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fiction fix
literary journal

featuring:
sarah clarke-stuart
editor's choice award
kristen iannuzzi
vanessa wells
nathan holic
joshua kreis mcclernan
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april fisher
reader's choice award

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Dear Readers,

When we started Fiction Fix we decided if we could produce three volumes we would consider the venture a success. I’m not sure how or why we came up with the number three. According to Ari, our faculty advisor, three is the magic number. Now we are honored to present you with our fourth journal.

The first year we started out with local submissions, and every year we received more and more pieces by some very talented writers. This year submissions came from all over The United States including the Midwest and New England. Several of these authors are published here. Fiction Fix set, what I considered, some pretty lofty goals. Because of the skill and tenacity of all involved, those goals have been met.

We could not have achieved what we did without the many people who helped push us on our way, including the founding members and our newest ones. At the beginning of each journal the Editor-in-Chief is allocated the first task of choosing a panel of members to assist in the decision making process. Each person on this panel makes a commitment of one year in which every single submission, wiped clean of the author’s name and any identifying information, hits their desk. I was very lucky with the panel I chose. Their votes and arguments on behalf of the stories helped tremendously in my year as Editor-in-Chief. I wish to extend a personal thank you to all of you.

I hope you find these stories as well-written, intriguing, entertaining, and passionate as I do.

Thank You,

Melissa Milburn
Editor-in-Chief
Fiction Fix
Thank You:

To everyone who helped put this book together. To the Fiction Fix staff and other volunteers who took time out of their busy schedules to complete Volume IV.

To the University of North Florida, and in particular the College of Arts and Sciences, for your support. Your help has made our job so much easier.

To the professors who taught our book. Thank you Pam Hnyla, Eileen Maguire, Chris Dew, Tim Gilmore, and Mark Ari. Because of you we are able to continue to reach out to students and share our love of the written word.

To all of the writers who submitted your work. Simply submitting can be difficult. We understand and appreciate your bravery.

To our friends and families for giving up your time with loved ones, and for all your support.

To Ari. Because you showed us what we can be.
On a Monday morning in early January Rachel stepped outside to retrieve Saturday’s mail. She noticed a black-veiled woman hobbling down the street, clutching a wooden rosary and muttering prayers under her breath. Rachel had seen her before, circling the neighborhood, always with the veil and the rosary. As the woman got closer, the rhythm of the prayer became recognizable. *Holy Mary mother of God pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.* The woman, blank-eyed and frowning, paused at the sight of Rachel’s long bare legs and tangled hair. And then, like a zombie under the spell of the crucifix, she continued limping down the street with the next wooden bead pinched between her thumb and forefinger.

Rachel thought of the last time she went to confession. It was in college. Father Thomas, a soft-spoken man with a long, narrow face, had said to her, “Pray to the Virgin. She will bring you comfort.” He gave her a prayer card depicting Mary in an elevated position, her arms outstretched, palms facing forward, a china white face pointing down.

“No,” she had whispered. “It won’t help.” But she put the laminated card in the pocket of her jeans anyway.

Rachel stepped back into her apartment—the top floor of a two-family house that had not been renovated since the 1960’s. From the front hall she could see the entire apartment. The alley kitchen, the bedroom doorway, the tiny bathroom. To her left was a sitting room where a petite Christmas tree still stood, almost bare. A carpet of green and brown needles lay beneath it on the hardwood floor.

Paul brought it to her in early December, and they decorated it with random items from around the apartment—silly string, cotton balls, aluminum foil, spider rings from Halloween. The only traditional adornments they used were last year’s candy canes. Paul suggested they put an angel on top, but Rachel had cringed. Instead, she found
a naked Barbie doll, face down in the mud in her yard. It belonged to the kid living downstairs, and Rachel figured it would soon be forgotten in the excitement of Christmas. Paul laughed when he saw the nude doll sitting atop the tree, legs splayed. *It's the anti-angel*, he had said. *Your mother would just love it, I'm sure.*

Rachel’s mother, Katherine, had an extensive collection of fat, winged children and virginal women draped in white robes, most of which were flamboyantly displayed at the entrance to her home. When Rachel was a child, she and her mother used these displays as altars for their daily prayers. According to Katherine, Rachel had her very own host of angels watching over her. As a child Rachel had imagined this “host” as a circle of fairies, holding hands and fluttering overhead, just above the clouds somewhere. Sometimes the angels would raise their clasped hands and sing in wispy voices, just like the ladies in Katherine’s prayer group. But at some point in Rachel’s early teenage years the fairy-like creatures began to drop away one by one. Katherine, on the other hand, became increasingly immersed in the angelic world. On several occasions, Rachel found her mother sitting in the living room, misty-eyed, whispering to an empty chair.

