up almost instantly.

Why not, I thought. Jim's right. Why not have this? I know what I need to do. I did it in High School. Keep your nose pointed skyward, tighten your stomach when she leans into you, and pretend like you're interested in what she's saying. Why the fuck not?

I wish I could say that hitting the ice again was some unimaginable cathartic experience, that once I felt the nearly frictionless movement of my feet across the shiny off-white surface, my spirits rose, unencumbered by history. But it wasn't. It was standard. I skated fast and dragged her behind me. I tore across the ice and ground to a quick stop in front of Jim, sending a thick layer of frost all over him. I came around behind Elise and pretended like I was going to smack straight into her, and pivoted aside at the last second, laughing my way through the crowd. It was an hour and a half of the most familiar territory I could think of.

"Let's go," Jim announced as he skated up behind me and managed to pull his tongue out of Shannon's ear.

"Go where?"

"Elise's place," Shannon grinned.

We piled into Jim's car and headed down Route thirty toward Central Catholic. There wasn't much to see. Other than Westmoreland Mall, six hundred or so soon to be defunct car dealerships, and a miniature golf course, the only thing between downtown

Greensburg and Jeannette was cold, dark asphalt. I quietly watched the headlights flicker off the reflectors buried in the middle of the road, finding everything sickeningly typical. I felt sick for having backtracked so much, for having had a good time with people like this. Not that Elise was all that insufferable. She had managed to get me out on the ice, which was more than I could say for anyone else. Shannon was just Shannon – an above average-looking girl with a below average IQ who was riding the false hope that someone would come along and take her out of that place. As much as I loved Jim, I had come to realize that the only thing we had in common was history. And when it came down to it, history wasn't enough. I knew I was better than those people.

We pulled up in front of a lime green two-story with a dim bulb casting yellow light across the concrete slab of a front porch. Jim killed the engine and we piled out. I got ready to exchange a quick goodbye with Elise and wait in the warmth of the car while Jim tried to swallow his date's larynx. But the three of them walked up to the front porch and turned around to stare at me.

“You coming?” Jim yelled.

I nodded and trudged across the light layer of snow that choked the grass and cracked underneath my feet. The house smelled like vanilla, its patchwork furniture and mantle-jockeying knickknacks casting shapely shadows around the thinly lit living room. Jim and Shannon made a hard right down the hallway and vanished into one of the back rooms. I sat down gingerly next to Elise on the orange couch in front of the TV and wiped a fingertip's worth of dust from the coffee table.

“I think this table needs dusted,” I said in the type of detached, evaluative tone one hears from principals and traffic cops.

“Dusting,” Elise fluttered.



“Huh?”

“Or ‘to be dusted,’ would be just as acceptable,” she mused.

“Excuse me?”

“You omitted the infinitival copula. What should be ‘needs dusting’ or ‘needs to be dusted,’ becomes ‘needs dusted.’”

“I didn’t realize you were an English teacher,” I shot.

“You mean grammarian.”

“Come on.”

“Don’t worry,” she laughed, “All us yinzers talk that way.

“Mm hmm,” I groaned as I looked down at the dormant TV. *NHL Tonight* was about to start.

“You’re hardly a charmer,” she smiled.

“Thanks,” I said, “You weren’t exactly lighting up the room with your conversation either.”

“I was trying not to vomit. I hate it when Shannon gets like this. Every time she finds a guy who pays her the slightest bit of attention, the only thing that beats her to the floor is her underwear.”

I laughed out loud, although Elise didn’t seem amused.

“That’s... sad,” I offered.

“I take it you came here thinking I’d do the same thing,” she accused.

“What?” I squaked. “Listen, I only came along because Jim asked me to. And don’t think that I couldn’t-”

“I will, you know.” She said plainly.

“What?”

“I will. I like you. You’re... honest.”

“Hey, I appreciate that and all, but...” I was trying not to laugh.

“But what? You have anything better to do?”

I didn’t. And she wasn’t bad. She led me back to what I figured was a “little sister” room. The bed was covered in a frilly pink and white comforter, the walls with pictures of models and pop stars and movie icons. I undressed her in the dark and listened to her lay down on the bed. I slid on top of her and felt her warm skin press against mine. We kissed timidly at first, scouting each other. I took her nipple in my mouth and gave it a soft bite. She breathed heavily and opened her legs. I went in slowly as her tongue ran up my neck and her fingers pressed into my shoulders. After a while I slowed down and started to pull out. She grabbed my hips and pulled me back in, saying it was ok and she wanted me to finish.

Afterward, she rested her head on my shoulder and laid there sliding her fingers through the dark hairs dotting the middle of my chest, her left leg folded up over me. I listened anxiously for a door opening and footsteps down the hallway. I knew that I couldn’t leave until Jim did.

“She puts a lot of faith in people. Especially the ones who want to run her through,” Elise eventually whispered.

“Shannon?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

“Seems she should know better.”

“So should most girls.”

“Jim thinks he’s going to marry her,” I said ominously. Elise didn’t know what to make of that. “Seriously. He’s been talking about taking on some extra shifts, saving up, settling down.”

I wasn’t sure which one of us cracked first, but we both started laughing hysterically. At least she appreciated the absurdity of the situation as much as I did.

“And you?” she asked suddenly.

“What about me?”

“You buying any property?”

I wished I could have told her ‘no’ as definitively as I wanted to. I wished I could scoff at the notion of spending the rest of my life there, laugh at the idea that anyone in their right mind would stay in New Stanton. But I couldn’t. So I lied.

“Nope. I’m out of here in May. I’ve got some work lined up in Chicago.”

“Chicago, huh?”

“Yeah. Managing shipments out of a meat packing plant.”

“Yep, those shipments sure need managed,” she cracked.

“Managing,” I followed. We laughed and she squeezed in closer to me.

“You excited?” she asked, running her fingers along my jaw.

“Sure. It’ll be nice to get out of here.”

“It’s not that bad,” she said.

“Yes it is.”

\* \* \*

The next day, Jim and I got called in for the afternoon filler shift. He was beaming as only Jim did after railing his latest victim. I kept my eyes on the road as I steered the car toward eight or so hours of subzero hell.

“I told you those bitches would put out. Even you got some.”

I felt disgusting. I had taken two showers when I got home and spent the better part of the night staring up at my ceiling contemplating which sexually transmitted disease was preparing to leave me puss-laden, scarred, and sterile. I started wondering what I’d do if she were pregnant. Of course, she’d run and tell her father. Her parents would make us get married. We’d live with them until my job at her father’s filling station or roadside corn stand turned into a career and I could afford more suitable lodgings for my wife and our seventeen children.

I barely noticed the shift go by. I dropped Jim off at his house and promised to give him a ring later on that night, then drove straight to Elise’s house. I wanted to scream at her for letting things happen the way they did the previous night. She wasn’t any better than the others. She was fooling herself. She was a filthy slut like her friend. *She* was stuck there. I wasn’t about to be stuck with her. I ran across the grass and racked the front door with a clenched fist. A short chubby girl, no doubt the same kid whose bed I had desecrated the previous night, answered the door. She stared up at me, uninterested.

“Is Elise here?”

“No.”

“Ok. Do you know when she’ll be back?”

“Spring Break, I guess.”

“What?”

“She went back this morning.”

“Back where?”

“To school. College. UPenn,” she spelled out for me. “Do you have her number up there? She should’ve gotten there by now if you want to call her.”

I stood there, embarrassed, in front of someone who didn’t know that she should be laughing at me. Finally, when it looked as though the girl was about ready to scream for whichever parent was closest, I turned and walked back across the front lawn to my car. I drove back down route thirty, getting more and more used to seeing the same miniature golf course, car dealerships, and mall; getting more used to seeing nothing else.

Yonaguna

In 1985, a series of oddly-shaped structures featuring perfect right angles, concave bunkers, and what appeared to be steps were discovered off the coast of Okinawa, Japan. Over the past eighteen years, scientists from all over the globe have debated whether these formations, known as the Yonaguna ruins, were man made. They have yet to reach any concrete conclusion, but if Yonaguna was indeed constructed by man, Egyptology will be officially dethroned as the yardstick of human evolution in respect to massive feats of engineering.

I started sleeping with Kelly just after she and Vaughn got engaged. In all fairness, the first time occurred after splitting a bottle of Chivas and sharing sob stories about break-ups past. I had recently been dropped like a bad habit by my girlfriend of close to a year. Kelly had been doubting the sincerity of her feelings for Vaughn since he'd slipped the ring over her knuckles and sealed a fate she wasn't all that enthusiastic about in the first place.

We'd meet in a different motel every Thursday night. This practice, while sound in its efforts to avoid detection, proved more complicated than we had thought, seeing as how

there were only about ten motels in and around Akron. But we made due. For seven months. And all without Vaughn being any the wiser. Kelly credited her nymphomania for his cluelessness. I put my faith in blind luck and a severe lack of intuitive powers on Vaughn's part.

“Again with your Yona-yahoo shit,” Kelly sighed.

I had just given her my Yonaguna speech for the hundredth time. She never took anything away from it, but she always listened. I, on the other hand, was sure that there was a lesson to be learned in there somewhere. I just hadn't figured out what it was.

“Don't do this. Every time we fuck you get all starry-eyed,” she said as she lay next to me.

Kelly had a way with pillow talk. She pivoted her head so that her chin rested squarely in the middle of my chest, her dark red curls streaming over my stomach and down to the mattress. I had waited for her alone in the dark as usual, sipping a beer and watching headlights pan across the curtain, wishing and fearing that each one was her pale gray Sonoma pulling into the lot. I looped wisps of her hair around my finger as her eyes danced along my face.

“Honestly, I don't like being some vehicle of false hope,” she said.

“False hope?”

“Listen, we have a good thing here... not too honorable or convenient, but nice. I just don't think we should get each other's hopes up.”

I hadn't realized anyone's hopes were going anywhere.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Time for me to go,” she said after a look at the bedside clock.



I watched her crunch up her dress and slide it down over outstretched arms, it's wrinkles quickly smoothing themselves out over her narrow hips.

"I'm out of town next Thursday," she said as she gathered the rest of her things.

"Oh?" I asked as though I hadn't already known. Vaughn had told me at work the day before that Kelly was going to visit her sister in Zanesville. Apparently, there was a bitter divorce in the works and Kelly was heading down to mend some wounds.

"Della is finalizing her divorce and she wants me there for support." Kelly said as altruistically as possible. "Makes me wonder why I'm even bothering with Vaughn."

"That's funny. I'd have thought sleeping with your fiancée's best friend would raise a little doubt," I said as I pulled the covers up and fumbled for the remote. She finished with the shoes, grabbed her coat off the chair, and strode back over to the bed. I clicked on Nightline. Kelly leaned over and kissed me softly on the forehead.

"You're cute," she said and tussled my hair the way my mother used to. She slid out of the room and back toward Vaughn's bed, leaving me there with Ted Koppel and a gut full of regret.

\* \* \*

Vaughn always worked fast when he was pissed off. He was a scrawny guy, but deceptively strong, his clenched biceps looking more like bulging tendons on the verge of snapping than actual muscles. He had worked in relative silence most of the morning, carrying cases of beer up from the root cellar and running liquor inventory in the back.

While Mr. McGee's was certainly not the ritziest bar in Northern Ohio, it was probably the best run. Scarcely more than a half-dozen booths made of deeply stained oak

situated across from a ten foot bar flanked on one side by shelves of cheap booze and on the other by the small hydraulic lift we used to bring cases up from the basement, the place was, in all honesty, a piece of shit. Pictures of Jim Brown and Bernie Kosar dotted the brick walls, illuminated by uncovered 40 watt bulbs.

Vaughn and I had worked for Millie, the owner, since high school. She had promised us back then that if we kept our noses clean and gave her a decade of our lives, she'd turn the bar over to us upon her retirement. After twelve years, the wretched bag refused to quit, so Vaughn and I were promoted to "head bartenders," a title which meant we made around 29 thousand dollars a year on salary instead of 24 thousand dollars a year off of timecards. Secretly, Vaughn and I were happy to have not inherited the place. The entire joint was a mob front anyway.

"Your drawer was five bucks short last night," Millie wheezed, her sixty-three year old lungs finally beginning to buckle under the strain of four decade's worth of unfiltered Camels smoked at a two pack a day clip. She carried around a small red handkerchief into which she sent a curdled orb of phlegm every fifteen minutes or so. Her pear-shaped body rippled underneath any one of four extra large sweatsuits. She had navy, black, red, and green. That day was a red day.

"Here," I said, pulling out my wallet and handing her a five spot, "just toss this in and even it out."

"I don't like this, Bubba," she frowned. "You know what I think when I see a bartender making good on a short drawer? I see a guy who got caught and figures he can slide by with a smile and a greenback. What if I hadn't said anything? Would you have still put this five bucks in the drawer?"

"Of course not," I groaned. "I wouldn't have known."

Truth is, I would've known. I had been stealing around twenty dollars a night, five nights a week, for three straight years. The operation was painfully easy to negotiate because Mille used the bar, a type of place that by definition kept little track of its cash flow, to launder money. Every night from eleven to close, we'd serve half-price drinks. The patrons, already in the bag courtesy of the stiff numbers we'd been pouring all night long, would flock to the bar and load up on what they thought was cheap hooch but was really nothing more than watered down mixers. The books, however, didn't reflect the discount. At the end of the night, we rung up all of that dirty money as a genuine sale, instantly legitimizing the whole pile. Everyone made out. Everyone was happy. And I narrowly avoided an additional ethical crisis by stealing from thieves.

Millie eyed me suspiciously for a few seconds, trying to find a hole in the logic. With a huff she shot out a hand and grabbed the bill, making her way toward the back stairs that led up to her office. I had been up those stairs exactly twice in twelve years. The first time was at the behest of Vaughn, who had tried the same a few days before and nearly gotten a slug in his chest when he interrupted a fifty-dollar-a-hand game of Texas hold 'em. My invasion elicited similar feedback. The second time was a day later when I was brought up to the office and politely reassured that the next time I scaled the steps, I'd be lucky to only lose my job.

The lift whirred to life and Vaughn rose up out of the floor, a case of Banker's Club Vodka resting on his shoulder. He stepped off the lift and fired the case down onto the bar. Had the liquor not been so horribly cheap and therefore housed in plastic jugs, the bar would've been covered in spirits and shattered glass.

"What the fuck?" I asked.

"Huh?" he countered as though he had no idea what I was getting at.

“You’ve been stomping around all afternoon and haven’t said a word. Who shit in your cereal?”

“You did. Where the fuck were you last night?” he yelled.

Somehow “banging your wife” didn’t strike me as a phrase that would have brightened his day. I went with “What was last night?”

“McManus and Johnson. Semifinals. Eight o’clock.”

“Oh, shit, Vaughn, I’m sorry. I completely bricked.”

“No kidding. I told them you were sick. The league office is giving us a reschedule, but said it wouldn’t happen again,” he said in an uncharacteristically parental tone. “Next Tuesday. Seven thirty. Any chance you could stop by this time?”

I hated when Vaughn talked down to me, but I deserved it. I’d just always found Vaughn’s obsession with bowling to be unhealthily fanatical. I bowled because it got me out of my apartment for a couple hours and the beer was cheap. Vaughn saw it more as a vaunted tradition that determined the pecking order around town. He had never liked to lose. Over the years, as his life began to resemble more and more one big losing situation, the little things had started to carry additional weight. He had nearly castrated me after I took twenty bucks off him when the Steelers beat the Browns a few months earlier. I felt dirty rooting for the black and gold, but the Brownies didn’t stand a chance. It was his own damn fault for making a bet with his heart instead of his head.

“I’ll be there, I promise,” I said emphatically.

“Where the hell were you anyway?” he asked as he cut open the case.

“Debbie Arleigh’s place,” I answered, taking the jugs from him and sliding them underneath the bar.

“That chick from the Safeway?” he asked with a smile.

“Yeah.”

“She’s fucking ugly, man.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m just saying you could do better.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

\* \* \*

“You’re rolling like shit,” Vaughn sneered as he scribbled furiously at the score sheet. He was right. Eight frames in and we were down seventeen pins. McManus and Johnson weren’t all that good. Any other day we would have beat them like a gong. But while Vaughn was tossing bombs, I was busy trying to keep my mind off Kelly. It would’ve been much easier if Vaughn hadn’t invited her along to cheer. She sat obediently in the seat next to him, one hand rubbing his neck and the other working out what must have been a terrible kink in his inner thigh. Whenever Vaughn would get up to throw, I’d catch Kelly eyeing me like two hundred pounds of bitch bait on a hook.

“I’m going to take a piss. If I don’t see a spare on that sheet when I get back, I’m going to put you in a hurt locker,” Vaughn grumbled.

He strode off to the can and I plopped down in the scorer’s seat to watch McManus roll. Kelly sat there silently, watching me avoid her.

“I’m going to leave him,” she whispered.

“No you’re not,” I said, my eyes planted firmly on the lane in front of us.

“I want to go to New York,” she sighed.

“That’s great.”

“I think you’d like it there.”

“I think you’re insane.”

“Come on. We could leave right now. There are plenty of shithole bars for you to waste your life away in up there.”

“Sorry. I’m quite happy with my current shithole bar,” I lied.

Instantly, my thoughts went to my mattress and the fifteen thousand dollar cliché hidden underneath. We could leave, I thought. We could leave right now. At the moment, the idea seemed almost plausible. The same hand that was buffing Vaughn’s groin a minute earlier landed square in between my legs as McManus extended the lead with another strike. I shot up and stood next to the return, waving my hand over the vent and fighting back the erection Kelly had nearly caused.

“You boys suck,” Johnson belched from his seat.

“Only when paid well,” I snapped as I picked up my ball. I slid my fingers into the holes, tapped my right foot on the floor twice, cleared my throat, and took three gingerly steps down the lane.

“Good luck!” Kelly yelled as I sent eleven pounds of marble crashing into the ten pin. McManus and Johnson roared with laughter as I stared a hole in Kelly and waited for the remaining nine pins to reset. She winked and went back to her beer, again content with mind fucking me. Final score: them 478, us 433. Vaughn didn’t say a word to me the entire way home.

The bedsprings squeaked in agony as I threw myself down and watched the Indians get pummeled by the Yankees. Half a case of beer later, I noticed how uncomfortable my bed had become. As I lay there in the dark, my face pressed into the pillow, I could feel the

money beneath pressing up into my stomach. I rolled around a few times, trying desperately to find a soft spot, one that would give me just a few hours of peaceful sleep.

I began thinking about Kelly and New York and how far my stash would take us. I had heard that cigarettes cost eleven dollars up there, and that riding the subway was akin to standing in the bottom of a porta-potty. Akron sure as hell wasn't New York, but at least it had the decency to let only certain sections of itself reek of urine. Kelly and I needed a break, a fresh start. We needed to shake off the dust and give ourselves at least a fighting chance for a better life somewhere else. I realized that we hadn't left Akron for the same reasons nobody leaves Akron – we were safe, tidy, and worst of all, content.

“Fuck it,” I yelled to an empty room.

I picked up the mattress and threw it against the wall, exposing three years of patient larceny. There were thousands of bills, none of them any bigger than a twenty spot. I worked through the night to sort and stack them all. As the morning sun began to creep through my blinds, I stared out across the room at \$15,453. In lieu of normal boxes, I shoved the stash into empty beer and liquor cases, cocooned them all in duct tape, and slept peacefully on what might as well have been a brand new mattress.