Rachel sat down at her kitchen table and picked up a book. She held it open in front of her as if to read, but only stared out the window. The sky was white with cloud cover and a few drops of rain were beginning to fall. The hollow apartment seemed to shiver around her. Every sound endlessly bounced around in the emptiness—the scratching of a mouse inside the wall, the drip of a bathroom faucet, the repetitive click of the ceiling fan.

It suddenly occurred to her that she and Paul had hardly missed a day without seeing one another since that humid afternoon when she inadvertently initiated the conversation. She presumed it was her friend, Sara, directly behind her when she looked down at the greenish water, peeled off her shirt, and asked, “Do you think it’s safe to swim in here?”
the power to momentarily erase the line between body and spirit.

When Paul first saw Rachel, her white body was turning pink in the August heat. He watched as she knelt on the dock and carefully spread out a purple towel in front of her. When she lay down, Paul could see beads of sweat starting to form on her upper lip. She smiled at him and motioned for him to sit closer. She adjusted her bathing suit top and wriggled out of her shorts. It was the sight of her bare stomach that nudged something in his memory. He got the feeling they had met before; it was as if they had even known one another intimately at some point. She showed no sign of recognition, and he didn’t mention it. She asked if something was wrong. *You scared of me?* She teased. He stood up and looked at his watch. *No...no. Gotta be somewhere.* He turned to leave. But before he could escape, she rolled onto her stomach and announced her address. *Stop by sometime, ok?*

He tried to forget the numbers and street name, but they were engraved in his mind, just as if he had carved them into his skin. 36b Elizabeth Drive. He thought it was strange she chose to give him her address rather than her phone number. For three days he tried to figure out why she seemed so familiar. The only connection he could make was the image of her body. It reminded him of the body that sometimes floated around in his nightmares. A lifeless body, laying naked on an elevated platform. But he could never see the face.

On Tuesday night he knocked on her door. She was wearing a small black dress, as if ready for a dinner party. But she wasn’t planning on going anywhere, she said. She invited him in, and they watched cartoon reruns together. She laughed uninhibitedly, guffawing and snorting like a child, which made him laugh too. But when he made a move to kiss her later on, she became very still and quiet. She stiffened, and Paul had the feeling she was about to bound away, out of his grasp. He thought maybe she didn’t want to be kissed, or that she had a boyfriend. But the moment their lips touched she became soft and alive.

It was several weeks later when Paul finally remembered where he had seen Rachel before. The memory jolted him awake. She was tucked into a half-moon shape under the white sheets, snoring softly. He was stroking her hair and swimming in and out of sleep
when he remembered. He got up and paced the apartment for an hour, craving a cigarette even though he hadn’t smoked since college. All night he stayed awake, watching her sleep, wanting to whisper the secret into her sleeping ear. *She really should know....*

Their relationship continued for several months, Rachel in a sensual trance, Paul in a state of confused adoration, until one evening in mid-December. They were essentially living together by then. She lay in bed, half-dreaming but not quite fully asleep, when he came into the room and began fumbling around in the shadows. She snapped out of her dream when Paul clicked on the dresser lamp. *Sorry Rach- just give me a second.* She caught a glimpse of him as he stood in front of the mirror with his back to her. The shape of his head and the curve of his bare shoulders suddenly reminded her of someone else, although she couldn’t quite remember who. When he turned around, she could see clouds traveling across his gaze, dimming its usual intensity. A brief but inexplicable wave of nausea swept through her body. And then Paul kissed her, and it was gone.

He switched the light off and sat down on the bed. A few minutes later he said, “Rachel, you still awake? I have a question...actually something to say....”

She pretended to be asleep.

He got out of bed and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. When he came back Rachel whispered, “What is it?"

“Oh. Well, I wanted to tell you something, but we can talk about it tomorrow.”

“We can talk now if you want.” The nausea was slowly returning.

“Well...I don’t know if I should say anything....” Paul stopped and waited for her to say something but Rachel remained quiet.

“It’s just been bothering me a little....”

Suddenly she got the feeling she had been sleep-walking for a long time.

“I meant to...I meant to tell you so many times.”

“What happened? “

“Nothing happened...I mean not recently. It was seven years ago.”
“Oh. So....”
“Well...do you remember me from college?”
“I thought you went to school up north.”
“Not until I transferred there in my junior year. But you and I...we had a computer science class together. It was one of those big lecture classes. So you probably never noticed me?” His voice cracked.

Rachel tried to laugh, but her throat tightened up. “You’re kidding, right? You’re saying we knew each other before? I don’t know....”

“We didn’t really know each other. I mean, I noticed you but we never spoke. Not in class at least. When we met in August I didn’t even recognize you at first.”

“Oh,” said Rachel. “Oh. I don’t remember.”

“It’s not a big deal,” Paul said. “Funny though, huh?”

“Oh,” Rachel said again, “yeah.”

The next morning she woke up earlier than usual. Paul was up already, and she watched him through half-closed eyes as he dressed for work. Then she turned on her side, facing away from him. Her eyes darted from the window, its single curtain blowing in the fan’s breeze, to the bedroom doorway, and back. A cold tremor passed through her body like a stream of ice water. A wide gap in time contracted to a narrow crack over which she only had to step. She remembered a dream, or possibly a drunken incident from years ago: a man undressing in front of a mirror, his naked back to her. The memory of an odor wafted through her nose: a mixture of stale cigarette smoke and moldy carpeting.

Suddenly she said, “It’s funny that you never mentioned it before....”

“Hmm?”

“Funny...that you never told me we’d met.”

He sat down beside her and put his fingers around hers.

“Oh. Yeah. Well I wasn’t sure at first....”

She looked into his face as he bent over and placed his lips on her forehead. He held them there for a minute. Another cold tremor.

“Gotta go,” he said.

He looked pale—so pale that the blue of his veins showed. As
she watched him leave, she studied the back of his head and shape of his shoulders. She grasped at the images that were floating to the top of her consciousness and then popping like bubbles. Suddenly the horror of recognition yanked her out of a five-month trance. She sat up and tried to rub the goose bumps off the backs of her arms.

On the phone later that day she told him she was working late and then going out with friends.

“You don’t want me to stay over,” he said.
“Well...whatever you want....”
“You remember, don’t you?”
“Remember?”
“Do you? Remember the class?”
“I dropped that class mid-way through the semester,” she said absently.
“I know.”

The next day she waited in a crowded café, sipping a Dr. Pepper, trying to ignore the leering man at the table next to her. As he watched her cross and uncross her legs, she studied the grey hairs on his large pink ears. They matched his tidy grey suit and the miniature cell phone lying on the table in front of him. He looked like he might try to speak to her so Rachel quickly picked up her own phone and put it to her ear. Her stomach churned.

She was waiting for Paul. Why do you want to meet in public? he had asked when she told him not to come over to the house. Are you scared of me? What do you remember? But the truth was that she couldn’t make sense of her memories. Maybe they were from a dream. A bad one. But just a dream.

She did remember going to see a priest about something. That was not a dream. It was that last confession, seven years ago. She had decided to go to church—not to attend mass, but just to sit in the familiar incense-filled hollowness of a Catholic church.

It was a Saturday, in the spring semester of her freshman year, when she walked among the plastic beer cups and cigarette butts littering the sidewalk in front of a tall and narrow church. The stone building was wedged between a two-story bar and a sandwich shop,
directly across the street from the university. Upon entering, Rachel dipped the tips of her fingers into the cup of holy water and made a quick sign of the cross. A posting by the doorway read, “confession 3:00 to 5:00 pm every Saturday.” Rachel knelt down on the marble-like floor in the back pew rather than pulling down the cushioned kneeler. For almost an hour she stayed like that and studied the hand-carved Stations of the Cross. When she stood up and approached one of the tall confessional doors situated in a row along the right side of the church, her knees buckled in pain from kneeling for such a long time.

In the confessional, she sat on a wooden bench and, for several minutes, listened to the raspy breaths of the priest on the other side of the screen.

She saw a dim profile of him through the confessional screen. He nodded for her to begin. Very simply she told him she may have lost her virginity the weekend before.

“You don’t know for sure?”
“I can’t really remember that part of the night. But I’m pretty sure that’s what happened.”
“Did you black out?”
“I drank too much.” She thought for a minute. “I remember being in a motel or something... but maybe I dreamed that.”