\* \* \*

“What the fuck are you so chipper about?” Vaughn asked suspiciously as he stacked shot glasses in the corner. I had arrived half an hour early to get a jump start on the day. Millie responded by making me bleach the pantry floor. The bucket's solution stung my eyes and splashed onto my jeans, promising a few big white spots would soon settle in the stitching, but I didn't care. After work, I would wait for Kelly in the hotel room. When she

walked in, and before she could say a word, I would tell her all about the plan. We would load up my car, point it in any direction, and drive until we were free. Finally, I was going to do *something*.

“No reason,” I said plainly as I checked over the bourbon stock.

“Bullshit. You’re getting laid. I know that look. Just please tell me it’s not that bumper-chasing slut Bonnie.”

“Nothing like that. Really.”

Vaughn stopped sweeping the floor and rested his elbow on the broom.

“I think Kelly’s fucking someone else,” he thought aloud.

I froze and spent a second or two praying into the bar before looking over at him. He was staring across the glossy oak out the front window.

“Nah. You’re imagining things,” I groaned, “Jitters, that’s all.”

His eyes scanned the street as a car whizzed by, a heavy bass beat screaming from its speakers and rattling the thin glass. I could see his knuckles turning white around the broom handle.

“Yeah, jitters,” he repeated.

“What’s got you thinking this?” I asked.

“She’s got this Bridge circle on Wednesdays and Thursdays. With Wendy and Evelyn Baker.”

“The ones from Slim’s Bakery?” I asked.

“Yeah. I ran into Evelyn the other day at the 7-11. She asked me if Kelly was pissed at her. When I asked why, she said that Kelly hadn’t shown up for almost two months.”

His words got angrier by the syllable.



I stood there trying to look concerned for my friend while all I could think about was Kelly's Wednesday nights. There I thought I was the only "other" man in her life.

"Hey, man, I'm sure there's an explanation for this," I offered.

"Of course there is. She's whoring around," Vaughn yelled as he threw the broom to the ground.

"So are you," I said. "Or did Becky Disalvo's lips accidentally fall on your dick?"

"Whose fucking side are you on?" he yelled.

Just then, Millie walked down the steps. She was wearing her green number. Her hair was up in a net and the last third of a ragged cigarette hung limp between her sagging lips.

"You break my fucking broom and it's coming out of your check," she hissed.

Vaughn picked the broom up delicately, examined it from end to end, raised it over his head, and brought it down with a crack against his thigh. It snapped cleanly in two. He threw the pieces at Millie's feet and stormed out of the bar.

When I got outside, Vaughn was sitting on the curb outside sucking on a Marlboro, his right knee bouncing up and down. I pulled up a piece of concrete beside him and looked across the street. When we had started at Mr. McGee's, the entire street held a myriad of small businesses; tailors, hardware stores, consignment shops, barbers, bakers, diners. Inevitably, Target and Kmart entered the fray and – as has become disturbingly standard in this country – the smalltime competition was driven out. About two dozen businesses still hung around, waiting to burn out in the wake.

"I lost my cherry behind that pizza parlor," Vaughn offered in reference to what once was Gianelli's, the best pizza joint in the city.

“No wonder it was condemned,” I said. Despite his best efforts, a light laugh snuck out of Vaughn. “Millie’s pretty pissed,” I offered, borrowing his cigarette for a quick puff.

“Fuck her. That broom was worthless anyway,” he laughed.

“Well, your paycheck’s probably gonna be a few bucks short,” I said.

Vaughn stared down into the gutter.

“I want you to do me a favor,” he said slowly, “I want you to talk to Kelly and see what’s going on.”

“Vaughn, I’m not going to interrogate-”

“I didn’t say that. But you two are pretty close. I just want to know if she mentions anything,” he countered.

“You can’t be serious,” I said in the best holier-than-thou voice I could muster.

Vaughn looked up at me with what must have been sincere aching in his eyes. I had never seen anything like it before.

“The sun rises and sets with her, man. Please,” he pleaded. I finished the cigarette and dropped it into the street. It died with a sick hiss in the light mist that had begun to fall.

“Ok.”

\* \* \*

“We should stop this,” I said as Kelly’s curls sprang open and closed on my stomach. Her lips slid off with a thin smack and she looked up at me, amused.

“I see your conscience is making its weekly rounds,” she said as her tongue made slow circles, sending traces of lightning down my legs.

I really had planned things more carefully. Parking myself squarely in the recliner of room 306 a good hour before Kelly was scheduled to arrive, I rehearsed several versions of the speech I wanted to give her. But she had entered the room hungry and I was obviously not one to exercise any self-restraint.

“He’s got me spying on you. He thinks you’re fooling around,” I whispered.

“I am fooling around,” she giggled.

“I’m serious,” I said, pulling her up and off me. I sat her up at the edge of the bed and tried my best to concentrate.

“Who’s your Wednesday,” I asked her.

She knew what I was talking about immediately, but tried her best to look perplexed by the question.

“What are-” she started.

“Don’t,” I laughed. “I’m not sure how you’ve kept Vaughn in the dark about us this whole time, let alone whoever else you’ve been screwing.”

Her head dipped a bit. “You don’t know him. He lives in Cleveland.”

“Christ,” I hissed as I stood up and walked around the room. In all the time Kelly and I had been sleeping together, I’d never stopped to think about how Vaughn would feel if he knew. Now I knew why. This painful, hollow feeling crept along my ribcage and stole the air from my lungs. I wasn’t sure whether my heart was breaking or if it was the principle of the matter, but whatever it was, I would never wish it upon anyone.

“I should have told you,” she said with a slight tearful tilt in her voice.

When people run, they have to *run*, I thought. The only way to fix the situation was to remove myself, to remove Kelly, from the entire goddamn ordeal.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly. I could tell that this unburdening of the soul was as hard on her as it was on me.

“Say you want to be with me,” I said.

“What?” she asked.

“Say you want to be with me.”

“You know I do

“I have about fifteen grand stashed away,” I started.

“Where in the blue fuck did you get that kind of cash?” she yelled.

“Don’t worry about it. Listen, it’s ours. You said you wanted to go to New York? I’ve never been more ready to leave. We can be there by tomorrow afternoon.”

Kelly started to smile, waiting for me to crack up and reveal the humor of the situation, but I kept staring into her eyes.

“You’re serious,” she said. I reached into a gym bag hidden between the bed and the nightstand and pulled out a thick stack of twenties. “You’re serious,” she repeated.

“I’m serious,” I said.

Kelly took a deep breath as her fingers lost themselves inside a mass of tousled burgundy. She leaned back in to me and took my cheeks in her hands.

“You’re serious,” she said just as much to herself as she did to me. “Tomorrow night.”

I blinked a few times in disbelief. I was leaving Akron, with my best friend’s fiancée and fifteen large in small bills, to boot.

Kelly dressed as quickly as she could, talking even faster the entire time.

“I have to pack some things. And make a few calls. Let some people know I’m leaving,” she said, jittery and disorganized.

“Hell no,” I yelled. “What are you thinking? If we do this, we do it alone. Nobody else can know.”

“You’re right,” she sighed. “Tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” I grinned. I walked over to her and pulled her in, planting a heavy kiss on her. She threw her arms around me and we fell back into the bed. An hour later, she slid out the door.

\* \* \*

I went into work the next day, just to make it seem like nothing was amiss. Vaughn hadn’t arrived by the time I walked in, so I endured a solid hour of Millie, quietly finding solace in knowing that it’s be the last time I’d ever have to listen to that old wench yell at me. I had just finished washing the pint glasses and sweeping up when Vaughn charged into the bar with a baseball bat, a crazy look in his eyes.

“You rat fucking bastard,” he growled. “Fourteen years with you and me, tossed out the window for some cheap skank.” He rang the bat off the surface of the bar to punctuate the end of his summary.

I put my hands up, palms facing him. “Easy there, Vaughn. What’s the trouble?”

Vaughn sneered and shook his head. “What’s the trouble,” he said to himself. “He wants to know what the trouble is. Well, buddy, the trouble... is that you fucking fucked my fucking fiancée!” he screamed at the top of his lungs as he swung the bat at my head. I barely ducked the blow, and the bat cleared off a shelf of spent microbrews.

“I’m gonna take you apart,” Vaughn hissed through clenched teeth.

“What the hell’s going on?” Millie yelled from the bottom of the staircase.

“This is between me and him,” Vaughn said.

“Fair enough,” Millie shrugged. “Clean the fuck up when you’re done,” she called down the stairs on her way back up to the office.

Vaughn and I both stopped and watched Millie disappear up the stairs. We snapped back to each other and Vaughn took another swing. I ducked again and grabbed one of the thirty-gallon tubs we used for ice. As Vaughn hopped over the bar at me, I emptied the tub onto the floor. Vaughn’s boots couldn’t find footing on the ice and his legs shot out in separate directions. As I hurdled the bar and sprinted out the front door, I heard Vaughn squealing like a stuck pig. He never had been all that flexible.

I dove into my car and drove double the speed limit all the way to my apartment. All I had to do was load the money and my suitcase – both of which were already packed and waiting by the door – swing by Kelly’s place to pick her up, and we would be home free.

I bolted up the stairs to my place and threw open the door. Sitting neatly where I had left it was my suitcase. Only my suitcase. Vaughn might as well have been there stomping on my chest, because in an instant there wasn’t an ounce of air left inside. I dropped to my knees and fired the keys across the room. Vaughn knew where I was and I knew that he would be arriving very soon. I sat there and hoped that he would at least let me tell my story before he brought it to an abrupt end.

I walked outside and waited until I saw Vaughn’s car make a hard left onto my street. The car’s tired squealed angrily and I looked out at the pale yellow streetlights casting an uncertain glare. The rain drops danced in and out of vision as they passed through the golden cones and back into the dark anonymity of night.

I knew that Vaughn would let me explain, even if only for his own understanding. He’d want to put the whole mess to bed just as much as I would. He’d charge up the stairs

to my place, see me sitting there, and wonder why in the hell I wasn't poised to defend myself. He'd sit down and I'd unload everything. Then he would ask me "face or gut?" and I'd opt for the gut. We'd get drunk and talk about going after her, our pursuits justified by revenge and a burning need for some sort of closure. Then we'd pass out and get up for work the next morning.

While the pyramids are dated anywhere between 3500-5000 B.C., the last time the area on which Yonaguna sits was above sea level occurred during the tail end of the last ice age, between 9000 and 12000 BC. Still, archeologists largely ignore possibly *ten thousand years* worth of intellectual, scientific, and social evolution, almost as though they're afraid to cut their losses and move on in a more promising direction. They revel in their complacency, assuming that no risk entails no loss. Who am I to suggest otherwise?

River on Fire



Most of the time, I'm not this bad. The cobwebs aren't so thick, matted to the inside of my skull like the dense cloud of black smoke that rises from train engines and congeals along a tunnel's interior. I'm clear. I'm focused. I fucking maintain.

Clearly, such is not the case now. Streams of intensely hot molten lava are spinning and churning their way down the dark crevice of the bus aisle. That's odd. The rotation of the wheels across the slick black pavement coincides seamlessly with the lava flow. They both seem to rise and fall, to pitch and bend with such synchronicity that I would wager God's own two hands are on the other end of their strings. Each speed bump is a bubble; each sharply taken turn a slight variation in subsurface current.

I don't mind the vines, really. I consider them beautifully constructed and convenient outcroppings for passengers, unaware that their feet and ankles are being melted to the bone by this heinous maroon mass, to clutch and rest their weary bodies. No, the vines are quite all right as far as I'm concerned.

It's that damn Aborigine driving this multi-axled passenger boat to hell that worries me. He strikes me as the kind of person who would eat your last three hits, devour the leftover pepperoni pizza under the sofa, and leave the next morning without saying goodbye after having spent close to four hours in your bathroom regurgitating the morning's breakfast – a mushroom omelet with bacon and hash browns on the side – while spouting his archaic Judeo-Christian ethic interlaced with sob stories about how when he was twelve, he smeared honey on his nuts and made his German shepherd lick it off before eating a piece of the filthy mongrel's shit to “even the score.” Not at all a stable character. No doubt shunned and severely disrespected by his peers. But he is my leader. The Lone Ranger to my Tonto. The Hillary to my Bill. The shepherd to myself, the lone member of this late night urban flock.

The windows are nice. It's not often, given the customary temperature, smoke, and all around disregard for the well being of the human corporeal frame, that lava will allow itself to be seen in the reflection of a vehicular window. But it's just not fair to squander one's visuals on a pathetic cast back when the real thing is revealed by merely shifting focus three feet downward. Wasting lava like this is just not kosher.

He hasn't noticed the torch yet. Should he discover my flame, I'd wager that I would be forced to put it out and wait until port. However, contrary to popular scientific belief, lava does not produce a great deal of light, but rather a soft, ambient glare which fails to sufficiently illuminate the surrounding area and is not in any way conducive to my exploratory and documentative purposes.

Thus, my torch will remain lit. Good thing, too, seeing as how the lava has slowed its flow and begun to change from its previous viscous, gelatinous mass into a solid foundation of newly-formed earth rising up out of its base and constructing a cave of

nature's finest jerry-rigging. Yes, my torch, although perhaps offensive to my dark-skinned guide and any would-be members of our journey, will serve me well in the upcoming spelunking venture.

It saddens me to know that I am alone in my cave. My dreadlock-wearing friend simply at the front keeping watch. Ever vigilant, he is my one true and trusted sentinel; impartial and unwilling to give up his post for any offered bribe or supplementary compensation. These people *are* to be trusted. After all, any pale-skinned watchman surely would have let his guard down by now. Perhaps something can now be said for his people's ritualistic consumption of field mice, grass chutes, and their own feces. I think we should learn of their ways.

What is this? An intruder? How dare he allow someone into my cavern! He'll pay for this, the dirty bush bastard. His superiors will hear of it. I intend to write a letter. Doesn't matter, though. He's probably union. One little insignificant fine or verbal reprimand and this son of a bitch will be back out there falsely guarding other people's subterranean passageways. It's a cruel, cruel world when one cannot find proper security staff to accomplish the simple task of refusing entrance to a secluded grotto. My, oh my, the state of things these days.

Who is this trespasser, and from where came the audacity of her actions? Surely I would not be one to just stroll into someone else's cave. Such things are unacceptable even in the most primitive of societies. Just ask my former friend, the chief, up there. This woman probably doesn't even realize the importance of the geological event that has just taken place. She is going so far as to insult the momentousness of this occurrence by clicking and clacking across it with some sort of azure leather footwear obviously not intended for excavation.

Now she insists upon sitting directly across from me. Not only has she seen fit to insert herself into my world, she thinks it a good idea to tarnish the area around my throne with her presence. Offering a brief, obviously obligatory gesture of recognition meant solely to appease the cave's owner and, were his wishes respected, sole occupant, she tosses back the amber wave that has perched itself on the top of her head and crosses her slender, shapely legs in a manner obviously meant to induce internal organ somersaults.

I see it now. My sentry meant for this to occur. For this woman is, herself, a goddess and felt as though a brief excursion over to the next cave's owner was simply polite. After all, only we Gods get caves. It's a fringe benefit that, although tacked onto a pile of powers including immortality, omnipresence, and free cable, is no less vital and well deserved. If not for us Gods, you humans would be an insufferably boring lot. Be glad we deities care enough to fuck with your heads and shake things up a bit.

Is she seeking my attention? Something seems amiss. I thought it was customary that when visiting a neighboring cave, the standard operating procedure was to remain silent and stare at the lava, but apparently new customs have been decided upon. Perhaps I should attend meetings on a more frequent basis. Shame they often conflict with Racquetball.

Yes, I believe she *is* speaking to me. There isn't anyone else in here, is there? If so, by God I'm moving because the omnipotent beings in this part of town have no respect for personal freedom. Uncivilized vagrants.

I think she is looking at my torch. Yes, she seems to be gesturing directly at it. I see what's going on here. She doesn't have a torch. My word, the locals are not only intrusive, but have nary an organized, prepared, fore thinking bone in their entire bodies.

“Do you mind?”

Fuck yes I mind. Not only has she invaded my domain, she has now mustered up the gall to inquire about my torches and their subsequent availability to the likes of her. How presumptuous to think that a perfect stranger would gladly dole out his torches simply because someone had forgotten their own. She is a freeloader, a mooch, the type of person who would cheat on a metaphysics exam by gazing into the soul of the boy next to her. And despite all this, I cannot dislike her.

“No, not at all.”

“Are you sure? It’s your last one.”

So it is. My torches, save one, and not counting the one in my hand, are gone. I could have sworn that I had more. Was I willing to give it away to someone of whom I had no knowledge beyond her blatant predilection toward invading sanctuaries ill-equipped for the venture? She seems so frail, so helpless, yet completely in control. I can see now that she is here to help me. I am in need of accompaniment and guidance. My friend out there knew this. He selflessly and lovingly opened my doors to this opportunity in hopes that I might learn of and from it.

“Go on. Trust me, you’ll need it. It’s getting darker in here by the second.”

A smile. Does she know? Of course she does. She’s one of me. She knows me as well as I know myself. She wants to share my torches. Why did I not understand this earlier?

“Thank you.”

Her words bend me like Uri Geller’s spoons. I can only ask her to take from this what I am currently luxuriated in: pure pleasure.

“Enjoy. I am.”

“Do you think he’ll get mad?”

She is concerned with my Aboriginal friend up at the entrance. Questioning the resolute ties that one forms to his captain during the course of a prolonged pilgrimage through the soul's soul does not strike me as a pressing legitimate concern. But then again, let us leave nothing to chance. Her sensibility and attention to detail are striking.

“Nah, I don't think he knows. Plus, he's union. Their kind can be trusted,”

Obviously this comment was not solacing enough to warrant another smile from my subterranean companion. Damn. Instead, she is staring into my eyes, wearing a look consisting of the most delicate balance of confusion and fatigue it has ever been my pleasure to witness. She is obviously taken aback by my calm demeanor. Such apathy and apparent at ease with one's surroundings are rarely seen in cave dwellers such as myself, especially when one takes into account my recent careful dodging of superheated subsurface liquid. I have to say something that will reassure her.

“Don't worry. These help.”

Again a smile.

“Thanks. You know, I've been trying to quit for almost a year now. I think I'm hopeless.”

Quit? Why would any self-respecting lord shun their torches? Has she found some non-redeeming quality in these beloved embers which have always served me so well? No. Now I understand. She is attempting to gain independence, to shed her reliance upon these trivial objects that I hold so dear. How amazingly strong of her. I wish that I had her courage.

“Do you have a light?”

“You are my light.”

“What?”

“You and I were meant to be together. It all makes so much sense.”

“Excuse me?”

There is no excuse needed. If any apologies need to be made, they are on my part. I can't believe that I failed to notice this before.

“It all makes so much sense.”

I am destined to love this woman. To shower her with gifts, pathetic impersonations of and testaments to our divine love, but respectable nonetheless.

“Um... is there something in these?”

There is so much in everything. The world is alive, renewed with passion and vigor, all pulsating from within the confines of my very own shelter. I, we, are responsible for all of this. How could I possibly address such a predicament ?

“It's exciting, isn't it?”

“What is?”

How can she handle this so calmly? We are falling in love. I am helpless, yet she, standing here in the center of this most epic event, remains placid and tranquil as the highest mountaintop, unmoved by the weight or magnitude of the situation. Inspirational, truly inspirational.

She's turning to leave? And so soon? No, this just won't do. Deities have emotions too. I can't let her get away. We've so much more to discuss. Perhaps she is leading me on, waiting for me to follow. She must want more privacy than our current surroundings allow. I will follow.

I reach out for her, grab hold of her and pull her close. She squirms and wiggles, playing the cat and mouse game we both know all too well. Ah, the old bait and switch. She wants to make a game of it, does she?