Father Thomas was quiet for a minute. Then he asked, “And when did this happen?”
“Over a week ago.”
“Have you told anyone?”
“Just you.”
“Were you hurt or anything?”
“Well, I was sore I guess. I had some bruises....”
“Did you think about having a doctor check you out?”
“No.” She was becoming irritated.
“Um...you might need to report this to the campus police...?”
“What for? It was me. I got drunk. Nobody forced me to do anything.”
“Yes. But if you need help....”
“What is my penance?” she said abruptly.
“I can help you find someone to talk to.”
She stood up to leave.
Father Tom held up his hands and said, “Alright.”
He assigned her a penance of five Hail Mary’s and five Our Father’s and said that it would please the Lord if she were to seek out some help concerning the incident.
“I wasn’t raped,” she whispered. But he didn’t seem to hear.
He gave her a Hail Mary card.
“And also take this,” he added, sliding another prayer card underneath the screen. It was a picture of a haloed young girl with a lamb in her arms. On the back it was explained that St. Agnes had been martyred at age thirteen in the early part of the fourth century. She secretly converted to Christianity, and when she refused to marry a Roman prince he exposed her. Before being put to death, the community had sent her to a brothel where her chastity was miraculously preserved by the power of the Holy Spirit. On the bottom it said, St. Agnes is the patron saint of the Children of Mary, young girls, and rape victims.
Rachel’s face grew hot as she read the card. She threw it on the floor and screamed, “No!” She pressed her face, wet with tears of rage, against the screen and looked directly at Father Thomas. “I came here to confess my sins. It was me that did it.”
Her face and ears burned as she slammed the confessional door and marched down the side aisle, past the kneeling penitents and their averted eyes. It was extraordinarily quiet but Rachel thought she could hear the hum of Gregorian chant descending from the balcony.

Seven years later, she sat in a café waiting for Paul. The torn pieces of a memory began to lace themselves together. Random images clustered around her mind’s eye: heavy motel drapes, large hands pulling them shut, red wine stains on the white sheets, clothes heaped on the floor, water spots on the ceiling. The television was on, turned to what looked like a pornographic science channel, but the sound was off. On the screen a woman dressed only in cowboy boots was playing with a green snake, kissing it, wrapping it around
her arms. Rachel remembered being unable to move for some reason, but in the corner of her eye she thought she had seen two other men, maybe three, sitting in the cheap motel chairs and laughing. *It wasn’t a dream.*

Paul appeared at the door. A tinkering bell announced his entrance. His eyes were unusually white, his pupils as small as pinpoints. Everything about him seemed diminished except for his hands; he was holding them out to her as he approached the table. They were the hands that pulled the motel curtains shut.

He bent down to kiss her, sliding his fingers behind her neck, “Hey Rach—”

She jerked away from the enormous hand, her eyes dark and round. She fixed them on Paul’s throat and watched his Adam’s apple bob up and down as he spoke.

He sat down and pulled his chair close to hers. “You remember, Rachel, don’t you? What do you remember? Please. Tell me.” Then he looked around and said, “We should really go somewhere else....”

Trembling, Rachel slowly pushed back her chair. Quietly she said, “Did you track me down, Paul?”

“No, Rachel, no. It was a coincidence...that we met again.”

Rachel just stared.

“It was a horrible thing—what I did. Awful.” She could tell he was about to cry.

She shook her head.

“It wasn’t me, Rachel. I mean I didn’t want to do it. I just started talking to you at the bar. We talked about class. Remember? You agreed to leave with me.”

“No,” she said.

“I don’t know what to say. I can’t believe I did....”

“No,” she repeated. “Stop it. Stop talking.”

“Rachel.”

She stood up to leave, but he wrapped his fingers around her wrist. She stared at his flesh on hers.

“I don’t know what to say. There’s nothing to say. I’m sorry I fell in love with....” His voice broke.

Suddenly she remembered a single line of dialogue from that night in the motel. Somebody said, *Holy shit, man, she is tight.*
She raised her eyes to meet Paul’s, and then snapped her arm out of his grasp.

Paul was finally silent. The grey man next to them stood up.

“Are you alright?” the man asked Rachel.

She looked him up and down and repeated what she had said to Paul. No. No. She walked past the man and out the door, the café bell tinkling behind her. The man stared at Paul, vigorously brushed some crumbs off his suit, and then walked away. Paul sat down and covered his face.

Rachel dumped the mail—all junk—in the trashcan and flipped on the television. It was late in the afternoon, still overcast, and the wind was rattling the thick windowpanes. On the weather channel the map of the United States was divided into four colored bands. In the lowest band, where Rachel lived, it was supposed to rain and thunderstorm all through the night again. More mud. Snow was predicted for the next day—in North Carolina. She tried to remember the last time she had seen snow, tried to recall how it felt and crunched underfoot.

She picked up the phone and called her mother.

“Mom? Do you still want company on your drive up north?”

For several days Katherine had been nagging Rachel about attending a funeral with her, asking if she would please, please come—it would mean so much to Grandma. To which Rachel responded, I don’t know, Mom. What about David? Can’t you ask him? Great Aunt Dorothy had recently died at the age of 92. Rachel never met Aunt Dorothy, and Katherine, who was afraid of flying, wanted to drive the ten hours to northern Virginia where the funeral was being held. It didn’t seem like a good enough reason to miss work, but suddenly Rachel felt as though she had to get away immediately, even it was with her mother. And she wanted to see snow.

Katherine was thrilled. “Oh, yes, of course! Of course I want your company. But you know I’m leaving on Wednesday?”

“Fine with me,” said Rachel.
“Oh good. I can’t wait.”

Imagining her mother’s flushed face on the other end of the line, Rachel felt okay for the first time in weeks.

By the time Katherine and Rachel reached Georgia, the Florida drizzle had turned to cold rain and then to horizontal sleet.

“Drive through it,” Rachel said, “It’ll be worse if we stop.” So Katherine continued driving.

At the Georgia-South Carolina border the sleet finally stopped and the sky brightened a little. “It’s getting really cold,” said Katherine, pressing her hand to the window. “Do you think we might see snow?”

Rachel, who had been staring out the window for the entire trip, didn’t respond. She seemed mesmerized by the long stretches of pine followed by yellow pastures and then more pine forests.

Katherine was smiling to herself.

“Rachel,” she said, “remember when you and your brother put the dog in a toboggan and pushed her down that hill behind our house when we lived up north?”

Rachel smiled and nodded.

“Poor Annie,” said Katherine.

“Oh, she was fine. She had fun,” said Rachel smiling wider and finally looking at her mother.

“She was scared out of her mind, Rachel. Don’t you remember she did a flying leap into the bushes?”

They laughed, both seeing the same picture in their heads as if they were holding up a photograph: the young golden retriever, speeding down the hill with her tongue hanging out, long ears flapping behind her in the wind. At the time, it had seemed the dog was smiling, but Rachel now realized Annie’s black eyes had probably been shining with terror rather than joy. For the first time since Annie died ten years before, Rachel mourned the death of her childhood pet.

“That’s the last time I saw snow. I mean real snow—enough to make a snow man, you know? The kind that covers everything?” said Rachel. It was the longest phrase she had uttered all day.

“You were probably only twelve at the time.”

Rachel nodded.
like a nursing infant. In her dream she was kneeling in the snow with her arms wrapped around the neck of a large golden retriever. The dog roared in her ear like a lion, and the snow began to melt. The dream skipped a beat, and Rachel found herself immersed in a bathtub of warm holy water, on an altar in the middle of mass. Paul was sitting on the floor next to the tub, floating a toy sailboat on the water’s surface. His hands were fat and dimpled, like a child’s. Tears ran down his chubby face and fell into Rachel’s bath water. She patted his head and sang to him. *Mary had a little lamb*....

When Katherine stopped the car in a Denny’s parking lot, Rachel woke up and sucked in the pool of saliva gathered in her bottom lip. “My feet are freezing,” she said, pulling her knees to her chest and curling her toes under her feet.

“Oh Rachel, look! Look at that snow,” her mother said, pointing a finger at the miles of pastureland blanketed in snow.

“Oh. Pretty,” Rachel said like a little girl.

She opened the car door and tried to catch the flakes in her hand. Then she jumped out of the car and ran across the parking lot barefoot. The sun was finally peeking out of the clouds, turning the snow a fluorescent shade of white.

“Look how bright it is, Mom. I forgot it looked so....” Katherine carried Rachel’s shoes and socks to her.

“It must be 20 degrees out here. Put these on.”

“But look. It makes everything look so perfect, right?” For several minutes they both gazed over the rolling hills of North Carolina, spotlessly white with snow. Then Katherine broke into a childish smile and grabbed Rachel’s arm.

“I know!” Katherine said, clapping her hands together. “Let’s make....”

Rachel rolled her eyes. “No, Mom. No snow angels. Not here.” She looked over her shoulder at a group of teenagers filing into the restaurant.

Katherine pulled her daughter toward a pristine bank of snow. “Oh come on. Please? Just one.” Katherine was already sprawled out on the ground.

Rachel knelt down and scooped up a ball of snow. She tasted some of it and let the rest melt in her hand. She looked over her
“So…how’s Paul?” Katherine asked in a sunny voice, peering at Rachel in the corner of her eye.

“I don’t know.”

“Oh? You mean…what happened?”

“Nothing,” said Rachel. “Nothing really.”

They were both silent for several minutes, and Rachel began to feel guilty. Her mother deserved a better explanation.

“He moved out of town,” she lied.

For several days after the café scene, Paul had circled her block in his car and left messages on her voicemail saying that he was worried. He wanted to make sure she was okay, he said. *It was an awful thing, Rachel. Horrible. I know. There’s nothing I can say. But please be okay. Please.* The last time she saw his blue Toyota lurking outside of her apartment, she ran out into the yard and screamed, “Don’t come near me! What the hell is wrong with you?!” Paul’s car lurched forward, hesitated, and then slowly rolled away. Faces appeared at her neighbors’ windows, and everything was still for a moment. Rachel felt as if her skin had been peeled away, exposing the raw meat of her body, pink and throbbing. At first she expected Paul would return and cover her body with his own. But he didn’t come back, and Rachel stood there for a long time without moving.