Now for the chase, in many cultures a time-honored tradition during which the male's resolution and purity of intent are evaluated. The earth is much harder out here, unyielding and cruel. I crash down on her, leaving a piece of my knee strewn across the ground, an offering to this beautiful creature before me.

We dance in the pale moonlight, devoid of interference. She pulls away. I pull closer. She tries to fly. I pin her down. It is beautiful, this little dance of ours. Spinning, turning, dipping, flailing. She concedes, begging lovingly that whatever I do, I don't hurt her. If only she knew that causing her harm was the last thing on my mind.

It *is* exciting. We are the source of this world's pleasure. All future kindness, ardor, all forthcoming good deeds done and devotional monuments erected will exist courtesy of our experiences here and now. As our bodies will soon join and dance together in the spirit of warm calenture, so too will the world, mortals and gods alike, resonate and hum upon coming in contact with this, the most desired and difficultly-realized of all fantasies. Here, in this perfect synthesis of time and space and existence, we are the light.



Over Charlotte

Natalie had planned on spending Christmas – the first without her father – alone and perpetually stoned.

Against her mother's wishes, Natalie had moved into the basement when the two of them arrived in California that summer. The basement was the only place in the house that felt like home. Natalie missed the chilly Pennsylvania mornings, the gray days and the rain that came down at a steady, 45 degree angle. Mostly she just missed her father.

Rhea had made the movers take all of Thomas' possessions down there immediately. Before Natalie had unpacked her own things, she made sure that all of Thomas' belongings were taken care of. She hung his shirts on exposed water pipes, coordinating them by color the way he always had, his shoes resting neatly on the floor beneath. A set of shelves lining the far wall housed Thomas' sports memorabilia, which was no small task. Natalie even found an old oak dresser atop which she placed his wallet, watch, class ring, and some pocket change – just the way Thomas always had.

In constructing her room, Natalie had pushed two old couches together, mouth-to-mouth. There she had slept peacefully on most nights as fourteen gave way to fifteen and junior high conceded to the 1800 member-strong, socially stratified, cheerleader-laden, full-blown Friday night football game version of public education.

Natalie turned over on her side and faced the picture of Mario Lemieux taped to one of the couch's back pillows. Her father had the luck of attending a Penguins/Devils game on New Year's Eve, 1988. Little did he realize at the time that the performance of one Mario Lemieux would seal the night's place in the annals of National Hockey League History. In a 8-6 win over the New Jersey Devils, Lemieux became the only player in history to record five goals five different ways: even strength, power play, short-handed, penalty shot, and empty net. Natalie's father, a rabid Penguins fan, took his camera to the game that night. As time expired, he snapped an off-center, partially-obscured, fuzzy picture of Mario Lemieux. At least that's who he always claimed it was. In reality, the photo was so poor that it could've been the official, or someone on New Jersey's team, and nobody would have been able to tell the difference.

Natalie always awoke at least half an hour before her mother, Rhea. This way, Natalie could shower and get dressed without having to speak to her. Natalie's father, Thomas, had died ten months earlier from kidney failure. Neither Natalie nor her mother had dealt well with Thomas' death. Some might think that this shared agony would have brought them closer together, but the company loved so much by misery tends to be roundly rejected by acrimony.

Her mother stirred overhead, the floorboards creaking under her tired feet. Groggy footsteps made their way through the house without rhythm. Natalie listened to her mother shuffle into the kitchen for coffee, and slowly gather steam to the basement door. Hinges

that seemed to creak more by the day grunted as the door opened, casting fluorescent light into the dim basement.

“I’m up,” Natalie said, irritated, as she slid a finger along the picture.

The door closed unceremoniously. Natalie leered at the picture until she heard her mother return to the far end of the house. She peeked her head above the fabric fissure and pointed a remote control at the small TV propped up a few feet away. The 8:00 Sportscenter was about to start.

Half an hour later, the basement door creaked open again. Natalie sat in her couches, tugging on a joint and watching Dan Patrick go through the bowl card. Normally, Rhea would open the door and immediately get a status report from Natalie. “I’m awake. I’m coming. “I’m fine.” Whatever it took to get that door closed as quickly as possible. Natalie decided to ignore her.

“Natalie?” Rhea said from out of sight atop the stairs. “Natalie?”

Rhea took the first couple of steps. Natalie watched Rhea’s bare feet shift awkwardly with each creak of the staircase. Natalie aimed the remote control at the television and turned up the volume, in effect turning down the volume on her mother. Each time Rhea called Natalie’s name, she would take another step or two down the stairs. Soon enough, Rhea was standing at the bottom of the stairs, ten feet away, yelling at her unflinching daughter. Rhea stomped over to the television and looked for the proper plug to pull. She mistakenly yanked the coaxial cable out of the wall, which sent a deafening salvo of static through the room. Natalie pushed the Mute button and let the remote fall to the couch cushions.

“Our flight leaves in an hour and a half,” Rhea said at Natalie, who had immersed herself in a TV guide. Law and Order had recently entered syndication, improving life dramatically.

“*Your* flight leaves in an hour and a half,” Natalie said quietly.

“Natalie, we are not going to go through this again,” Rhea said, crossing her arms. Natalie snuck a peek at her mother and started to chuckle at the air of authority she was attempting to muster.

“You’re stoned,” Rhea hissed.

“So are you. Xanax counts,” Natalie said, slipping a page in the TV guide. MacGyver reruns started at eleven. Channel 42.

“Get up, shower, put some clothes on, get your suitcase...” Rhea scanned the room. “Where is your suitcase?”

“Over there,” Natalie said, pointing at an empty suitcase she had deliberately propped open on an old folding card table.

“You haven’t packed?” Rhea yelled, raising her hands in the air and then letting them drop at her sides.

“Perceptive to a fault,” Natalie said. Iron Chef in ten minutes.

Rhea walked over to the couches and, with all the strength she had, yanked them apart, sending Natalie careening down in between them to the cold cement floor. Natalie let out a yelp as she heard her ankle pop against the hard ground. Natalie curled up, holding her ankle close, sobbing. Rhea swung the couch out further and knelt down next to her daughter.

“Baby, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. What hap-”

Natalie's fist landed cleanly in the middle of Rhea's face – two knuckles on either side of her nose. Rhea toppled over and landed flat on her back. There the both of them stayed – lying on the cement floor, clutching different injuries.

“Natalie, I have to go,” Rhea sobbed.

“No, you don't,” Natalie whispered.

\* \* \*

Due to a computer mix-up that the nineteen year-old astrophysicist behind the ticket counter was unable to completely explain, Rhea and Natalie had to wait an extra hour before boarding the plane that would eventually take them to North Carolina.

“Well, what do you want to do?” asked Rhea as Natalie spun around slowly, her neck craned so that she could see to the tops of the palm trees.

“Why are there palm trees in here?” Natalie asked.

“I don't know, honey. Let's go see what they have in the food court,” Rhea said.

“Seriously. Why would anyone put palm trees in an airport?” Natalie wondered aloud, still studying the huge green leaves bowing under their own weight.

“I think it's this way,” Rhea said to herself as she started walking in the direction least likely to end in a food court.

“Mom!” Natalie yelled.

“What is it?” Rhea huffed.

“Over here,” Natalie said, pointing in the opposite direction. “We passed it on the way in.”

Rhea nodded and retracted her steps, passing Natalie, a behemoth suitcase clicking off the tiles behind her. Natalie took another skeptical look at the palms and followed her mother.

They plopped down at the bar of a TGI Friday's. The bartender walked up to them, wiping his hands with a damp, off white rag.

"What can I get you ladies?" he asked with a cowboy-like tilt to his voice.

"Rum and Coke," Natalie said.

"Natalie," Rhea moaned.

"All outta Coke, darlin'," the bartender grinned.

"Make it an orange juice then," Natalie said contemplatively.

"Breakfast menus, please," Rhea said. "And coffee."

"Sure thing," he said, walking to the other end of the bar.

Natalie drummed her tiny fingers on the bar and stared up at one of the six TVs mounted into the back wall. Each television carried a different incarnation of ESPN. There was ESPN, ESPN 2, ESPN News, ESPN Classic., even ESPN *Deportes*. Natalie didn't want to leave. Her brain, unable to handle so many manifestations of The Total Sports Network all at once, made Natalie's eyes lashed wildly from one television to another, to another, and so on. Rhea puffed steadily at her cigarette, switching her eyes between an infatuated daughter and the bottles of liquor a few feet away.

"Two years, five months... twenty...three days," Rhea whispered to herself.

"Twenty five days," Natalie said matter-of-factly without looking away from the televisions. "Man, I wonder why Linda Cohn never went to a major network."

"You keep track of that?" Rhea asked, staring over at Natalie.

"My birthday is June 30<sup>th</sup>," Natalie said, looking over at her mother.

“That’s right,” Rhea smiled, looking down. “It is.”

Natalie turned her attention back to the televisions as the bartender set two menus down in front of them. She knew what was coming next. A burning cramp would arise within Rhea; originating somewhere she hadn’t been in a long time. Natalie could always see her mother’s cravings coming on. First, her posture would begin to resemble someone with a hanger still in her shirt. Then she’d start to crumple and sweat as a churning, painful, menacing knot that seemed to yank everything from her sternum to her thighs in the wrong direction danced around her body.

“Mom, what do you want?”

Rhea hadn’t even opened the menu.

“Coffee’s fine,” Rhea said quietly.

“You should eat,” Natalie said hesitantly.

“Coffee’s fine,” she repeated, dragging her open hands across her cheeks. “Coffee’s fine.”

Rhea plopped a finger into the cup and stirred slowly, pausing to smile lightly at Natalie.

“So who is Linda Cohn?” Rhea asked, her voice shaking.

“Nobody,” Natalie said. She turned back to the televisions and rested head-on-hand, her back to Rhea. “Just someone on TV.”

\* \* \*

“Welcome to Charlotte Airport, where the local time is 1:47 pm,” droned Craig, who was quite possibly the airline’s most enthusiastic pilot. Natalie had had her fill. Four hours



of an unfunny Steven Wright regaling roughly 150 sets of gnashed teeth with spectacular assertions the likes of which had never been seen prompted a deep desire on the part of Natalie to exit the plane post haste.

“We are now cruising at 33 thousand feet. Please observe that I have turned off the seatbelt light. You are free to move about the cabin.”

“If you look out the right side of the plane, you’ll get a spectacular view of the Mississippi river.”

“Welcome to Charlotte Airport, where the local time is 1:47 pm.”

That last doozy was the straw that broke the teeming mass’ back. Protocol was cast aside as every passenger stood up and tried to gather magazines, computers, folders, books, purses, carry-ons, and wits as quickly as possible. Not a single one of them paid any attention to Debbie, the portly, parrot-faced woman who had served them freeze-dried eggs and soggy toast above Oklahoma, as she urged them to “check under the seat for any personal belongings that might have been brought on board.”

When in Rome, thought Natalie, who had never been on an airplane before. She bounded up out of her seat and tossed open the overhead compartment. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she tossed Rhea hers and closed the compartment in hopes of slowing down anyone else who needed to get at the luggage. Rhea’s bag thudded against her chest and opened onto the floor.

“Come on,” Natalie yelled as she started down the aisle.

“Natalie, wait,” Rhea yelped as she tried to cram three day’s worth of work back into her briefcase bag.

Natalie continued down the aisle, pausing to grin sarcastically at Debbie, who Natalie surmised wouldn’t recognize mockery if it landed between her uneven, surgically-altered

breasts. Natalie strolled down the jetway and into the terminal. She looked around. No palm trees. A lot of concrete and crooked picture frames advertising events dated at the height of Charlotte's limited relevance to the tourism industry. But no palm trees.

Natalie noticed a boy standing at the far right end of a crowd twenty-something strong. He was holding a sign with "Donovan" scribbled across it. She walked slowly in his direction. He was tall, with dark ear-length hair pushed back over his head. Wearing work boots, a pair of weathered jeans, and thermal underwear beneath his t-shirt, Casey had a fifteen year-old girl in love with him before he'd even been introduced to her.

Natalie walked the last five or six steps hoping that he didn't have blue eyes. If so, her dream of going to high school, attending Northwestern, graduating with a degree in sports broadcasting, and seducing Trey Wingo would be obsolete; taking a distant back seat to marrying the awe-inspiring credit to the human race that stood before her. She made her way to his side. He was still watching the gate attentively, his sign at chest height, slung up by what Natalie knew was at least one but probably two bulging forearms.

After a few seconds, Casey sensed her next to him and looked down at her. Chin skyward, Natalie stared up at her future husband (who did, in fact, have blue eyes) and grinned sheepishly.

"Natalie?" Casey asked.

Natalie nodded her head, jaw agape. Casey leaned down and took her in his arms, hugging her tightly. Natalie slowly eased her arms around his waist, her fingers savoring the journey.

"I'm glad you made it," he whispered sincerely into her ear, "I'm sorry for your loss."

Casey leaned back, faltering slightly to disengage the arms that had anchored themselves to his waist. Natalie's arms slowly sank to her sides as she gazed in wonder.

"I'm Casey, a friend of the family," he smiled.

Natalie nodded her head, jaw agape.

"I'm here to pick you up," he led.

Natalie nodded her head, jaw agape.

"Well, you and your mother," he clarified.

Natalie nodded her head, jaw agape. Casey noticed.

"Is she here?" he asked, turning his attention back to the gate.

Natalie had a brief episode of "how lame am I" and looked over at the gate.

"Yeah... she's coming. Down the tunnel. Here."

"Great," Casey smiled, still staring at the tunnel.

"So how was the flight?" he finally asked.

"Not bad. The pilot kind of sucked," she giggled. Almost immediately, she grew profoundly disgusted by the fact that she had giggled and mentally kicked herself for choosing "the pilot kind of sucked" over a brain full of observations which involved fairly astute views on politics for someone her age, a solid working knowledge of the telecommunications industry, an air tight grasp on classic rock, and nearly every statistic in the day's box scores.

"Natalie!" Rhea yelled as she emerged from the tunnel entrance. Sadly, Rhea's eyes caught the sign much sooner than Natalie's had. She stomped over to Casey and Natalie and stretched out the index finger on her right hand in preparation for a good wagging.

"Don't run off like that in a place like this," Rhea chastised, her finger poking at the air adjacent to Natalie's nose.

“I’m Casey.”

“Good for you,” Rhea said blankly.

“I’m a friend of your family’s. They asked me to pick you up,” he grinned.

“Great. Let’s go,” Rhea breathed heavily.

Casey and Rhea set off for baggage claim, trailed by a seething Natalie.

\* \* \*

Natalie expected a pickup truck. She wanted some hulking mechanical beast covered in dried mud, rust, Bondo, and Casey’s sweet scent; something fit to send this rugged demigod from A to B and back again. She stumbled across the parking lot, trying to keep pace with Casey, who was carrying three bags and handling them well. Her mother hopped along, toting just a purse.

“Right here,” Casey said as he shifted all three bags to one side and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small black key chain and pressed down on a red button. The Saturn to their right beeped as its trunk leaned open. As Casey loaded the luggage, Natalie circled around and stood, waiting for shotgun.

“Oh, sorry,” Casey grinned as he punched another button on the key chain.

Natalie heard the doors unlock. She pulled open the passenger side door and Rhea slid in.

“Thank you, darling,” Rhea smiled as she fixed herself in the seat and pulled the door shut behind her. As Natalie glared in at her uncouth mother, she caught her own reflection in the window and was disturbed to notice how alike they looked.

“How do you know Virginia?” Rhea asked as Casey drove along I 77 toward Yorkmont, the small town outside of Charlotte where Rhea had grown up.

“Oh, I’ve been helping out ever since your dad took ill two years ago,” Casey explained. “You know, just your standard farm stuff.”

“I see,” Rhea said.

“I have to admit, Virginia didn’t say much about you,” Casey said.

“I’m not surprised,” Rhea smiled bitterly.

“You moved to Pittsburgh, right?” he asked.

“Then California,” Rhea stumbled. “About six months ago – after my husband passed away.”

Natalie could’ve counted on one hand the times she’d heard Rhea mention her father since his death. That last time the two of them had discussed him was just before Natalie had started high school. It was as short and awkward a conversation as those things can really get.

“So what else do you do, Casey?” Rhea asked.

“Well, like I said, I’m putting in time at the farm. Trying to save up enough money over the winter to give Raleigh a shot in March.”

Natalie, who had spent her time to that point brooding in the back seat, perked up and leaned forward, jutting her head between the front seats.

“You play baseball?” she squeaked?

“Forgot you were back there,” Casey grinned, looking briefly at the brown crest of hair sticking out of the back. “Yeah, played two years in Columbia before getting booted. Figured I’d come up here and give it a shot. Less of a drawing pool. Pitchers aren’t so mean, neither.”

“What position?” Natalie smiled.

“Shortstop. But they used me pretty much as a utility player down in Columbia,” Casey said, a bit disheartened.

“Still, that’s triple A,” Natalie said, wholly impressed.

“You know your baseball,” Casey said, equally impressed.

“Better than most. How-”

“Why are you going this way?” Rhea asked, worried.

“49 is all tore up. This way’s faster,” Casey said. “Five minutes.”

Rhea had grown up in a colonial-style plantation house that stretched as high up into the sky as the oak trees surrounding it. The place was a castle, clad in off-white wooden siding and topped by a slate roof that was interrupted only by a thick, gray brick chimney.

Rhea walked away from the parked car. As Casey unloaded the trunk and chatted about Boston’s middle infield, Natalie watched her mother take in the sheer size of it all. Rhea was turning around, eyes skyward, looking like she was about to cry. Most people go back home and think it small. “This is the biggest place I’ve ever seen,” Rhea said aloud, although Natalie guessed her interior monologue had simply given out.

“I still say Garciparra is overrated,” Casey said, shutting the trunk.

The two of them walked toward the house. Natalie stopped by her mother as Casey kept on going, once again sporting three heavy bags and looking no worse for the wear. Natalie looked up at her mother, who appeared as though she was fighting the urge to run back down the dirt road and not stop until she hit South Carolina.

“No palm trees,” Natalie smiled thinly, unable to discern whether she was lending support or luxuriating in her mother’s pain.

Casey had already put the bags inside and was waiting dutifully at the door when Rhea and Natalie walked up. They entered and were greeted by two dozen familial strangers, as the entire room suddenly had no idea what to say.

Patty, Rhea's younger sister, jogged over and threw her arms around the two of them.

"I didn't think you would come," she whispered into Rhea's ear.

"Of course I came," Rhea said, leaning away from Patty.

Patty was the only one out of Rhea's eight brothers and sisters who had kept in touch. They exchanged phone calls once or twice a month. Patty, having visited Rhea twice in California, was the only one in the entire house who had met Natalie. The last time Patty had come out to California, she and Natalie had spent the entire night on the beach. Natalie had just discovered boys and Patty was giving her all the wrong advice, so naturally, Natalie savored every second of it.

"My God in Heaven, you're huge!" exclaimed Patty, who had leaned back to get a better view of Natalie. "But not in a fat way, I mean, in a tall way. Even though you're not all that tall. I didn't mean that."

"Just hug me, aunt crazy," Natalie said, smiling.

Natalie had always liked Patty. She knew that her aunt was certifiable, which was why she called her 'aunt crazy.' She also knew that Patty was aware and very open about her loose screws, which Natalie had to respect.

Natalie looked around. The room was awash in unfamiliar people. Slowly, she began placing everyone from her mother's descriptions.

Small ears, thick glasses. David.

Curly hair, legs from here to eternity. Molly.

Ugly purple dress. Shannon.

Short and tubby. Awkward as hell. Christopher.

Perfectly pressed khakis. Daniel.

Furry arms, crossed in defiance. William.

Looks confused. No visible spouse. Joseph.

Everyone else was alien. There were a dozen or so children scattered around the room, clinging to knees or cradled in the backs of elbows, looking at the strange woman with the swollen nose and the tight tank top who had just walked in with her daughter and tossed a grenade in the foyer.

Suddenly, the crowd parted. Out walked Virginia. Natalie watched the matriarch walk slowly and silently toward them. Virginia looked up into Rhea's eyes and gingerly put her arms around her daughter's trembling body. Vanilla and Murphy's Oil Soap, Natalie thought as she breathed her grandmother in, taking a quick look at the wooden floors brought to a high gloss by what must have been Virginia's weekly waxings.

As the two pulled apart, their audience went back to doing whatever it was they were doing before Rhea had walked in. The room's volume increased steadily, as though someone was cranking a stereo knob. Everything's kosher now that grandma didn't flip shit, Natalie thought.

"And you must be Natalie," Virginia said, admiring her.

"That's the rumor," Natalie said flatly.

"You're even more beautiful than I thought you'd be," Virginia smiled as she gathered in Natalie from head to toe. "Did Casey treat you two all right?"

"Absolutely," Rhea said in a hollow voice. "He's great."



“Yes he is. Ain’t that right, Natalie?” Virginia grinned as she caught Natalie eyeing up her newest favorite shortstop.

Natalie fumbled for a few seconds before emitting a sheepish, “Yeah.”

“Come in. Please. You can help us set everything up. We’ve been waiting since two for you, but we’ve still got a couple solid hours, so I’m sure we’ll make due,” Virginia smiled as she turned, pulled her second Moses imitation of the day, and shuffled off toward the kitchen.

Natalie waded headfirst into the crowd, swapping handshakes, hugs, kisses and smiles, all forced. They’ve all been told that I was a sinful mistake and a curse on their family, she thought; might as well suffer their shit with a smile.

\* \* \*

Natalie kept to herself during the funeral, passing the time with Patty. When the wake seemed a little too crowded and much too religious, Natalie asked Patty to find some beer and a good hiding place. Patty grabbed Natalie’s hand, shoved a six pack under her sweater, and led her outside to the garage. Originally, the garage had been a barn. Natalie and Patty scaled the nearly-vertical staircase up to the hay loft and tossed themselves down on the bails.

“You’re going to get me in trouble,” Patty said.

“I certainly hope so,” Natalie smiled.

Natalie opened two beers and stuck one in front of Patty.

“I don’t know if I should do this,” Patty said hesitantly.

“What’ve they got you on?” Natalie asked.

“Oh, they’ve put me on a little of this, a little of that. Right now I’m taking this Celexia stuff. It ain’t bad.”

“You’ll be fine, Aunt Crazy,” Natalie smiled. “It’s good for what ails ya.”

“Well if Mama finally let David bring beer into the house, we might as well take advantage,” Patty smiled, grabbing one of the auburn bottles. They laid back on the hay bails, sipping beer and telling stories. Natalie’s left arm and Patty’s right arm, positioned next to one another, were the only operating forces in the room, save the conversation; they hung like two colossal construction cranes, perched atop thin girders, occasionally loading or unloading their cargo. Patty talked about her new boyfriend from church. Natalie mentioned how much of a pain in the ass it was living at home and Patty agreed. They polished off three beers apiece and made jokes about how the other’s cheeks had turned crimson all of a sudden. The rest was, as Ginsberg said, drunken dumbshow.

“It’s because she loved him so much,” Patty said from deep left.

“What?” Natalie said, now leaning on one elbow.

Patty sat up and rubbed her hands over her eyes. “Don’t gimme that. You’ve been pissed about being here since before you came. And since you don’t seem to know, you’re here because your mama loved your granddaddy so much.”

Natalie’s brow furrowed and she sat up straight. “But he kicked her out. When he found out she was pregnant with me,” Natalie reassured herself.

“Honey, all I’m saying is that you should give your mama some more credit. Unless someone else made her nose swell up like that, I’d say you’re giving her a pretty hard time.”

“What happened?” Natalie asked.

“I’ll tell you if you kindly understand that I wouldn’t have told you sober,” Patty said.

“Ok,” Natalie said suspiciously.

“Back when daddy was a minister, we were the cat’s meow of this town. Big ol’ natural Christian family, ya know? Why David was so smart and Daniel played damn near every sport there was. And William, he was just getting his business up and running. We girls were supposed to sit around, wait for a suitable husband, and go live ourselves good Christian lives. Your mama and Thomas, well, you know the details. You *are* the details,” Patty laughed. “Oh, that sounded mean, honey, I’m sorry-”

“And he didn’t want his image sullied, so he kicked her out,” Natalie led.

“Will you be patient, darling?” Patty said.

“No,” Natalie urged.

“Anyway,” Patty yelled. “Everyone in the family knew that mama ran the whole deal. Your granddaddy wasn’t happy that your mother and Thomas had taken a shortcut, but he never stopped loving her or you, even though you were just a twinkle in his eye.”

“Then what happened?” Natalie asked.

“Look at it this way. Your mama? She’s happy when the people she loves are taken care of. My mama? She’s the sweetest most God-fearing woman on this good earth... as long as she gets what she wants. One thing she did not want was her good Christian family tainted.”

Natalie looked down at her fingers as she crossed and uncrossed them.

Patty gasped, “Oh honey, not that you’re a taint-”

“It’s okay, Aunt Crazy,” she said softly.

All of a sudden, Casey’s head popped up from the edge of the hay loft.

“There you are. They need you on the line,” Casey smiled.

“Let’s go, darling,” Patty said, patting Natalie on the back.

“What are we doing?” Natalie asked.

“Sweet potato pies,” she smiled.

\* \* \*

“You know, if I had a penny for every one of these I made, well, I certainly wouldn’t be slaving over them now,” Virginia said from the head of the pie line. “Thank the Lord I can still make them, though.”

A cascade of muffled “Amen’s” rippled down the table as Natalie watched her grandmother’s wrinkled hands slide rhythmically along the edges of the dough, sealing the sweet potatoes inside. Methodically, Virginia pressed notches around the edge of the crust, making sure each indentation was perfect. Natalie stood at the opposite end of the assembly line, trying to figure out how someone so fragile looking could be so evil.

Natalie’s job was to roll the dough so that Shannon (or was she Molly?) could slap it into the pie plates. Rhea was buried in the middle of the line, next to the filling, her head held low. Natalie watched her mother go through the motions as though she’d never left. She envisioned a much younger, almost ethereal version of her mother, amiably cooking dinner for her father and brothers while she tried desperately to figure out what to do with the tiny flicker of light inside her womb. Natalie looked down the table at Virginia, who smiled pleasantly and went back to her finishing touches.

“And look at all my girls, back home where they belong,” Virginia smiled as she surveyed the table. “I only wish your father had lived long enough to see it.”

Natalie snickered. Patty quickly stuck her tongue out wide, trying to cover for Natalie. Virginia looked at Natalie, then at Patty. “You two behave yourselves,” she said, her right eyebrow creeping up a wrinkled forehead.

Patty's head instinctively shot back down to the table, but Natalie paused. What right does this woman have to give me orders, Natalie thought. She dropped the rolling pin flat on the table and stared at her "grandmother."

"Did you not hear me?" Virginia asked, a slice of challenge in her voice.

"Oh I heard you," Natalie said. "I just fail to see how I'm required to listen."

"Natalie," Rhea hushed.

In that moment, nobody existed at that table except for Natalie and Virginia, who were staring holes in each other. Natalie had just thrown thirty-six ounces of carbonated fuel on a fire that had had her aching for a fight since she left California. Virginia, ever the calm, cold presence, remained stoic.

"Because I am your grandmother and this is my house," she explained coldly.

"You're not my grandmother," Natalie laughed as though insulted.

"That's it," Rhea said as she put down her pie and wiped her hands on a washcloth. She left her place in line and started walking toward Natalie.

"Get back to work, Rhea," Virginia said calmly, still staring at Natalie, who watched in disbelief as her mother dutifully turned around and walked back to her place in line.

"Don't give her orders, you heinous bitch," Natalie yelled.

Every person at the table gasped and made the same saintly gesture. Everyone except for Natalie, Rhea, and Virginia, that is. Patty, who abhorred confrontation, looked like she was on the verge of tears.

"You know where she gets this behavior," Virginia said. "From her father."

Natalie picked up the first thing she could get her hands on – a sizeable piece of raw dough – and sent it whizzing past Virginia's head. A loud clap rang out through the silent

kitchen as the ball impacted against the far wall. The old woman, looking shocked for the first time all day, was nearly at a loss for words.

“I have never-” Virginia started.

“Mention him again and the next one hits you in the forehead,” Natalie threatened.

By this point, Rhea had circled around to the end of the table and placed her hands on Natalie’s shoulders. Natalie and Virginia were locked on each other. Slowly, the weight of Virginia’s comment began to pull on Natalie and tears welled up in her eyes

“Now is not the time for this,” Virginia said dramatically, her eyes shooting up to the ceiling, her hands neatly stacked, palms-inward, on her chest.

“Another round of “Amen’s” for the sweet potato pie table,” Natalie cheered as her penitent cooking partners made the world a little more pure.

“I suggest you hold your tongue,” Virginia countered.

“If you ever say anything about my father again, flying dough is going to be the least of your worries,” Natalie said meekly, tears in her eyes.

Virginia looked at Rhea menacingly and said, “How dare you let that... that *sin* of Thomas’ talk to your mother like that.”

“Excuse me?” Rhea hissed, her jaw clenched. “How dare *you* talk to *my* daughter like that.”

Virginia straightened up a bit, preparing for a fight. “Now you lis-”

“You listen,” Rhea bellowed. “You have no idea what it took for me to walk back into this house, to look you all in the face. Because of you, the first time I’ve seen my father in fifteen years was at his funeral.”

“Don’t you blame this on-” Virginia started.

“Shut up!” Rhea screamed. “For once in your life, shut up. I want you to look at Natalie.”

Virginia faltered a bit.

“Look at her!” Rhea ordered. Virginia slowly shifted her eyes to Natalie, who was standing next to her mother in uncertainty. “Remember what she looks like. Remember what I look like. And that goes for the rest of you,” Rhea said as she looked around the table. “Because neither one of us are coming back here, even when you finally do the civilized world a favor and die,” Rhea spat, pointing a finger at Virginia.

Rhea took hold of Natalie and led her out the front door. Natalie plopped down on the porch swing, sending a few shards of peeling paint to the cement porch. Rhea sat next to her, gingerly placing a hand on Natalie’s back. Natalie gave and leaned into her mother, sobbing. Rhea squeezed her hard and ran her fingers through Natalie’s hair. Patty, who had finally mustered the courage to leave the table, stood in the doorway, tears in her eyes. Rhea showed a painful smile and nodded to Patty, who then vanished into the house.

“I’m so sorry,” Natalie sniffed. “Aunt Crazy told me everything.”

“She did, did she?” Rhea said contemplatively as she rocked Natalie back and forth.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Natalie asked.

Rhea lifted Natalie’s head up and looked into her eyes, swollen and red from the strain of holding in so much.

“Because I’m your mother,” she said, brushing a strand of matted hair from her forehead. “And anyone who considers you a sin or a mistake or anything other than the reason I live and breathe isn’t worth telling stories about.”

“I miss him so much,” Natalie cried.

Natalie let her mother take her moist cheek in her hands.

“I know,” Rhea said, her own tears now starting to make their way down her face.

“See that field out beyond the line of spruce trees?” Rhea pointed. “He used to take me out there to pick flowers.”

“It’s beautiful,” Natalie whispered, finding odd comfort in her mother’s embrace.

“He would have taken you out there,” Rhea mused.

“Yeah?” Natalie asked, her voice cracking. She squeezed in even closer. All of a sudden she had this new warmth, a rediscovered serenity so consoling it made her shudder to think that she’d ever existed in its absence.

Rhea turned them both so that they were looking out over the farm. There they sat in silence for a few minutes, shuddering and sniffing intermittently. Natalie watched the fading light dance across the fields, shimmering and swaying as though it were riding on the air, clinging desperately to every ounce of bending energy. All that space, Natalie thought all of that room to make anything happen.

“No palm trees,” Natalie said softly.



Andy Hausler Ruined my Life

The Hauslers moved in next door on my birthday: January 11. There were two kids, boys, with whom my son, Conrad, became quick friends. Their mother, Janet, who walked across the driveway separating our properties and knocked on our front door the very first day, wasted no time in joining the front porch bitchfests held by the neighborhood wives each weekend night while they waited to see whether or not their children made it home by the generally-accepted nine o'clock deadline. Overall, they were quiet from the time they moved in until just after Easter, when Andy Hausler, father, husband, breadwinner, asshole, first stepped outside and into my nightmares.

I had just begun the year's spring gardening. My bulbs broke through too early; they had frosted over the previous night and I was outside making repairs. As I staked long sheets of plastic into the front flower bed, Andy came around the side of his house with a brand new Foster wheelbarrow – complete with reinforced oak handles and micro-cellular polyurethane flat-proof tires – filled to capacity with gardening ordinance.

I watched him carefully over the next few weeks. Each evening, we arrived home from work at about the same time, he getting out of his Lexus and me out of my Taurus. After dinner and the evening news, I would retire to the yard for maintenance. Nine times out of ten, Andy was already out there, elbow-deep in potting soil or fertilizer, his tools sullied with the evening's gardening refuse. As May rolled around, I noticed how evenly robust his grass was, how perfectly pruned the Azaleas lining his sidewalk were. I started spending more time outside. I left the office a bit earlier each day, driving ten reckless minutes home and retiring immediately to the yard.

By June, I was spending an average of four hours a day on my knees, plumbing for weeds, laying out poison for the rabbits that snuck up the wooded hill behind my house late at night to nibble at the Juniper. I trimmed the Forsythia more carefully than I did my beard, watched the soil ph levels more closely than I did my own child, and kept an eye on the dear next-door neighbor who, although he'd never admit it, was trying to abscond with the Fox Ridge neighborhood status and power I'd achieved through years of diligent agriculture.

July 4<sup>th</sup> fell on a Sunday that year. I awoke early the preceding Saturday to check on the yard and make some last-minute changes to my shopping checklist. I had successfully held the neighborhood barbecue for seven straight years and had every intention of raising the tally to eight.

"Did you send out the invitations?" I asked Ellie, my wife, as I stood over her in the kitchen and pounded my morning coffee.

"They're going out today, hon," she said.

“Today? That means they won’t arrive until at least Monday. How do you expect anyone to RSVP in time for me to get a decent head count?” I barked. “I won’t know how much to cook.”

“There are going to be forty one people, Danny. There have been thirty-nine every year you’ve hosted. Ted and Carol moved out and the Hausler’s moved in. That makes forty one,” she said without looking up from her crossword puzzle.

“I just want to make sure,” I said, downing the coffee.

“If it’s that important, I can just walk around the block and put everyone’s invitations in their mailboxes myself,” she said.

“Are you insane? Nobody is going to come to a barbecue hosted by people who can’t afford stamps,” I yelled. “Just send them out and hope that nobody else has plans already.”

I stormed out of the house and pulled a quick survey of the yard. I made a quick mental note to call the newspaper office and bitch about their paperboy walking across my grass while the dew was still on it. That little bastard was going to single handedly destroy the hue of my lawn if I didn’t stay vigilant. The Oleander looked dry. Nothing a little Miracle Grow couldn’t fix, I thought to myself.

As my eyes naturally strayed over to Andy’s yard, I felt a nauseous bubble of apprehension well up inside me. He had planted a long, thin line of plum trees along the side of his house the week earlier. Pruned and tied down, they had taken perfectly to their artificial shaping, anchored in the two-dimensional Espalier fashion common in southern Europe. I had never thought to do that.

“Don’t forget my yogurt,” Ellie called from the front porch. “And could you get the mail?”

I trudged over to the mailbox, cursing Andy and the paperboy under my breath. I yanked down the mailbox door and pulled out a thin stack; two bills, a Giant Eagle coupon flyer, and a small envelope addressed to my wife and me. The paper was off-white and thick, the message pressed in deep blue ink fancifully across the page.

Andrew and Janet Hausler cordially invite you and your family to  
attend the Fox Ridge Independence Day Barbecue this Sunday, July 4<sup>th</sup>.  
The festivities will begin promptly at three pm and run until we're out of food.

306 Dinning Court

Please RSVP via phone or letter at your earliest convenience.

I looked back over at Andy's house. Like a ghostly apparition existing solely to torment me, he had appeared out of nowhere and was devotedly attending to his prune trees. He flashed a wide smile, waved at Ellie, and walked over to me. I felt my palm sweat begin to seep through the invitation as he approached.

"Sure hope you can come," he said, grinning wide.

"Actually, Andy, I usually host the barbecue on the fourth, and I-"

"Well, there's no harm in giving the new guy a chance, is there? I mean, I'm sure I can't live up to big Danny's soiree," he chuckled, landing a soft punch on my shoulder. "But the least I can get is a shot at the crown."

I wanted to plant my fist in his breadbasket and stuff his cheap Staples invitation and its shoddy calligraphy right down his throat.

“Unfortunately, my boys won’t be able to make it. They just left for soccer camp up at Penn State,” he smiled thinly, pretending not to gloat. “Got a scholarship to the summer program.”

“That’s great,” I said.

“What’s Conrad up to this summer?” he asked.

“Summer school,” I said.

“Ah,” Andy nodded, looking around uncomfortably.

“Sweetie Pie, come on back over here,” Janet yelled from her front porch. She was wearing a big grey Air Force Academy t-shirt. As she raised one arm to shield her eyes from the morning sun, the shirt crept up a few inches, revealing a creamy thigh without the slightest hint of cellulite. She noticed me looking over and raised the hand even further to offer a wave, which brought the shirt higher. I caught a glimpse of the thin pink panties clinging to her hipbone.

“Well, can’t wait to see you there, buddy,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder once more before he turned around and started toward his babies.

I walked with clenched teeth to the porch as Ellie waved to Janet and sipped her coffee.

“Anything good?” she asked, still holding the crossword puzzle.

I stared up at the number two pencil holding about half of her hair in place. She had gained some weight. Her freckles, once dim and cute, looked like they were starting to grow larger, some of them even merging. Before I knew it, my mind went to Janet. I had been trimming the Abelia a few days earlier and caught a glimpse of her bringing groceries in from her car. I lost three perfectly good branches to her hypnotic hips.

“Bills,” I said, handing her the stack minus an invitation.

I ignored a wave from Andy, dropped the invitation in our curbside garbage cans, and climbed into my car.

Naturally, Ellie was less than pleased to learn of my treachery. I walked into the kitchen a few hours later, carrying a bag of fertilizer, new pruning shears, and a four-pound bag of iodized salt – it didn't help that I had forgotten the yogurt. She was standing with her back to me, washing the dishes. Conrad sat at the table, frowning down at a page of *remedial no-pressure just try and do your best* geometry.

“Hey, dad,” he smiled. I gave him a brief glimmer of recognition and set down the bags.

“Did you know that the Hausler's are having a barbecue next Sunday?” she asked innocently enough, the way wives do when they're baiting you into a conversation from which you will inevitably emerge a tangled, bleeding mess.

“No...” I trailed off, reading the fertilizer directions.

“That's funny. I was talking to Andy...” she led.

“Yeah? I asked, trying to look supremely interested in learning that the home-lawn rate for a single application of nitrogen is 1 pound of N per 1,000 square feet of turf.

“He said that he sent out the invitations on Thursday,” she said.

I looked up at her, knowing I was caught. I used to be much better at digging up lame explanations for inappropriate behavior, but the terra was barren.