It was then that she began to feel warm and light, the way that she had as a child when she was immersed in her pretend world of fairy-angels. Suddenly she felt the clothing of her skin wrap itself around her again, swaddling her fragile soul in flesh.

In the car, she fell asleep with her fleece jacket balled up underneath her head. Katherine hummed a Christmas tune and thought about grandchildren. She wanted them. If Rachel got pregnant, even without a husband, it might be okay, she thought. *She* could help Rachel with the baby. *It would be such a blessing,* Katherine thought, *a sweet little miracle.* Katherine believed her life was filled with little miracles. Rachel had been a miracle baby. At age twenty-nine, Katherine, mother of one, was told she couldn’t have any more children. But three years later Rachel had been born. She looked over and gently patted her sleeping daughter on the knee.

Rachel flinched and began breathing unevenly through her nose,
shoulder again before lying down in the snow. She stared into the blue and ivory sky as her arms fluttered up and down and her legs glided back and forth. Then she stood up and looked down at her impression, brilliant in the sun.
So you dig this hole. A foxhole that is as deep into the earth as the tallest guy’s shoulders, about five and half feet. It’s really called a combat effective fighting position, and it isn’t really going to end up that deep. Not tonight anyway. You’ve been humping all day, a fifty-pound ruck through mountainous terrain that is less than favorable on your disgustingly blistered feet. The rain is a welcome break because it gives you something to do. You sit in the hole, about a foot shy than what it should be, and empty the falling water with your canteen cup.

Your battle buddy starts a no shit story, probably one that you have heard; they’re all the same goddamn story anyway. All stories in the Army are no shit stories, “No shit, there I was,” followed by some manifested idea of manhood in which at least part of it is probably bullshit and not no shit. Your company doesn’t have the good stories anyway—not like Alpha who was strategically prepping to cross a river and ended up capturing five stark-naked, enemy soldiers. And not like D Co., the first platoon leader in Delta Company escaped from a POW camp last fall. That fucker endured having twenty-three bones broken by the enemy, and he gave only his name, rank, serial number, and date of birth—not a whisper more. Then he escaped by tunneling out with a spoon the day before they were going to execute him by cutting off his limbs. One at a time. With a rusty pocket knife. So the story goes anyway.

Your stories aren’t like that though—not even the fictitiously honest ones. Not Bravo. You don’t find any naked bastards to capture, and you have no heroes. You hump around all day, build a perimeter at night, and wait for some sort of absolution...or redemption...or an end...or beginning. Who the fuck knows. But you just sit there, half-heartily listening to some random story and thinking about what got you into this hell:

You were eighteen, barely out of high school. Maybe you
had a good time. Maybe you were even successful. But who cared anyway? It didn’t matter anymore. Sometime during the four quick years of discovering, or attempting to discover who you were, something possessed you to get some sick and twisted obsession of patriotism. So you joined the Army. Chances are you did it for some money, or maybe to get away. But maybe, just maybe, you were one of the few who really did care. It doesn’t matter either. Trivial. Everything before then. Suddenly you were in this completely erratic world of disgusting conformity. Some middle-aged Drill Sergeant with revolting breath spat 2.3 centimeters away from your face. You were treated like a possession, convinced you were lower than whale-shit, and the idea that things would get better was nothing more than a hideous lie conjured up by what little hope you still possessed. That was the easy part. Soon after you were shipped overseas, thrown into some bizarre notion of mortal combat, and treated as a worthless pawn on a politician’s chessboard. Again, insignificant details. Here’s what matters, the dénouement of your reality: you went to war, became a man (or so they said), and will never go back the same. You will have nightmares the rest of your life, flashbacks that are debilitating, and you can never truly put it behind you. Not entirely.

So now there is nothing except tally marks on your Kevlar to tell you how many days you have been covered in mud, hunting a figment, and an empty bottle of foot powder to remind you how many days remain. Maybe you will make it home...maybe you won’t. If you don’t you are a hero, but it doesn’t matter anyway because you’re dead. If you do make it and happen to suffer from a severe case of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, society sees you as troubled. Or if you get injured and become a cripple, you are a drain on the economy. The idea of dying no longer seems so perilous... it seems the quickest, most honorable solution. It might even be the onl....

The rain stops and your battle buddy throws in an expletive at the end of his story that pulls you from your life-altering trance.
Foxhole living is an art, really. You find ways to keep yourself occupied...keep yourself sane. Daydreaming isn’t a good way to remain mentally stable. So maybe you write a letter that you will never send out, maybe a quick game of cards, and then possibly polish off the last of your rations while talking about home. But back in your mind, you prep yourself for night watch. Three hours of perpetual torture, the circle of hell that Dante couldn’t even fathom in his infernos.