“Just to be sure,” she added, yanking from her pocket the crumpled invitation, which she tossed onto the table in front of me.

“What's that?” I asked, figuring denial would buy me a few more seconds.

“You're sick,” she said as she walked past me and down the front hallway.

“Ha. Dad's in the doghouse,” Conrad snickered.

“Why don’t *you* play soccer?” I seethed.

“Fucking sick,” I heard just before the screen door slammed shut behind Ellie.

\* \* \*

The Roman Legions were renowned for their brutal tactics. A not oft used but extremely effective strategy of theirs was the total destruction of a people’s agricultural base. When, during the course of their rampant imperial expanse, the Romans stumbled across a group of people who were simply too troublesome to rule effectively, they would sow salt into the village fields, ensuring the ground wouldn’t yield crops for as long as it took the inhabitants to die off.

I waited until just after midnight. I could hear Conrad snoring and my wife had passed out just after the news and about four glasses of wine quietly imbibed to help her deal with her crazy husband. I sat alone in the living room, drinking beer and brooding. After the house was good and quiet, I slipped into a pair of jeans and a dark sweatshirt as I made my way to the basement and out the back door. I crept across the dark asphalt of the driveway and over to Andy’s plum trees. Working in near silence, I began to poke holes in the soil and fill them with small columns of salt. As I made my way down the tree line, I thought of how embarrassed Andy would be the following week as he overcooked hamburgers on his grill and tried to smile pleasantly through the stench of rotting vegetation. He’d never host the barbecue again.

I still had a few cups of salt left by the time I had made two trips up and down the plot. After a quick look around, I decided to take a shot at the Azaleas. As I made my way over to the front of the house, I heard muffled noises seeping through the window. I crept



over the Azaleas, in close to the house, stood up on the tips of my toes, and peered in the window.

Andy was perched atop Janet, having a go at her from the backside. He had one hand full of ass and the other clenched in her bright red hair. Her eyes were closed and her mouth agape in that good kind of agony that only comes from one place. I realized that Ellie and I hadn't had sex in months. Come to think of it, we'd barely touched each other since January. Janet let out a wail and I lost my balance. I tumbled backwards over the flowerbed, crushing one of the Azaleas with my ass.

"What was that?" I heard Janet yelp through the window. I rolled over and bounded out of the bed, trampling two more plants as I went. I made it two houses away before I heard Andy's front door bang open.

"I know you're out here, you fucking pervert," he yelled into the darkness.

I crouched behind the Zuckerman's Cherokee and watched Andy reach back inside, flip on the porch light, and look around. All of a sudden, the Zuckerman's car lit up and wailed as I leaned on it. The horn bellowed throughout the neighborhood and the SUV's emergency blinkers flashed their orange nuisance out into the night. I watched him turn and spot me standing next to the Cherokee. The Zuckerman's front light came on and Andy took a few hurried steps in my direction. I took off down the road, running in between houses at random. Rounding a dark corner, I crashed into the Armstrong's chain link fence at a full sprint and toppled backwards to the ground.

I regained consciousness several hours later. The sky was beginning to show signs of a rising sun. I stood up, clutching my sore chest, and limped out from behind the Armstrong's house. I straightened myself, walked directly past the vacant Pennsylvania State Trooper car parked in the Hausler's driveway, and fell asleep on the couch in my den.

I slept like a drugged baby that night, my head awash with visions of Janet's breasts rocking back and forth, the little pouch beneath her belly button shuddering slightly with each thrust. I awoke to the sound of a door slamming. As my eyes crept open, I saw Ellie standing at the foot of the couch, hands on her hips.

"Yes?" I asked, still groggy.

She stood there for a few seconds, obviously arranging a speech for me.

"Janet came over for coffee this morning. Said someone tried to rob their house last night."

"Are you serious?" I asked.

"Yeah. Told me Andy had to chase the guy off."

She was staring holes in me, waiting for me to do anything that would lend legitimacy to the theory she had cooked up. I ran a hand through my hair and wiped the sleep out of my eyes.

"Well, honey, our door locks are all fine," I said. "The ones on the windows are good too. I don't think we have anything to worry about."

She nodded to herself and walked toward the door. I flopped back down on the couch, pulled the blanket up to my chin, and lost myself in the stucco ceiling. I chuckled to myself as the plaster began to resemble the spires of salt I'd planted in Andy's otherwise immaculate garden.

"Oh, I almost forgot. Janet asked me to bring baked beans to the barbecue. I offered to do more, but she said Andy's insisted on handling the rest of the cooking," she said.

"Figures," I murmured.

"What?"

“Nothing.”

“Anyway, I couldn’t find the bag of salt you picked up yesterday and I need some for the meat.”

I shot up. She was standing, arms crossed, just in front of the closed door.

“Didn’t I put it in the pantry?” I asked.

“I didn’t see it,” she said, cold and unblinking.

“Well, I-”

“Just get some more while you’re out,” she hissed, slamming the door hard behind her.

\* \* \*

Nobody touched our baked beans. Andy had taken it upon himself to make his own batch; assuring apologetically that he’d only done so to try out a new recipe his uncle had just sent him. The back yard was decked out with lawn chairs and tiny citronella candles centered on tables. Tiki torches illuminated the edges of the yard. Andy stood gleefully at his two thousand dollar, multi-level, gas/charcoal hybrid, I-am-the-king-of-all-things-flame-kissed grill, answering questions about his gardening routine. I sat alone at one of the far tables, drinking Seagram’s Seven and watching the kids play lawn darts.

The salt did not work as I had planned. I hadn’t covered my tracks well and, sure enough, Andy had removed most of the salt the morning after I had planted it. I sat in his cheap molded plastic lawn chair, sipping his second-rate booze, watching him handle ten burgers and three conversations simultaneously.

He was hemmed in on all sides. Betty and Travis Fabrey, a pair of antique lawyers from the next street over, chain smoked and threw their heads back at every one of Andy’s jokes. Janet made her rounds, filling glasses of Sangria from a massive crystal pitcher and

exchanging pleasantries. Ellie, my wife, my supposed supporter through thick-and-thin, stood at Andy's side, smiling wide and touching him lightly on the shoulder with greater frequency as drink after drink slowly disappeared into her belly.

Andy eventually killed the grill and wandered over to the driveway where a few of the neighborhood children were playing basketball with Conrad. He was terrible. While only a couple of the kids could shoot well, at least they all knew how to dribble. Conrad just ran around with his hands in the air, belly flapping up and down underneath his t-shirt. Ellie and Janet stood next to the snack table, babbling on and leering at Andy's ass during jump shots. I successfully stood up on my third attempt and staggered toward the bar. I gathered another whiskey and slid over to Ellie and Janet. They both looked at me with the same equal parts disgust and pity as I tried in vain to straighten myself.

"Great party," I half-belched in Janet's direction.

"Thank you, Daniel," she said, paying as little attention to me as possible, which was still more than Ellie cared to offer.

"I especially enjoyed the baked beans," I said flatly.

Janet grinned in discomfort and nodded. Ellie apologized quickly and grabbed me by the bicep, trying to lead me away.

"What, honey? Those were some good fucking baked beans," I laughed. "In fact, I want more. I want the rest. Where's the plates?"

As I yelled out my inquiry and spun around to look for the plates, my drink spit half its contents onto Janet's chest. She gasped and took a big step back. Knowing that chivalry was not dead, I grabbed a stack of napkins and lunged at the pair of breasts I had been dreaming about since the previous weekend. She let out a quick yelp and Ellie slapped my forearm hard.

“Danny, you’re making a scene,” she scolded.

“Everything all right?” Andy asked, taking a few steps toward us, basketball in hand.

“No problemo, senor Hausler,” I smiled, toasting him with what was left of my whiskey. “Just telling your wife how good her beans is.” I let out a brief belly laugh and realized that most everyone at the party was splitting their time between looking at me and at the pair of sopping breasts to my immediate right.

“Fuck the beans,” I announced. “I want to play some basketball.”

I swigged the rest of the booze, tossed the empty glass to Ellie, and wobbled over to the driveway. Andy was standing there, still holding the ball, a look of confusion smeared across his face. I slapped the ball out of his hands and watched it bounce into the yard.

“Hope that doesn’t hurt the grass,” I snickered as I closed the distance between us.

“You all right, big guy?” Andy asked, smiling as awkwardly as his wife.

By this point, everyone at the party was watching their inebriated former favorite neighbor taunt their new favorite neighbor as though the two of them were standing in a schoolyard. At least, that must have been the way I saw it. I couldn’t back down. I shoved Andy hard and he took a few steps back. I heard the crowd gasp. I took a fuzzy swing in his general direction and fell face-forward onto the pavement. I stayed there for a while, looking at the small grains in the asphalt and once again seeing the Roman Legions decimating acre after acre of land with rudimentary chemistry and some elbow grease.

Eventually, someone tugged at the backs of my arms and I was hoisted to my feet. I raised a hand to my lip and brought back a dark red set of fingers. Ellie threw one of my arms around her waist, with Conrad taking the other on his shoulder. As they dragged me away, all I could think to say was “Camellia. I should plant some Camellia.”

A Long, Slow Drag

Evan knew that he was neither athletic or brilliant and that those two things – in that order – were all that seemed to matter. A senior at Manor, the largest public high school in Ashland, Kentucky, Evan had grown up in the apathy capital of North America; small town, no hopes, no aspirations, and damn sure no escape. Just a random assortment of God’s own squatting on plots of land around a Wal Mart and an interstate

He lived in a large ranch-style house no more than a fifteen minute walk from town. His mother worked two jobs; one at Union Feed Store down the road and the other at Clem’s Café, a 24 hour rib and coffee joint out by the interstate frequented only by truckers and hapless drunks looking for a fight. Evan worked part time at the Last Shelf Video in what the Ashland residents foolishly referred to as the “downtown” area. The income from those three jobs was enough to keep the house and put food on the table, as Evan’s father, Charlie, had been bedridden for several years courtesy of a laundry list of ailments ranging from severe arthritis to migraines to the beginnings of lung cancer.

Evan's sister, Susie, was three years his junior, but as a freshman was already climbing the influential rungs of Manor High's social ladder. Susie was the first girl in eleven years to make the varsity cheerleading squad as a freshman and she never missed an opportunity to tactfully remind anyone of that fact. Tall, slender, naturally blonde and blue-eyed, she had been asked to the prom by three seniors a good four months before the event was scheduled to go up.

Evan's days were spent dodging 2400 other students as he slid down the hallway from class to class. Evan never paid much attention to or grew passionate about any academic subject. He had decided at a young age that anything mandatory, such as public education, was to be abhorred and had never found good reason to think otherwise.

One day in early March of his senior year, Evan came home after pulling a four-to-close at the video store, and jugged down to hide in his room as usual. When he reached the door to his bedroom, he saw that it was closed. Evan never closed his door. He had always been haunted by the fear of being trapped. He saw his entire existence as a trap. He was unlucky enough to be born in Ashland, Kentucky, of all places – into a poor family who lived a life that bordered on complete isolation. His mother had to give up her scant social gossip circle when his father, who never so much as talked to another human being unless it involved high school football, took ill. His sister, despite her beauty and popularity, had decided long ago that she'd never leave Ashland. At least Evan knew that she wouldn't. He assumed that she'd get knocked up at some point during high school and have a fancy little shotgun wedding before she settled down to cook chicken and pump out babies. Evan had seen it happen countless times before, and he knew in Susie's case it was only a matter of time.



Evan turned the knob and pushed the door open. He quickly scanned the room for any changes. In the back left corner hung a faded red punching bag. A thick chain ran up from the top of the bag to the ceiling, where it was bolted into the concrete. Frayed duct tape covered the middle of the bag, which was littered with divots and scrapes.

“It’s for you,” a voice coughed from behind.

Evan spun around to see his father standing there, hunched over. His silvery hair stuck out at strange angles, framing a face covered in massive wrinkles and liver spots. Charlie had once been a behemoth, six-three and built like a brick shithouse. He was an all-conference linebacker twice. Evan studied the emaciated frame, trying to discern where the muscles had been. All he saw was a shriveled old man with a tube running up to his hairy nostrils who could barely stand, let alone lug around a thirty pound oxygen tank.

“It’ll toughen you up,” he wheezed, “put some meat on those bones.”

His father reached out, squeezed Evan’s upper arm, and with a disgruntled humph, turned to start up the stairs, the tank squeaking and clanking behind him. Evan turned back around and stared angrily at the red intruder.

\* \* \*

Evan despised group projects. Most of the time, he could slide through school without having to talk to anyone, let alone work with someone, which was why Evan slumped down into his seat at the back of the room when Mr. Fetters, his History teacher, announced that the class was to be paired up for writing papers on the Civil War. Evan knew that there were 27 students in the class, which meant that there would be an odd man

out. Evan also knew that nobody would voluntarily have him in their group, and maybe, just maybe, Evan could do the assignment on his own.

“All right now, class,” Mr. Fetters yelled. “The school board is worried that the size of this place prevents many of you from getting to know each other and that this fosters the type of general dislike that causes events like the incident in the cafeteria. Therefore, in an effort to help you all become better acquainted, I’ve taken the liberty of assigning partners for this project.”

Two weeks earlier, a fight had broken out during lunch. From whisperings in the hall and eavesdropped conversations, Evan figured out that a few members of the football team had taken it upon themselves to stick Jerry McCumpsey’s lunch down his pants. Jerry’s older brother, Steve, a greasy tower of a man who happened to head up the car-fixing/parole violating/Metallica fan demographic, took exception and gave half of the starting secondary concussions before the scuffle turned into a brawl. Evan had been on the other side of the cafeteria at the time, hearing only a few shouts and screams. By the time he looked up, a dozen teachers had thrown themselves into the fray and calm was quickly being restored.

Evan silently cursed the school board. It was foolish not to accept that in Ashland, there were classes of people. There were warring factions who fought for no other reason than the knowledge that they all occupied the same territory. Sure, the board might like the idea of new faces being met, of social circles becoming integrated, but Evan wished they would understand that there were students who just wanted to be left alone to skirt by on the beefy side of the GED line. He listened, disheartened, as Mr. Fetters called out the pairs. Jeanie Krepsik, captain of the cheerleading squad, was paired with Bob Malenzi, a grease monkey who had already dropped out of school once but returned when his father threatened to put his teeth down his throat. Jeanie was less than thrilled and scoffed

deliberately as Bob began to case her thighs and make a mental list of all the nasty things he wanted to do with, or more to the point, *to* her.

And so it went. Evan could tell that Mr. Fetters had planned this carefully. Nearly every student representative of a distinct social class was paired up with someone grossly inappropriate as far as the brutal caste system of Manor High was concerned. Muscle-bound Jocks with Pencil Thin Academics. Perfect Beauty Queens with Rampant Sluts. Poor Grease Monkeys with Rich Elitists. With each group, Evan became more and more fearful of who Fetters had decided to pair him up with.

“Evan Anderson... Jeff Britton,” Mr. Fetters barked.

Evan’s eyes went over to the other side of the classroom. There sat Jeff Britton. Jeff was well over six feet tall, had lettered in basketball and track for four straight years, and, unlike most of the guys he hung out with, seemed to be well-liked by the bulk of the students. Jeff’s face gave away nothing as he eyed up Evan and gave a slight nod.

“That does it. We’ve got about ten minutes before the bell rings, so why don’t you all take this opportunity to introduce yourselves and start brainstorming,” Mr. Fetters called out over the mass of groans and whining.

Jeff stood up and practically blocked the sunlight coming in from his side of the room. Three or four long strides and he was standing next to Evan’s desk, looking down at him silently. He threw out a massive hand and smiled.

“I’m Jeff,” he beamed, “Looks like we’ll be working together.”

Evan couldn’t decide whether or not to stand up. He reached a hand out and Jeff took it, shaking so hard Evan thought his shoulder was about to tear apart.

“Evan.”

“Good to meet you. Say, I have to go get ready for practice. Coach gets us out of eighth period a few minutes early. I’m done at 4:30 though, so why don’t you stop by the gym and we’ll figure out when we can get started?”

Evan didn’t expect Jeff to treat him this well. Noone ever had.

“No. I can’t. I have to work at 4:00,” Evan stuttered.

Jeff thought for a second.

“S’alright. Where ya work? I’ll swing by on my way home,” Jeff smiled.

“Last Shelf Video.”

“The one on Billings Street?”

“Yeah.”

“That place is a shithole.”

“Yeah.”

“See you around 5:00.”

“Okay.”

With that, Jeff walked back over to his seat, picked up his oversized canvas bag, and sauntered toward the door. Fetters gave a knowing nod as Jeff strode out of the room with half of the females watching him lustfully.

\* \* \*

“Do you have “Navy Seals?” asked a crater-faced kid who could barely see over the counter.

Evan had been staring at a massive cardboard “Pulp Fiction” stand-up, wondering how anybody could ever take John Travolta seriously. Out of the corner of his eye, Evan

saw a tan pickup roll into the parking lot. “Britton Landscaping and Plowing” was stenciled in bright blue paint across the truck’s doors. Out jumped Jeff, still in his warm up pants and sneakers, topped by a worn gray tank top he had completely sweated through.

“Uh, no,” Evan groaned as he stood up straight. He caught his hand going up and sliding through the mangy locks of wavy hair that protruded from his scalp and headed immediately in the general direction of the floor. For the life of him, Evan couldn’t figure out why he was so nervous.

“Are you sure?” the kid squeaked. Evan had forgotten he was standing there.

“Yes!” he yelled as Jeff walked in the door. Jeff looked around for a second before noticing Evan perched awkwardly behind the register.

“Sorry I’m late,” Jeff panted, “Coach said we were slacking. Had to finish practice with wind sprints.”

“Oh, I hadn’t noticed,” Evan lied. He had been checking the clock every three minutes for the last half hour.

Jeff leaned comfortably on the counter, peering at the stand-up to which Evan had averted his eyes. Jeff glanced back at Evan, then again at the stand-up.

“John Travolta. What a joke,” Jeff chuckled.

“Yeah,” was all Evan could think to say.

“Didn’t he make those talking baby movies? What were they called?” Jeff wandered.

“Look Who’s Talking,” Evan said excitedly.

“Yeah, that’s it. What a fucking joke.”

Evan fell in love with the words as they rolled off Jeff’s tongue. Evan realized that he was no longer nervous. He was in awe. Here he was talking to his polar opposite, someone who hours earlier hadn’t even realized that Evan Anderson existed. And they

agreed on something. Sure, it was a mutual aversion to John Travolta's career, but they had to start somewhere.

"So when do we want to bite this bullet?" asked Jeff. Evan stuttered.

"Uh, I have Saturday afternoon off. I mean... if that's okay with you."

Jeff turned his head and looked straight at Evan, who lasted less than a second before planting his eyes on the varnished wood countertop.

"Saturday is perfect. How's noon? I'll come pick you up and we can work at my place. My brother left all of his high school shit at home when he enlisted. We probably won't have to do much work if we dig through his old papers," Jeff said.

"Uh, I work 'til one," Evan thought aloud.

"One it is," Jeff decided as he slapped a palm down on the counter. "See you then."

"Ok," Evan said sheepishly.

"Oh, and Evan, the sooner you stop being afraid of me, the sooner we'll finish this project."

Jeff smiled and slapped Evan on the shoulder so hard he thought he'd fall over. Then, just as quickly as he'd entered, Jeff slipped out, jumped into his truck, and tore off down the road.

"Saturday," Evan said quietly to himself.

"What about "Hard to Kill?" Ya got that?" squeaked the same kid. Evan barely heard him.