It’s pitch black now, late...you got the 0200 shift. A supply shortage means there is only one set of night vision goggles for your platoon—the rotation has them on third squad’s watchman, not you. So you stare off at nothing and see everything, especially the stuff that really isn’t there. It’s cold, too, probably because you were still wet from the evening showers. Your feet, which are wrapped in socks drenched with a week’s worth of sweat and stale rain, feel as if they are disintegrating...you wonder how many toenails you have left.

But the sound. The distinct noises that come from the darkness make you forget the fungus that was once your most fundamental mode of transportation—and now you listen. Pulling your rifle close into your side, you hear it... so distinctly... rustling... not wind—something louder. Maybe you don’t hear it. Maybe you want to hear it. Hear something. Anything. It would prove your eyes right—make them honest again. Infallible desperation.

You readjust so your rifle is actually pointing at something. You know everything out there, beyond the perimeter, signifies sin...every noise and every sight and everything that may not even truly be there. All of it. The dark woods reek of anger. The night encompasses sloth. The dim stars are lust hiding behind dark clouds that are actually greed. There is gluttony in the fallen leaves, and the enemy is pride. The enemy *is* pride. Squinting hard, you stare at the same dark nothingness and begin trying to combat the seven deadly sins with the seven Army values you learned so long ago as just a recruit in basic training. Loyalty...Duty...Respect...Selfless Service...Honor...Integrity...and...*Damn.*
Here's the problem: you're tired. And not just simply in the need of rest—you are excruciatingly exhausted. Mentally, physically, emotionally. Perpetually. Fear keeps your eyes open, transfixed on the blackness that is your reality. Yet your eyes, in which you know you cannot trust, are still more dependable than your mind. For all you know, you are dead—killed some time over the past few days when you hit a trip wire and splattered into pieces all over the rest of your squad. If hell is in fact the palpable manifestation of the individual’s demon, a place created exclusively for the independent soul to be tortured, this would indeed be your hell: sitting in a foxhole, watching blackness, for eternity.

So you are stuck in this hole...if you are dead, it is going to be a while—an insufferably long while. If you are still alive, you figure you have about two hours and fifty-nine minutes left. You brace yourself for the time ahead, and for just a second you rest your cheek on the butt of your rifle.

There is a cruel and abrupt kick in your side. You open your eyes, and you are relieved to see your pissed off squad leader standing over you eclipsing the sun with his massive form.

You are awake. And alive. You don't remember much about last night, maybe because there is drool all over your rifle. You are too tired to care, anyway. You stand up, fill in the hole, and etch another tally onto your Kevlar. You will spend the rest of the day humping a fifty pound ruck through mountainous terrain that is less than favorable on your disgustingly blistered feet.
A cardinal sees its reflection every afternoon in Letty’s window. The bird flies its pointed red head into the glass over and over for three hours everyday. Letty’s grandmother says cardinals bring good luck. Her good luck keeps trying to come in through a closed window.

She leaves her small apartment at the beach and boards a plane with Bear. They fly overnight to Italy. When he invites her, she clears her schedule. Spends money to fly anywhere, be with him any place. She loves him.

Flying over the Atlantic, she walks on eggshells and talks around his ego. She takes small breaths to steady her voice and her heart when speaking with him. She does most of the talking—empty and naked words. Letty wears a Moroccan skirt cut just below her knees, layers of pretty pink satin.

Letty sits close to Bear, resting her hand on his wrist, perfectly made up, ready for his detached embrace. *Say something witty, say something witty, say something to make him fall in love with you.* Bear glances up from his book.

“Why are you so dressed up? You do know we’re going to be on this plane for eight hours, don’t you?”

She gives half a smile and flips through her magazine.

Letty is strawberry blond hair green eyes with yellow flecks. Medium height a sprinkle of freckles. A scar on her right knee from a trampoline accident when she was in the sixth grade. Wavy short hair. Nose that juts out. A girl who doesn’t wear underwear.

They get off the plane in Rome and drive three and a half hours to Trivento. They settle into his family’s villa.

In bed that first night; she touches Bear’s face. Beautiful crinkles around his eyes, brilliant blue and cold. He takes control at the small of her back. Eyes dart and she is ready to submit. A subtle forced intimacy.

He climbs inside of her like he is staying in a nice hotel. Rips away the sheets and throws his head on the soft down pillows. But
the sheets will be rolled up on the floor in the morning, forgotten, as he sleeps in and barely makes the noon check out.