\* \* \*

Evan awoke early that Saturday morning. Not only did he have to open the store at nine, he had to get ready for Jeff. He showered and shaved, putting on the pants and shirt that he'd lain out the night before. On his way out, he paused briefly to look at the punching bag. He hated the fact that his father was spending his last days regretting who his son had turned out to be. He hated to think that his father believed a punching bag would fix everything. He had secretly sworn never to touch the thing except to remove it from his room.

Over the previous few days, Evan and his father had been playing a back and forth with the punching bag. Evan took it down and threw it out onto the back porch the same day his father had installed it. He surmised that ever since, his father had had his mother hang it back up while Evan was at school. Neither one of them said a word to the other about it. This battle, as with any other they had ever had, was fought silently

But on this day, Evan was too excited to be encumbered with the punching bag nonsense. He had to get to the store in time, throw up the shutters, fill the register, collect, catalog, and restock the overnight returns, and have everything else up and running by the time Steve, the store manager, came in at 1:00.

Which, of course, he did not. At a quarter after one, Jeff's truck pulled up. Evan took a second to check his appearance in the reflection of the plastic Twizzlers display case to his right. He slapped on a confident visage as best he could, and tried to act casual when Jeff entered the store.

"You ready?" Jeff asked. He was wearing a pair of navy sweatpants and a tattered Archers of Loaf shirt underneath his letterman's jacket. His dirty blonde hair was windblown and seemed as though it shouldn't have looked any other way.

“Nah, the manager still isn’t here. Probably sleeping it off,” Evan said a little too loud and with a little too much sarcasm in his voice. He had been practicing that line for the last half hour and kicked himself for not delivering it a little more coolly.

Another half hour passed, each minute more agonizing than the one before it. Evan had only prepared so much material and most of it was reserved for the ride to Jeff’s and the time spent actually working on the project. Jeff tried his best to politely scan the racks over and over again, occasionally pulling out a movie and reading the blurbs. Every once in a while, he would call out a title and Evan would tell him whether or not it sucked. Movies were pretty much the only thing Evan knew. He had been working at Last Shelf for nearly three years and had passed the majority of that time watching movies. Few people ever came into the store; there was a Blockbuster three miles away.

Eventually, Steve showed up. Evan couldn’t figure out whether Steve was hungover or still drunk. Nor did he care to. Jeff fired up the truck and laid tire out of the parking lot.

“Harnesses in Slums” shot out through the truck’s speakers. It was a rickety ’87 Chevy with an extended bed. The dash was several different shades of black and the leather seats were cracked and fading. The interior smelled of sweat and cheap cologne.

“You like Archers of Loaf?” Evan asked.

“You know Archers?” Jeff asked, surprised.

“Yeah, they’re not bad, I guess,” Evan replied.

“Open the glove box, will ya?” Jeff yelled over the music.

Evan did as he was told. Inside were a few maps, some Dairy Queen napkins, a tin of Skoal, and a pack of cigarettes.

“Do me a favor and hand me one out of the pack,” Jeff said.



Evan slid open the box and saw half a dozen cigarettes rolling around inside. Jeff tossed a lighter at him and said, "Go ahead and start it yourself." Evan held the cigarette tenderly in his lips and flicked the lighter three times before getting a good flame. He had smoked cigarettes a few times, but never regularly. It wasn't a habit he could really afford to take up, and watching his father die slowly and painfully of lung cancer made the idea even less appealing. He took a long, slow drag and started coughing before he realized that he wasn't smoking a cigarette.

"Pass that over here, man," Jeff grinned as he watched Evan cough uncontrollably. Jeff took a couple of hits off the joint and sent it back over to Evan.

Evan had smoked pot only once, several years earlier. He remembered getting sick and vomiting all over the place. But he couldn't refuse it now. Jeff would be so disappointed. Evan sucked on the joint again, and again he coughed. Jeff fished around in his gym bag and pulled out a bottle of Gatorade, which he traded Evan for the joint.

"Been a while?" Jeff asked as he polished off the pinner.

"Yeah," Evan coughed, embarrassed.

"Coach says never to smoke in season, but he lets us know ahead of time if we're getting tested, so I don't worry too much about it."

Evan's head began to get heavy. The road had a slight bend to it, almost as though it were curving off into oblivion no more than fifteen feet from the truck. He pounded the Gatorade and tried his best to keep cool.

Ten minutes later, they pulled into Jeff's driveway. He lived in a big brick house on the western side of town. The front lawn was dotted with odd sculptures Jeff attributed to his mother's Valium prescription and penchant for impulse buying at craft stores. They went inside and Jeff threw down his gym bag.

“Dad, I’m home,” Jeff yelled. He didn’t seem stoned at all. Evan, on the other hand, was having a hard time keeping his eyes open.

Jeff’s dad came bounding down the steps. He was a tank of a man, not quite as tall as Jeff, but twice as wide, his chest and biceps threatening to tear open the stitching of his maroon polo shirt.

“Dad, this is Evan. We’re working on a history project together.”

Jeff’s dad grabbed Evan’s hand and shook it even harder than Jeff had the first time they met. Evan thought he was going to fall over. He managed a meek “Hi,” and then turned his attention back to Jeff.

“We’re gonna work downstairs,” Jeff smiled as he pushed Evan toward the stairs just to their right, “If the phone rings, I’m not here.”

“Sure thing, bud. You guys need anything?”

“Nah, we’re good,” Jeff said, practically carrying Evan down the stairs.

“Good to meet you,” Jeff’s father called down the stairwell. Before Evan could think of what to say, Jeff had taken him downstairs and into the den.

The room was lined with stained wooden paneling. The carpet was a dark blue and thin, but felt durable under Evan’s feet. The walls looked like a taxidermy ad campaign. Wherever there wasn’t a severed head or a glistening fish, there hung rifles of calibers Evan couldn’t hope to place. Jeff tossed Evan down on the couch, turned on the TV, and grabbed two sodas out of the small fridge on the other side of the room.

“Man, I thought you were going to get us busted,” Jeff laughed, “You might as well have asked him if he wanted a bong hit.”

“If anything, I would have asked him for some Cheetos,” Evan yelled.

Jeff laughed out loud, as did Evan. He hadn't planned that line. It just came out. Rejuvenated by this fleeting moment of camaraderie, Evan relaxed a bit, sliding down into the couch and throwing his feet up on the table. Taking the soda from Jeff's hand, Evan felt their fingers touch. Almost instantly, he felt a slight bulge between his legs.

They watched the first half of the Hornets/Nets game, talking intermittently. Evan knew nothing about basketball but found that he couldn't get enough of hearing Jeff talk about it. They spoke a bit more about movies, about the one band they mutually enjoyed, about school and all the bullshit politics it entailed.

Evan discovered that Jeff had received a basketball scholarship to Duke. It turned out that Jeff was a National Merit Finalist and had a 4.0. The more Evan listened to Jeff talk, the more he wanted him to keep talking. Upon hearing his father leave the house and drive off, Jeff ran upstairs and came back down with another joint. As Jeff threw himself back down on the couch, Evan noticed that he had closed the distance between them considerably. That same bulge came creeping back.

"So how come I never met you before?" Jeff asked as he passed the joint.

"I don't know. I guess I keep to myself."

"You shouldn't so much. You're not a bad guy."

"Thanks," Evan said as he tried not to blush.

"Seriously, man, I'm going to this party tonight. You should come."

"I'm not good at those," Evan said, hesitant.

"At parties?"

"Yeah."

"There's nothing to it. You go, you drink, you pretend you like the people you're talking to, and maybe your dick ends up someplace warm."

Evan didn't quite know how to respond to this.

"I just don't think I'd be comfor--"

Before Evan could finish, Jeff leaned over and kissed him full on the lips. Evan certainly didn't know how to respond to this. He instinctively leaned back and braced himself for the beating. Jeff sat, a look of uncertainty smeared across his face, with what was left of the joint burning between his fingers. He took a long, deliberate drag, put the J out in his empty soda can, leaned back, and blew a thick plume of smoke up at the ceiling. They sat in silence for a few minutes, Evan staring at Jeff, Jeff staring at the ceiling. Slowly, Jeff turned to look at Evan.

"Not here," Jeff whispered.

"What?" Evan asked, completely confused.

"Come with me."

They climbed back into the truck and drove off toward the outskirts, saying nothing for the first few minutes.

"How did you know?" Jeff finally asked.

"I didn't," Evan said plainly.

"Nobody can find out."

"I know."

They drove up to Baker's Ridge, about five miles north of Ashland. Jeff parked the car and killed the engine. Off in the distance, they could see not only the thin lights of Ashland, but those of North Haverbrook and Bardsville, towns populated by people who, just like Evan and Jeff, had nothing better to do than get high, climb hillsides, and stare out at anything that wasn't their own.

Jeff leaned in and kissed Evan softly. They fumbled awkwardly through belt buckles and shirt buttons, each time provoking an excited but hesitant laugh from both of them. Evan started to worry that he wouldn't do anything right, that he'd be a disappointment. The last thing Evan wanted to come off as was an inexperienced kid, even though that's exactly what he was. Evan ventured that Jeff was probably just as scared as he was, perhaps more. After all, the starting forward on a state champion basketball team couldn't be gay. Not in Ashland. Not anywhere. For all of his muscles and girth, Jeff was surprisingly gentle.

Afterwards, they shivered together under a wool blanket and looked cautiously into each other's eyes. Neither of them spoke for at least ten minutes and they barely moved. Evan's head was awash with fantasies of leaving Ashland, of running away from his pathetic, lifeless parents, from a sister who, day by day, became more entrenched in the home Evan had come to fear and loathe.

"I want to go with you," Evan finally whispered.

"Huh?" Jeff sputtered as he came out of what was almost a light sleep.

"To Durham. I want to go with you," Evan smiled.

Jeff sat up and tried to flick on the overhead light. It didn't come on. He smacked it a few times with his fist and gave up, choosing instead to rummage around in the dark of the cab for his clothes. Evan sat there confused, still wrapped in the blanket.

"What is it?" Evan asked, terrified at the thought of a response.

"Nothing," Jeff stammered as he found his jeans and began to slide them up his legs. Evan watched Jeff's taught stomach muscles contract as he lifted his ass off the seat and pulled his pants all the way up. Much to Evan's dismay, Jeff threw on his shirt and leaned over to find his shoes.

“Jeff, what’s wrong?” Evan asked hesitantly, laying a hand on the back of Jeff’s neck. Jeff shrugged off the hand and began lacing up his boots. Evan sat there, still curled up in the blanket, staring over at Jeff’s jerky movements.

“What did you think this was?” Jeff asked as he looked out through the windshield at the dark mountains in the distance. Evan searched for words.

“Did you think this was love or something? I’m an athlete. I’m going to play for Duke for Christ’s sake. D-1. Do you know what they do to fags at schools like that?”

Evan shuddered upon hearing Jeff use the word. It seemed so derogatory, so cold. He felt small.

“I thought this-” Evan started, his voice shaking.

“You thought wrong,” Jeff said, sliding on his coat and pulling his seatbelt across his chest.

Evan began to feel the tears form in his eyes. This was his chance. His shot at getting out of the hills and into somewhere that might pass for an evolved society; maybe one of those places on his bedroom wall.

“You should get dressed,” Jeff said without looking at Evan.

Evan began to paw around on the floor for his clothes. He kept the blanket wrapped around him, thinking both that modesty at this point was foolish but that he never wanted Jeff to see him so exposed ever again. Jeff turned the key and the truck groaned to life.

Evan dressed as quickly as he could, knowing that Jeff would only wait a minute or so for the truck to warm up before tearing off down the road. As Jeff shifted the truck into drive, Evan grabbed his arm at the elbow. Jeff didn’t quite shrug it off, but he stared down at it, almost seething. Jeff’s eyes slowly moved up Evan’s arm and fixed on his face.

“Don’t do this,” Evan whispered.

Jeff reached over, grabbed Evan’s hand, and threw it across the cab. He shifted the truck into drive and started to back up. Evan flung open the door and jumped out, landing awkwardly on the side of his foot. He crumpled to the ground and lay there for a few seconds. Jeff put the truck in park and got out. He started to walk around to the passenger side. For a moment, Evan thought his display had made Jeff second guess everything. Maybe Jeff did feel something. Of course he felt something. He had to. Evan had believed Jeff when he said that he’d never done this before. And the whole time, Jeff was just as nervous and uncoordinated as Evan was, if not more so. He was probably just overreacting.

Jeff’s boots crackled on the gravel trail as strode up to the open door, closed it, and walked back around the truck without looking at Evan. The tires spit gravel in all directions as Jeff peeled off into the night. Evan sat on the ground clutching his ankle until Jeff’s tail lights vanished into the darkness.

\* \* \*

Evan entered the house quietly and slid down the shadowy stairwell to his room. He put the door in its proper place behind him and sat down on the corner of the bed, staring through glassy eyes at the punching bag. There was a light tap on the door and Evan heard Susie take a few cautious steps into the room.

“They took Dad to the hospital just after you left.”

Evan already knew what she was going to say. His father’s last two heart attacks both came after he had been told that the next one would kill him. Susie took half a step

toward her brother, paused, and slipped out of his bedroom, making sure to leave the door just the way Evan liked it.

Evan stood up, walked over to the punching bag, and gave it a quick right. A slight shot of pain sprang up in his knuckles and ran down the back of his hand, dissipating somewhere inside his wrist. He hit it again, harder, this time with his left hand. The same pain rang in his joints and he stared at the bag. Evan calmly walked over to the door, grabbed the knob, and shut it. He stepped back over to the punching bag and began hitting it over and over, harder and harder, until the pain started to hurt in that good way.



58.9

In the long and storied history of the Texas public school system, I wasn't the first teacher to sleep with a student.

She was a small girl, her frame tiny and relatively straight. There weren't really breasts to speak of, no shapely ass at the business ends of her small legs.

In fact, I had heard a rumor that Fred Meyers tagged a student some years earlier.

Hell, the girl probably only weighed ninety pounds. Her wardrobe was plain, stocked mostly with Levi's and B. Moss sweaters and a few pairs of sandals.

There were tens of thousands of schoolteachers in the state. It was Texas, for Christ's sake – the figures were probably staggering.

One day, when she was wearing a long-sleeved, Red Wings t-shirt, new Birkenstocks, a gray hair clip, and a pair of navy corduroys that fit in a way ordained by God, she broke me in front of everyone.

“And here, we see that the weight percent of  $\text{NaNO}_2$ , when dissolved in 500 mL of water, is 7.86%”

My students looked at me, confused as usual, as I stood there beaming with pride and a PhD. Her hand shot up from the front center of the room, where she always sat, notebooks open and two pencils at the ready from five minutes before class began until the bell rang to signal its end.

“Mr Messersmith, I think you mean 78.6%,” she said hesitantly.

I knew before I turned around that she was right and I was wrong. The solution had been withdrawn and treated with 50 mL of  $\text{M}\text{Ce}^{4+}$  in a separate acidic solution. When the excess  $\text{Ce}^{4+}$  was back titrated, it clearly showed that the weight percent couldn't have been that low. She had asked that I make a mistake for her to correct, and I had decided that she could burn me on one of the last questions of the day.

“Yes, you're correct,” I forcibly smiled.

I could see the faces of her classmates light up upon realizing that I had made a “mistake.” I walked calmly over to a dry erase board at the far end of the room, picked up a marker, and made a small, thin line in the “Messersmith” column. That brought the total to: Class, 144; Messersmith, 3. They were closing in.

For once the teacher was more relieved to hear the bell ring out the day's end than his students were. They all eagerly filed out. I watched her gather her things and head for the door. I felt the air gather in my throat as I prepared to call out her name. She paused every so slightly before exiting the room, almost as though she knew I didn't want her to leave.

“Ms. Granden, might I have a word with you,” I choked, putting all bodily effort into keeping my lower lip from quivering.

She silently complied and strode over to the front of my desk. For a few seconds, I forgot that I was the one who was supposed to initiate conversation. She stared up innocently, taunting me.

“Are you mad?” she asked quietly.

“No,” I stammered, “No... What for?”

Her eyes hit the floor and bounced back up as she put on the face that she knew drove me absolutely insane. Raised eyebrows, pouty lips, her cleft chin rising up ever so slightly as she looked up at me playfully.

“Well, I know you keep that board there to remind us that you’re smarter than we are, and-”

“That’s not why I keep the board there,” I rushed, wanting her to believe me.

“Well, I appreciate you letting me show you up,” she grinned, letting the tip of her tongue peek out from behind lilywhite teeth.

My eyes jumped nervously from her to the board to the massive periodic table hanging on the wall to our left. I came back to her and we both began to speak, but stopped ourselves at the sight of another gaping mouth. My eyes went back to the floor. I couldn’t remember why I had asked her back into the classroom.

“I think you would have had me on that one even if we hadn’t prepared it,” I finally said, sounding as awkwardly professional as possible. She smiled wide and almost jumped up with excitement.

“Really?” she asked.

“Absolutely,” I fed her. Anything to keep her looking at me. I forgot about the class, the tally board, the reason I had even taken that bullshit job in the first place. I forgot that her grade had shot through the roof soon after we’d started sleeping together. All I

knew was that I would have danced a jig right then and there if I thought it would keep her interested. God, those eyes. I began to wonder what it would be like to wake up in the morning and find them trained on me, of how I would lie there with her, stroking the fine skin of her shoulders, in eager anticipation of seeing those eyes break through her eyelids when she finally awoke and shook off the night's dust.

I clumsily closed the distance between us so that I was standing only a foot or so away. She looked down again as I stumbled for something to say. I lifted my hand to her. She seemed to buckle under its weight, her tiny shoulder almost completely enveloped by my awkwardly hefty hand.

“What time are you done tonight, Ms. Granden?” I whispered.

“Ten o'clock, Mr. Messersmith,” she said softly.

She looked up at me again, smiling thinly. She tilted her head toward my hand and let her cheek fall delicately across my knuckles.

“Oh shit,” she said, looking down at my watch.

She ran over to the windows and looked out over the front parking lot as I tried not to fall over. I heard the school buses groan and squeak as they pulled away from the front of the building. She raised up on the tips of her toes and leaned forward, exposing a sliver of pallid skin at the base of her spine. Plain white panties barely juttled out from beneath the tops of her corduroys as the afternoon light shimmered on the fine hairs covering the small of her back.

“I need to leave. I'm going to miss my bus,” she said as she turned around and ran out of the room. In her wake I heard “Have a good day, Mr. Messersmith.”

My “You too, Ms. Granden,” danced around an empty classroom.

\* \* \*

“Ed, we’re friends, aren’t we?” Bill Kelly, the Assistant Principal, asked as he polished the District Championship trophy proudly displayed on his desk.

“Of course we are, Bill,” I lied, “why do you ask?”

Bill stood up and buttoned his jacket as he looked out his office window at the football stadium. Everything, the 20 thousand seating capacity, the shimmering Astro turf, the colossal mustang painted across the far wall, was Bill’s doing. He had spent the better part of the last decade raising funds and pandering to the school board to build his Camelot. When he had become head coach of the team three years earlier, Bill had demanded that his office be moved to a more convenient part of the building, allowing him to keep vigil over his kingdom. He was nearly sixty, and had spent close to twenty years jumping around from position to position within the district. Elementary, Junior and Senior High, Summer School, disciplinary cases; he had taught them all.

“One of your AP Chem students registered a complaint with the guidance counselor,” he sighed, almost empathetically.

“Oh really?” I asked innocently.

“Yeah, Ed. It seems that the student doesn’t appreciate a...”

He picked up a manila folder from his desk and opened it slowly, eyeing me half the way before continuing.

“...*lack of professionalism* on your part.”

My stomach taunted my heart into a fistfight.

“Now, I’m not insinuating anything here. You’re one of the best faculty I’ve seen come through here, but-”

“Bill, I don’t see what the problem is here,” I cut in nervously, “It’s an advanced class. I hand out a lot of grades that aren’t appreciated because they reflect poorly come college application time. I’ve seen this before. A student takes an AP course because they think it’ll look great on their transcripts. Things don’t pan out the way they thought, and they blame the teacher. What I think-“

“Whoa there, buddy. Calm down. It’s not like you’re getting shitcanned or anything. I just think that it might be time for you to reevaluate the way you conduct yourself when it comes to your students.”

I was finished. She had turned me in.

“It’s just that this student, well he-”

“He?” I squeaked. Bill wasn’t tolerating interruptions anymore.

“HE doesn’t like having his mistakes tallied up on a board during class. And as a matter of fact, neither do I.”

I searched for words but came up with the atomic mass of Cobalt. 58.9.

“So in short, I want that board gone before you leave this building for the weekend. Is that clear? Ed? Is that clear?”

“Yes,” I finally coughed up, still half expecting to get pinched.

\* \* \*

She worked at the Frosty Shack, a mob front of an ice cream joint at the west end of town. I pulled into the dark parking lot as the radio played *Under My Thumb*. The front of the building was lined by one long window. Through it I saw her wiping down the counters, cleaning out the bins, the standard closing routine that I had witnessed countless times,

sitting in my car, completely awestruck by how fucking sexy the notion of an adolescent sanitizing stainless steel was to me.

I waited in the parking lot until she closed up. The exterior lights flickered a couple of times and then died. A few seconds later, there she was, bronze legs rising up, capped by short white shorts. Sleeves of the fudge-stained navy blue t-shirt rolled up to beat the heat of the machines. A few strands of hair peeking out from behind a crooked visor. Giving me that look she always shot just before walking out of the classroom at the end of the day. I began to worry, knowing that my shirt was tucked neatly into my khakis, as usual, and that the erection quickly forming underneath wasn't going to stay hidden very long. She climbed into my car and we were off.

I lived in an apartment complex about twenty minutes from the store. Two dozen pseudo homes designed for people either in transition or hopelessly single greeted us as my car wheezed up the hill and into the lot. Outside, rows of identical windows, shutters, and three by five foot concrete porch slabs secured tenant anonymity. The only ways to tell the units apart were to read the numbers haphazardly tacked up next to the doors or to memorize the knickknacks lined up in the front windows. My place was perhaps the easiest to find; the numbers had fallen off a week after I'd moved in and my window was pleasantly devoid of anything knickknacky in nature.

“Shit,” I hissed as I pulled up in front of my place and realized that I had left the front light on.

“It’s almost ten thirty. I really don’t think that-”

“The rules,” I said as though I were referring to scripture.

“I’ll wait,” she sighed as I bounded out of the car and toward my door.



We had rules. Several of them. All made in bed after our first night together and aimed at keeping me employed. Rule one: no physical or emotional intimacy in public. Rule two: my place was the only location that was decidedly non-public. Rule three: no telling. Anyone (obviously). Rule four: we were both obligated to do anything and everything we could to maintain secrecy. In this case, I needed to run inside and turn off my front light so that no one could recognize her as she came inside.

“You’re so fucking paranoid,” she said as she entered, her head shaking shamefully.

I stood in the foyer and watched her glide over to the living room. This was always the best part. She would come inside and, without saying a word, choose where we were going to be that night. She always chose. She’d circle the couch a few times, her slender fingers gliding along the fabric. Then she’d walk over and bump the kitchen table once or twice, testing its durability. Each time she encountered a different horizontal surface, she’d look back up me, standing in the doorway waiting to open my present. Sometimes, she’d start up the stairs to my bedroom, tossing her shirt down just after she’d gotten out of view. Others, she’d make a full patrol of the house, walk back over to me and go straight for my fly.

That night, she only made it about halfway to the stairs before her screams brought me out of my little erotic trance. I had forgotten about Joe and Strummer. They pounced on her with predatory quickness, her feet flying up in the air as their tongues savored the scent of chocolate that still clung to her body.

I ran over and grabbed them both by the collar, dragging them away from her. The two Dobermans quickly realized it was me and focused their licking at my chin as I tried to calm them down.

“Hey, boys! Easy now, easy,” I daddied as they came to a panting rest at my feet.

She stumbled backwards, her shoulder thudding against the corner of my coffee table. She let out a yelp of pain and crumpled to the ground again. I rushed over to her and tried to get her to her feet. Joe and Strummer mistook this gesture for the commencement of playtime and their heads came crashing into my lower back, sending me to the ground on top of her. Upon seeing their victory, the dogs danced around us, barking joyously.

“What the fuck?” she yelled in pain as I awkwardly rose to my feet. Joe and Strummer were hearing nothing of it, though, as they charged the back of my knees in unison, sending me back to the ground where they pinned me down and began licking my face.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” she yelled as she stood up, clutching her shoulder.

The dogs were about to make another dive at her, but I had them both by the shoulders. I wrestled them to the ground, stood up, and led them out the back door. As I came in, she was putting her coat on.

“I’m sorry,” I laughed, “I guess I just forgot to put them out this morning.”

“You think?” she screamed, “Look at me. I’m covered in their fucking drool.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying to calm her down.

She found her purse and slung it painfully over her shoulder, still sore from the fall. I reached out and pulled her close, planting a soft kiss on her shoulder. She let out a deep breath which led me to believe she wasn’t necessarily resigned to storming out just yet. Her purse slid down and landed with a hollow thud on the floor. I went to my knees, pressing my face into her stomach.

“Don’t go,” I whispered as I slid my nose under her shirt and began kissing her. I knew she loved having her stomach kissed. She inhaled deeply and brought her hands to the back of my head.

We both felt it at the same time.

“Oh God,” she whined, pulling her hands from my hair.

I put my hand to the back of my head. Sure enough, a good section was matted to my scalp with thick, warm dog slobber.

“I’ll be in the car,” she murmured, picking up her purse and making for the door. “Clean yourself up.”

I watched her stomp the ten feet from where I was to the front door, open it up, shake her head, and slam it behind her. The drool came off surprisingly easily in the kitchen sink. I pawed at my hair with a dishrag, grabbed my keys, and headed outside.

She was sitting in the car looking royally pissed off and talking into her cell phone. As I climbed in, she flipped the phone closed and stared straight ahead.

“Who were you talking to?” I asked.

“Is that really any of your business?” she replied, still staring away.

“I’m-”

“Just drive.”

As I started the car, I smelled it immediately; the stale musky vehicle odor that could only be produced by sweat and neglect. I looked over at her and saw she was deliberately breathing through her mouth. My ’88 Bonneville started on the fourth try or the seventh muffled curse, depending on how one looks at it. We both cracked our windows and I yanked the car out of the lot.

“What are we listening to?” she asked, disgusted.

“The Clash,” I said.

“It’s awful.”

“Don’t say that. The Clash was a great band.”

“Was... a great band. Sometimes I think you’re afraid of any music that came after 1990.

“Look, I’m sorry about the dogs, okay?” I whined as I clicked off the cassette player and adjusted volume for the radio.

“Jesus, talk radio. You might as well put the fucking tape back in,” she said, lighting a cigarette.

I was thinking to myself how much I had always hated the stale, dizzying smell of smoke as she blew her first hit into my side of the car. I coughed and rolled my window down the rest of the way.

“Smells better than this thing normally does,” she taunted, sucking on the cigarette again.

The rest of the ride to the bakery where I always dropped her off after our time together was disturbingly quiet. She made it the entire way without looking at me and kept the streak strong when I leaned over to try and kiss her goodnight.

I watched her in the rear view mirror as I drove away. I pulled up to the red light a couple hundred feet down the road and watched her. Standing there, arms crossed, a cigarette dangling from her lips, she looked so small, so lost. How such a tiny, frail girl ever came to own me lock, stock, and barrel, I couldn’t figure out. All of a sudden, another car pulled into the bakery lot. Some type of terrible excuse for music was emanating from behind the dark windows. She perked up instantly with a wide grin, jumped into the car and it sped off. I pulled a three point turn and followed.

I was trying to come up with some sort of explanation. She usually walked from the bakery to her house. I followed the mystery car all the way to Gull’s Point, an upper-class neighborhood stocked with huge bright green yards surrounding houses whose foyers were

bigger than my entire apartment. The car whizzed into a cul de sac already crammed to capacity with student cars – Jettas, Audis, and more SUVs than I could count. At the back of the turnaround was a huge three-story house with a long front porch spilling out into the front yard. I killed my lights and stopped a couple hundred feet up the road. Neither she nor the mystery car’s driver had exited yet.

I got out of my car and walked through a couple of yards. Squatting down behind a row of shrubs, I’d have had a great view into the mystery car if only its windows weren’t tinted. A minute passed, then another, then another. In that time, I made a mental list of about three thousand sordid activities that she and the driver – whomever the hell he was – were no doubt experimenting with a mere ten feet away. My legs began to feel weak beneath me. I sat down on the soft grass and rested my head on one knee. She had betrayed me. Such a simple deal, I thought – I give her some “help” with her chemistry, she gives me her love. I fell back and sprawled out on the grass, fighting back tears.

I heard a door pop open. I sprung up and saw her climb out, now dressed in a short (and I mean *short*) skirt, topped by a tiny (and I mean *tiny*) green tank top. Since when did she dress like that, I thought to myself. Out of the driver’s side rose Noah Frantz, looking a bit disheveled and plenty satisfied. Noah was one of the brighter kids in my class. Last I’d heard, Cal Tech was awaiting his commitment letter with baited breath. He walked around to her side of the car and she pulled him in close, refusing to waste time on his lips before putting her tongue in his mouth. I watched his arms slide around to the small of her back and then down to secure two handfuls of ass as they exchanged quick kisses, his fingers dancing down, then up-and-under her skirt.

I let out a quiet laugh that felt more like a sick shudder, and fell to the ground again. As I did, the motion light on the house’s side flashed on. Noah slid in front of her and they

stared over at the shrubs. I tried to stay hidden for as long as I could, but Noah was getting closer. He jumped back as I popped up and began looking around.

“Mr. Messersmith?” Noah asked.

“Oh, hello there, Noah,” I said as calmly as possible.

“I didn’t know you lived around here,” he said politely with a bit of a relieved laugh.

“Uh, yeah. A couple of streets that way,” I said, not pointing in any specific direction. I caught a quick glimpse of her eyes burning holes in me. “You kids partying tonight?” I asked in my most ignorant adult-like voice.

“Oh, no sir,” Noah shook. “Just hanging out, you know?”

“Yeah, I know,” I smiled as I looked over at her.

“Why were you in the bushes?” she asked me, her arms across her chest in that all-too familiar ‘fuck you’ pose of hers.

“Well,” I said, trailing off. “You kids haven’t by chance seen a dog running around here, have you?” I asked, looking around. “Her name’s Molly. She’s a puppy. Dalmation,” I stammered.

Noah, supremely ignorant of the situation, tried his best to look responsible in the face of an authority figure.

“No, no sir,” he said.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll find her eventually. Thanks for checking, though,” I said as I started to walk away. “I’ll see you kids on Monday.”

“Is that final going to be as rough as everyone thinks?” Noah called after me.

“Yes,” I said without turning around.

I peeked over my shoulder and saw Noah put his arm around her and try to lead her away. After a couple seconds of a deep scowl, she spun around and began walking toward

the sanctity afforded her by the one section of her world I couldn't invade. I surrendered to the tears as I limped back to my car and drove home.

\* \* \*

I tried not to look at her during Monday's class. She had switched seats, moving from the front of the room all the way to the back where Noah sat. She was giggling. She never giggled. In three months of spending with her the most intimate hours I had ever experienced, I had never once elicited a giggle. But this little wiseass, who until the previous Friday I had never thought to be anything more than scenery, was splitting her slender sides. She was wearing a short black skirt. Another skirt. No nylons. Just about two and a half feet of willowy tan skin running from the floor into the dark heaven underneath that skirt.

Those eyes were trained on him in admiration, with the same interest and fascination usually reserved for me. I could feel the other students staring up at me as I stood lifelessly in the front of the room, watching a perfectly natural high school courtship, trying not to cry. After awhile, even she and Noah realized that they'd been had. The two of them assumed their most studious postures and faced front like good soldiers. Jaw clenched, I circled around to the back of my desk and pulled out the stack of final exams I had prepared the previous week.

"This exam covers everything we've discussed over the last semester," I preached as I slid up and down the rows, tossing down stapled packets in front of widened eyes and quickened pulses.

"It seems as though many of you have taken those college acceptance letters as an indication that you no longer have to work." I slapped Noah's test down on his desk.

“Rest assured, this is not the case. You have...” I checked my watch. “...fifty three minutes to finish. And...” I trailed off as I came back to the front of the room. “I’ve been wracking my brain for ways to motivate you kids over the last couple of weeks here, and I’ve come up with this.”

I spun around what used to be the mistake tally board to reveal a ranking of every student in the class by semester average. Ms. Granden, of course, was at the top with a solid 98.4%. But not for long, I thought to myself. The final would tear her to pieces.

“I’ll update the standings after this exam and after the final two graded homeworks of which you are all already aware,” I said. “You may begin.”

I think the cheerleader off to the right was on the verge of tears, although I was paying too much attention to the lovers in back to say for sure. She sat there, completely unfazed, looking over the test calmly before beginning it. I could have sworn I saw a slight smirk as she picked up her pencil, blew on the end of it, and began scrawling feverishly, stopping occasionally to punch at her calculator. Each time she did, a brief moment of satisfaction and a quiet smile crept across her face before pencil again slid across paper with a flurry and a flash.

She was the first to finish, making sure that I saw her self-assuredly turn over the final before she went about organizing her daily planner. All around her, foreheads slung sweat as the brains behind them split the time between balancing reactions and planning my untimely demise.

The bell eventually rang and the downtrodden students marched out of the room, undermining each others’ confidence by exchanging paranoid inquiries about the juggernaut I had just lain upon them. But she remained stoic, striding confidently out of the room, pausing again for a brief glance at me over her shoulder as I waded through the desks



gathering up the exams. As soon as everyone had left, I ran to her seat and began flipping through the tests. Everything looked perfect. Everything. Calculations were flawless, significant digits were right on, all thrown down in her tiny looping scrawl.

“I know what you’re doing,” she said. I hadn’t noticed her come back into the room.

“I’m looking through a student’s test. That’s what teachers are supposed to do.”

“I can’t believe you followed me,” she laughed cruelly as I hid my eyes in the papers.

“Oops, he forgot to state the units here,” I said as I made a large red mark along the margin of Noah’s test.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked.

“Oh, this is the wrong equation entirely,” I chastised, as a flurry of the pen marked up half of Noah’s page.

“You’re sick,” she said, walking away.

I rose to my feet and grabbed her by the elbow. As she spun, her bag fell to the floor and out popped a copy of the final, filled out in a combination of her and Noah’s handwriting. We both looked down at the exam and then back up at each other.

“Oh, you’re in it now,” I seethed.

“Is that right?” she challenged. “And what in the hell do you plan to do?”

“Securing advance copies of a final exam? Cheating? Bill Kelly is going to hang you from the rafters after I-”

“After you what? Tell him where I got it? I’m sure he’d understand why I was over at your place. Yeah, he’d be thrilled to know that one of his teachers was giving the *extra effort* for one of his students,” she sung.

She couldn't have been more right. I felt tears begin to well up in the corners of my eyes as I slowly let go of her. She bent over to gather her things and I caught what was to be my last glance at that thin, menacing panty line that, while once inviting, was beginning to taunt me.

"At least I only take on one at a time," I said to her back. She stopped just short of the door and turned around.

"Not anymore you don't," she said, making sure that as she walked out, her ass was sliding back and forth more than it naturally should have.

\* \* \*

The trophy on Bill's desk had moved slightly to the right. And why not? The lamp built on top of one of the school's football helmet's took up a good amount of space.

"Ed, I'm worried about you, buddy," he groaned, sitting on the corner of his desk. It must have been a Friday. His tie was a bit loose, the top button of his shirt undone. "We've received another student complaint, and I think that sometime soon there are going to be parents involved. This seems more serious..."

I kept staring at the lamp. The helmet was royal blue, with a deep red stallion profile breaking through a semicircle in that post-80's sparkling streamlined sort of way. I should have just confessed the whole thing there. Yes, I was in love with a student. Yes, I spent nights awake thinking of how easily sleep would come if she were next to me, her tiny body enveloped by my arms and legs, folding inward until I cocooned her.

"Now, I don't want bad publicity. And I don't want the faculty disciplinary board involved..."

I did it. I promised her good grades in exchange for sex. I was a classic grade-A guilty-as-sin pedophile and there was no way around it.

“Are you listening? Ed...”

I couldn't help it, I thought to myself. She was too perfect. And now she was gone. There was nothing left to do but come clean. It would be the only noble gesture I'd offered in as long as I could remember.

“Ed! This unnecessarily rigorous lesson plan is going to stop. The students are beginning to think that you're taking revenge, that you're trying to weed out the one who levied the initial complaint against you. And frankly, I'm inclined to agree with them.”

My head sunk to my hands as I began to sob.

“Ed? Ed, what the hell...”

I sniffed and wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. Bill stared down at me, confused.

“What's gotten into you?” he asked as I stared down at his carpet.

“I screwed up,” I whined.

“Sure as shit you did. But that's why we're having this meeting, man. There's nothing you've done that can't be fixed,” he said, irritated.

“That's not true,” I shook my head, “I... seduced a student.”

He walked to the door and shut it quietly before pulling up a chair next to me.

“Listen,” he whispered, practically at a yell, “Listen to me like you've never listened to anyone in your life.”

I raised my eyes to his and started thinking about whether or not I could take up my brother's offer to teach math at the state penitentiary half an hour away.

“I guess you need to know her name,” I cried.

“I don’t want to know her fucking name. Now listen. One, you couldn’t seduce an eighty year old deaf blind mute quadriplegic woman who just quit the nunnery.”

“You’re going to fire me,” I sobbed.

“Shut up” he yelled, slapping me across the back of my head.

“Two, she seduced you. And three, you’re not going to get fired.”

I snorted a good sized line of mucus up into my right nostril and looked up at him, wide-eyed and crazy with self pity.

“What?”

“You think you’re the first guy who ever popped a student?” he laughed. “Christ, I get these little confessions at least once a year.”

He stood up and began walking around the office.

“Shit, man, if we fired every man who laid some inappropriate pipe, we wouldn’t have a goddamn staff.”

I straightened up a bit and dried my face. Bill picked his jacket up off a coat rack in the corner, slid it on, and examined himself in a mirror.

“Listen,” he said calmly as he turned to me, “I have to go review a student teacher. Smart kid. He wants to revamp the sophomore English curriculum. He’s bright and motivated and has great credentials and will probably be sitting in that seat having this very same conversation with me within a couple of years. So take some time, clean yourself up, and get back to doing your job. But stop calling so much attention to yourself. Besides, it sounds like this unburdening of your conscience came about because the little lady just got sick of you. As it stands, she’ll probably just forget about this whole thing and find some dreamy athlete to crack her hips and you’ll be free and clear. Believe it or not, most of these

things go unnoticed because the student would rather just forget they happened – appropriate for bad relationships.”

Bill walked out the door and I was left alone in his office. I looked out at Mustang Field in all its grandeur. The afternoon sun was beating down on the metal bleachers, making the entire stadium shimmer like a jewel. I sat on the corner of Bill’s desk and stared down, wishing I could give her that jewel, wishing I could give her anything, just to see those eyes look at me that way again.

I went back to my classroom and looked at the board. She was number one. She was staying there, too. I picked up an eraser and brought it up along the shiny white surface, erasing a semester’s worth of toil in an instant. Every name disappeared under the eraser as it made its way up the board. Every name but hers. I stood there, staring a crater in her name. I slowly slid the eraser across the top of the board and “Granden” vanished into oblivion. I let the eraser fall to the ground. As it landed with a light pat, I picked up the board and flung it out over the seats. It slammed into her and Noah’s seats, breaking cleanly into three pieces and skittering across the tile floor.

## Caleb's Story

Most people would say that this isn't really my story – that it's Caleb's story. But it's just as much mine as it is his. After all, he's my brother.

The summer before Caleb went away to college was the summer before my freshman year of high school. I spent the months riding my bike around the neighborhood with friends, sneaking the mile and a half down Route 136 to Grahamwood Pool whenever my mother wasn't paying too close attention, and generally screwed around as much as a fourteen year-old should.

Caleb waited tables at the Pizza Paul's a few blocks from our house. When he worked days and the place was practically empty, Caleb would sneak free pizzas out the back for us. With Caleb, though, there was always a catch. We would get two or three pizzas, one of which we all knew Caleb had spat on. He would sit out back with us and watch the pizzas disappear, occasionally snickering or pretending to be sick just to screw with us.

When Caleb left for college, my mom cried. My father slipped fifty bucks in Caleb's hand as he shook it and said, "Give 'em hell." Caleb turned to me and smiled. He had been out late the night before and looked like burnt shit.

"Well, I guess you'll have to pass for the man of the house now, asshole" Caleb smiled, nailing our dad and I simultaneously the way only he could. Our father shook his head the way he always did when Caleb swore. The two of them had always walked a fine line – our father tolerating Caleb's occasional unseemliness and 'shameful' behavior as long as his grades were above C's and his fastballs above eighty.

"Aren't you gone yet?" said my father.

"Yes I am," he said in an almost faint, hollow voice.

I bit my thumbnail as we watched him walk through airport security and toward the terminal. I expected him to turn around and wave, or to smile, or to do something. Isn't that what people do when they leave people they love behind? But Caleb just kept on walking, a duffel slung over one shoulder and a suitcase in the opposite hand. My mom sighed when we lost sight of him as he went down some steps. She and my father turned and started to walk away. I stood there for a few seconds and wondered who in the hell he thought he was to give us just one goodbye.

A middle finger popped up above the stairs, followed closely by a smirking Caleb, his blonde hair shooting up in random spires. I returned the gesture and turned around.

\* \* \*

High school, despite what everyone said, really wasn't all that bad a place. I quickly figured out that the best means of survival was just to find a niche. I made JV football,



which took up most of the fall, and I turned a passing interest in photography into a steady gig covering school board meetings for the high school newspaper. After the season finished, this girl, Danielle, and I started “going together,” although I wasn’t entirely sure what that entailed at the time. After a few weeks, though, I realized that this union meant spending every Friday night with her at the Mall, and every Saturday night at the roller skating rink.

Christmas was the first time that Caleb made it home. He’d tried to fly back for Thanksgiving, but said that he had too much work to do and that he couldn’t afford the plane ticket. I went with my father to pick him up at the airport. I didn’t even recognize Caleb until he strolled up and flashed the grin that belonged only to him. His hair was much longer, held back by a red handkerchief. It looked like he hadn’t shaved in months. Baggy cargo pants hung low from his hips, topped with an even more disproportionate brown sweater. He had obviously forgotten how cold Pittsburgh gets in the winter because he was wearing sandals.

“Jesus, boy, don’t they have showers in California?” our father half-joked as he extended a hand to Caleb.

Caleb closed in and threw his arms around our father, who awkwardly drew his own beefy appendages around Caleb after pausing for a couple of seconds. Caleb looked down at me and I slugged him in the shoulder, fully expecting a Charlie Horse or maybe a Dead Leg in return. But he just smiled down and pulled me in for a hug the same way he had grabbed our father.

As we drove home, Caleb spoke of beer, of the crooked college administration, of the art history professor who “actually said ‘fuck’ in class,” and of some guy named Kant who seemed to have figured everything out. Our father nodded politely, if only to keep

from shaking his head. He was trying to act interested, but I could tell there was something he wasn't saying.

Our mother was standing next to the front door crying when we pulled into the driveway. I grabbed one of Caleb's bags from the trunk.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd think you put some muscle on," Caleb said as he grabbed the other bag.

"Weird Danny sold me a weight set," I said.

"I hope you wiped it down first," Caleb smiled.

Weird Danny lived down the street from us. All the neighborhood kids and none of the neighborhood parents loved Weird Danny. He once was married and had a kid and seemed normal enough, but rumor was he lost it several years earlier during a summer barbecue. Ever since, he'd spent his time sitting on his front porch, surrounded by all manner of rotting plants and decrepit gardening tools. He was just nice enough to tolerate and just creepy enough to avoid. One day when I was walking by, he asked me if I wanted to buy some weights. He showed me a box full of dumbbells and when I asked him how much, he said, "Four dollars. I need fertilizer."

Caleb's bags were both pretty much the same size and, I ventured, weight, but he had more trouble picking one up than I did. I caught a glimpse of his left forearm, which was dotted with what looked like mosquito bites all along the back of his elbow. He saw me looking and drew the sleeve of his sweater down. Caleb hugged our mother for what seemed like an eternity, the bridge of his nose buried in her collarbone.

"You're so skinny," she chastised. "Don't you eat?"

"I eat plenty, Ma," Caleb smiled.

"And you smell like cigarettes," she said suspiciously.

“Well, Ma, that’s probably because I smoke cigarettes,” he said as though he were making a comment about the weather.

I wasn’t sure which parent gasped first, but they both did. I then realized that the musty smell hanging all around Caleb was what had put our father off in the car. He shook his head in silent disgust and walked past the three of us into the house, barking “Not in this house you don’t,” as he went. I began to wonder if the despotism under which Caleb and I had grown up no longer applied to one of us. If I had told our parents something like that, our father would have most likely gone to jail for my murder.

“Well, you should quit,” our mother said plainly. “Come inside. My God, aren’t you freezing with those sandals on?”

“If I were freezing, I wouldn’t be wearing sandals,” Caleb said.

It was December 23 and our house was full of family. Aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents, all eager to see what college had done to a Flannery. It isn’t every day that a family born and bred in Braddock from generation after generation of mill workers gets to see their kin come home from college. Caleb tried as best he could to be polite, but I could see that he wanted to get out of there. He said that he was very tired from the flight and we retreated to my room.

“That was fucking painful,” he said as he tossed himself down on my bed with a groan. “I see you’re still running with the meatheads,” he said disdainfully, looking at the helmet sitting on my dresser.

“Starting JV tailback,” I said as I took a seat on my desk. “Didn’t I tell you about that when I wrote?”

Caleb started up at the ceiling and chuckled to himself.

“Oh yeah,” he said.

“When’s baseball season start?” I asked.

“How should I know?” he laughed.

“You’re not going to play?”

“It’s D-2. It’s not like I’d get any scholarship money out of it, so why bother?” he huffed.

“Because you love it,” I said as though I were telling Caleb about himself.

“Not anymore. Things change,” he said lamely.

“I wrote you like six times,” I said.

“I know.”

We sat in silence for a few seconds.

“Well, what the fuck?” I asked. I had written him exactly nine letters, only the first of which had garnered a reply. Caleb turned his head and realized what I was getting at. He sat up and looked down at the carpet.

“I’m sorry, man. I’ve been really busy,” he said quietly.

“Too busy to write any letters?”

He raised his head and drew the back of a hand across his nose. I could see his fingers shaking and he let out a filthy sounding cough.

“Look, I came up here to get away from the inquisition. I expect that shit from them, but not from you,” he spat as he leaned back down onto my bed. “I’m just tired,” he whispered as he curled himself up into a fetal position and almost instantly fell asleep.

I spent the rest of the night making excuses for him. Everyone wanted to know where “our college boy” was. They were eager to hear stories, but reluctantly accepted my apologies. The entire time, I cursed Caleb under my breath.

He slept the rest of the evening and on through the night. After cots, beds, or sleeping bags had been found for everyone, I stretched out on the living room couch and passed out watching one of my father's Clint Eastwood movies.

I awoke to a rustling in the kitchen. The VCR clock said it was 3:14 in the morning. I slid through the once raucous house, now filled only with a chorus of snores. Caleb was rummaging through the counter drawers, obviously trying to make as little noise as possible. I flipped on the light and Caleb spun around, his eyes thin and piercing. His hair was pulled back in a partial ponytail and he shivered through the drops of sweat dotting his forehead.

"Morning," I said as I wiped the crust from my eyes.

"Where are the spoons?" he asked as he turned back around and pulled open another drawer, this time the one containing silverware. "Marvelous."

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Looking for a spoon," he said, holding it up for proof.

He walked past me without saying anything else and made his way toward the garage door, stepping specifically on the few floorboards we knew didn't creak.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Aren't you the inquiring mind," he sighed. "I'm going outside."

"Cool," I said, feeling like if I had said anything else, he would blow up at me. "I'll come with you."

"No you won't," he said over his shoulder. "I need to think."

He clicked off the kitchen light as he passed, and left me standing there in the darkness. I watched him disappear through the garage door and listened as he made his way through packrat heaven toward the exterior door. When I heard the second door close, I crept into the garage.

Caleb's voice cut through the darkness. "Go to bed, Timothy." He had always insisted on calling me "Timothy" – a name that, according to Caleb, made me seem just a little bit older and more worldly than a "Timmy" or a "Tim." But as the syllables crept over his lips, I began to feel small, childish, painfully unaware of whatever world he was about to enter. I watched him standing there next to an old set of golf clubs and the antique rocking chair our father had sworn to restore back when Caleb was still in junior high. Shafts of moonlight shot through the garage door windows and fell on his left shoulder. I saw the spoon glimmering in one of his hands. The other held a small bundle.

"Goodnight," he declared the way our father would – as though it were scripture. He walked through the side door and out into the backyard without saying anything else. I knew where he was going. About ten years earlier, Caleb, myself, and our father had built a storage shed in the far corner of our backyard, next to the creek that ran parallel to our property. The shed served two purposes simultaneously: clearing out space in the garage for more useless junk and providing Caleb and I a safe haven whenever our father became too irritated or overbearing.

When we were kids, every Spring we'd toss chunks of freshly cut grass into the water upstream and run down the bank to lie in wait. "Here comes the Imperial Navy," Caleb would say as we hunched behind the thick brush lining the bank. When the enemy ships got within range, we'd unleash a salvo of rocks, inevitably shattering the fleet into a million pieces. Every so often, when we missed one, Caleb would wade out into the creek and pick up a much larger rock. He'd hoist it above his powerful shoulders and wait until just the right moment, when he'd help the compost adversary shuffle off the mortal coil, coating the both of us in mud, grass, and creek water.

I skulked out the front door and around the side of the house that was in total darkness. I took the hundred feet between the house and the shed as slowly and quietly as I could. When I got close enough, I could hear a faint snapping, accompanied each time by a dim flicker of light. I peeked around the corner of the shed and saw Caleb squatted over the spoon. He was holding a lighter to the underside, moving it in small, even circles. The spoon began to pop and hiss as thin wisps of smoke climbed up past Caleb's face. From the small bundle resting between his legs, he produced a syringe.

Working the way a surgeon would, Caleb drew the spoon's fillings up through the needle and held the syringe in his teeth. He drew up his left sleeve to reveal a belt pulled tight around what once was a sizeable bicep. With the bound hand clenched, Caleb's free hand tossed the syringe at his side and then fell limp in his lap. He leaned back against the shed and breathed heavily.

I was too scared to move, but I could feel my knees jittering. One of them knocked against the corner of the shed and Caleb rolled his eyes over to me. I could have leaned back around the corner, but I couldn't look away from the belt. It was pulled so tightly that the skin around it had turned bright white. Caleb's eyes met mine and for a few seconds we stared at each other, both of our chests heaving. As a tear meandered down Caleb's left cheek, he let out a belly laugh that I was sure would wake the whole neighborhood. My legs suddenly no longer paralyzed, I took off running back toward the house, Caleb's sinister cackle nipping at my heels.

I rushed back to the couch and curled up underneath the blanket. Clint Eastwood was talking tough to some random felon who looked as though he had just shat himself. I turned the TV off and laid there in silence until I heard Caleb retrace his path back into the

house and up the stairs. Overhead, I heard his unsteady footsteps trail off to the other end of the house and eventually into my room.

\* \* \*

Our house was bustling with activity the next day. Three generations of Flannery bumped elbows as Christmas Eve dinner was cooked, assembled, and spread out across the dining room table. My father made a point of letting everyone know that he had made the dinner service possible by buying the table extension at a swap meet and redrilling the fastening holes all by himself. Bill Evans' *Compact Jazz* shared the air with the wafting scents of ham and cinnamon candles.

I stood next to the kitchen window and watched Caleb slink off to his hiding place, his little bundle just visible in the dusk light. That morning, our father had asked Caleb about the footprints leading to the shed and back. Caleb told him that he went out there to smoke cigarettes because he didn't want to upset Grandma. My father grudgingly accepted the excuse and went about ignoring Caleb until dinnertime.

He stayed out there for about ten minutes. I caught the reflection from his lighter bouncing off the creek water. Almost on cue, Caleb emerged from behind the shed just as everyone was assembling for dinner. I took my place at the table along with everyone else. My mother and grandma had crammed so much food on the table that the only space remaining was taken up by plates and glasses; the silverware was spread across the plate in a manner clearly meant to look decorative, but failing to appear as anything other than necessary.

"Bless us O-" my father started.



“Caleb’s not here,” I interrupted. My father’s angry eyes met mine.

“Yes he is,” Caleb said as he slid up to the table and took a seat next to mine. Our father’s rage quickly swapped sons and he resumed.

“Bless us, O Lord, for these thy gifts, which we... bow your head, son.”

I looked up from my folded hands and saw that Caleb was sitting up straight in his chair, patiently awaiting dinner. Our father slowly uncrossed his fingers as the rest of the table looked first at him, and then over at Caleb.

“No, thank you,” Caleb said quietly.

“Excuse me?” he said rhetorically in that way pissed-off fathers tend to say things.

“I dissented from Catholicism, well, from Christianity as a whole, actually,” Caleb explained.

“You did what?” Our father said in that same tone.

“I’ve dissented. I’m exploring Agnosticism. I still have no problem breaking bread with you, but I no longer know if I believe in your religion,” Caleb said. He seemed so lucid, so completely concentrated on what he was doing. Rightfully so, too. It takes guts for an Irish Catholic son to tell his equally Irish Catholic father that he no longer believes in Jesus – at Christmas Eve dinner, no less.

“*My* religion? This is our family’s faith, and you are part of this family,” he said, trying not to become angry.

“Well, here’s to faith then,” Caleb said, raising a glass I wasn’t sure he knew was empty. “As Bierce once said, the belief without evidence in what is told by one who speaks without knowledge, of things without parallel.”

Caleb brought the glass halfway to his lips in what I’m sure he thought would be a stellar finish, but he realized there was nothing in it and set it back down quietly.

“Get away from this table,” our father said, low.

“What?” Caleb asked.

“Calm down, now-” our mother said as she reached her hand toward our father’s arm.

“Get away from my table!” our father bellowed, slamming his fist down so hard on the table that Aunt Ailyn’s poppy seed cake slid off the side and crashed to the floor. Again, I cursed Caleb for causing this mess. Aunt Ailyn’s poppy seed cake was first on my dinner hit list.

Caleb slid his chair back and got up from the table. He made his way out of the dining room and through the kitchen. I knew exactly where he was going. I slid my chair back too, but before I could go after him, my father ordered me to sit back down. After he regained his composure, my father said grace, during which I peeked through the dining room window and watched Caleb storm through the yard and duck behind the shed. Then the meal finally began. Conversation was slow and quiet, with everyone having interior conversations about their heathen relative and his strange new attitude.

I wanted to kick and flail and scream at every one of them. Caleb was out back doing that to himself and all they could do was sit there self-righteously. I sat there for several minutes, occasionally grabbing a spoonful of whatever passed in front of me and slapping it down on my plate. After ten minutes, I still hadn’t touched a thing.

“Tim, eat something,” my father said, gesturing at my plate with a fork.

“Where’d Caleb go?” I asked.

“Probably out to smoke one of those damn cigarettes,” he hissed. The room quieted down again.

“He smokes?” asked my cousin Chris.

“He’s quitting,” my mother chimed in.

“Doesn’t practice start in a couple of months?” my aunt Tanya asked.

“He’s not playing,” I said before I knew I had. Everyone at the table offered up pretty much the same confused grunt.

“What in the hell is wrong with that boy?” my father asked my mother, who shrugged and shook her head, sad that dinner was no longer salvageable.

I looked at my watch. It had been almost fifteen minutes and I hadn’t seen Caleb come out from behind the shed. I knew he must have been pretty pissed off, but he had always done his brooding upstairs.

“I’m going to find him,” I said, laying my napkin on the small mountain of food in front of me.

“You’ll do no such thing,” my father said, gesturing at me with his fork the same way he had the sweet potatoes.

I stood up and ran out of the room, listening to my father’s chair rumble along the hardwood floors. I tore through the kitchen and out the garage door. My father’s obscenities echoed behind me as I heard him fall over or into or through another piece of useless shit he should’ve discarded years before.

Outside, all I heard was my own breathing and my footsteps in the snow, crunching out as though I were the only person alive for miles. When I rounded the shed and found Caleb, he was lying in a sickening “L” shape on his side, not moving. For the first time, I got a good look at his bundle’s innards, strewn across the ground next to him. There was another syringe and a tiny Ziploc bag, mostly emptied. All that was left was a tiny bit of what looked like powdered sugar.

I knelt down and rolled Caleb onto his back. Several of the marks on his arm had merged; from the center of the largest hung a syringe. I pulled the needle out and a thick squirt of dark blood fell onto the snow. I put my face close to his and yelled out his name. Behind me, I heard several sets of footsteps coming through the snow.

I shook him a couple of times, but he didn't move. His skin was pale and felt cold. His arm, now left uncovered by a t-shirt, bore a baseball-sized red and black wound surrounded by a thin, milky ring. I slapped my hands hard on his chest and grabbed him by the shoulders, trying to get him to sit up. I knew that he wouldn't wake up for any of them – just for me.

“What the hell happened,” our father yelled from behind me. I turned around and saw him closing in on us, having just slipped out of enraged and into terrified.

“Get away from him,” I screamed. My father came closer and I wailed, tears pouring down my face, “Get the fuck away from us!”

I beat my fists on his chest and grabbed two handfuls of his shirt, pulling him up from the wet snow. His head bobbed to one side and then sank, his chin flat against his chest, a sliver of saliva seeping out the side of his mouth. I pulled him in, squeezing his bony shoulders as hard as I could. He felt like he weighed ninety pounds. I thought that he just needed to warm up, that if I pressed him close enough, he'd be fine. All I wanted was a little smile, that tiny piece of Caleb that meant more to me than he ever knew.

By then a small circle had gathered. They stood silent, some crying, some clutching their wives or husbands or children in disbelief. All of the family members who had wanted so badly to know how their pride and joy was doing at college were getting an answer that none of them expected. My father stepped in and tried to touch Caleb. I screamed and threw his hand away, letting the tears pour down my cheeks onto Caleb's matted hair.

“Wake up, Caleb,” I whispered. “Wake up.”

Caleb and I sat there by the shed for a few more minutes watching the dark water shimmer and slide down the riverbed. I rocked him back and forth until my arms felt like they were going to break and fall away.

“It’ll be spring soon,” I whispered to Caleb. “The navy’s coming. We have to get ready.”