Letty is not a nice hotel, not even an apartment. Letty is every girl swinging on the pendulum between a suburban house, 2.4 kids, a tail-wagging chocolate lab or a double wide, eight kids, a chained Doberman pinscher who’s foaming at the mouth.

Bear will leave before the noon check out. Maybe the down pillows aren’t soft enough or maybe there is an apartment downtown with cheap rent and new paint in a good location convenient for his life.

She waits for him to speak, giddy and uncomfortable. This is it. He’s going to tell me he’s in love with me. She moves her fingers along his chest.

“I like you because we have companionship and sex with no commitment or intimacy,” he tells her.

Letty’s sadness fills the room, soaks in like oil on the century old armoire, drips like lacquer on the cold marble, and seeps down into her crumpled skirt on the floor.

At the top of the mountain in Trivento, a place named after the three winds that converge there, Letty drinks a cup of wine. A single rose bush blooms in the convent’s garden across the cobblestones. A fury of pink flutters in the wind and stumbles down three hundred and sixty-five steps to the village below. The petals dance with the wind becoming: we. Letty wants to be: we like them. She wants to flutter freely into someone else. She leaves Italy, leaves Bear. She leaves windy fragrant we.

Back home in Jacksonville, Letty drinks her thoughts down deep. The bartender serves her another margarita, and the guy sitting to her right begins to make sense. Nice hands with hair around the knuckles and a smile that looks honest to her on this particular night. Anton gives her a ride because the world is spinning and she can’t drive her thirteen blocks home. Maybe ten she rationalizes but not thirteen.

Bright afternoon sunlight blares in through the bedroom window. Letty moves her lips and mouth a few times: wet cotton balls.

“How’s it going?” Anton, the stranger, strokes her arm.

“I think a cat jumped in through the window last night and died
in my mouth,” she chuckles, still a little tanked.

“Last night was fun,” he leans forward to kiss her.

“I was wasted,” she dodges his lips and climbs out of bed.

She heads for the bathroom. Closing the door behind her, she fights back anxiety and nausea as a hangover sets in and pieces of the night before burn the back of her mind. Brushing her teeth, cold water, and toothpaste on her gums are both refreshing and sickening. She leans over the sink, spits, and rinses. Dizzy as she stands straight.

She climbs back in bed with stranger Anton and offers an awkward smile. His body shifts next to her.

“So,” he strokes his ample belly, “I should get going. I’ll call you?” He sits up and Letty stares at the excessive hair on his back. The hair seems to sweep in circles and end at the nape of his neck. Twenty tiny hurricanes of follicles climbing up to his neck.

“Sure, call me sometime,” she says, “I would walk you out but you know. Feeling a bit hung over, best to stay in bed.”

He leaves without a number.

She falls back in bed.

She pulls the car over. Sirens fill her ears and eyes. The cop walks up to her car. He taps on her door. She tries to reach to roll down the window, but her fingers lay limp on the wheel. She tries again, this time concentrating all of her energy into her left pinky finger. He taps harder, obviously angered by her inaction. Her pinky nail quivers but she can’t move an ounce of herself. Now he is banging on the window. She tries to yell but her throat is a vacuum and sound dies before it’s ever born. He takes his flashlight and smashes the window. Glass splays onto her face, into her eyes, shards find their way into her half-open mouth. Letty uses every point of energy in her universe to move her left pinky finger.

She blinks. The tapping continues. The cardinal is dutifully at her window slamming his beak into the panes. Letty touches her face, blinks again, swallows hard. No glass. She wiggles each finger. She wiggles her left pinky finger with all of her soul. She climbs out of bed and heads for the living room.

She smokes a bowl and hopes last night and her headache will fade. Letty picks up the book her roommate’s reading. She glances at the title, *Almost Space: A Collection of Stories*. She opens to
“Death kills the living more than the dead. It shaves the edges off our existence. Habits and vices once coddled in the warmth of our sheltered personalities now stick out like awkward black feathers oiled slick with the dirt of the world around it. Time ended and ebbed life to the dusty periphery of the present. I woke up one morning.”

She closes the book mid-sentence.

“Fucking hell,” Letty vents to the empty room, “why does it have to be about death? Why does everybody got to write death? Death and coffee. People are either dying or drinking a cup of coffee.”

She opens to the middle of the book.

“A few days later, I meet up with Mona for coffee. Her skin is radiant. She is sitting in front of Starbucks smiling as I walk up. She crosses her long tanned legs as I sit down. The sun is setting and there is a slight breeze coming from the west.”

Fucking coffee. Letty sets down the book and smokes another bowl.

Letty goes for a drive. She heads south.

Seven hours later she’s on the Florida turnpike outside of Miami heading for Key West. Letty parks at Eva’s house and walks up Elizabeth Street to the dock. Eva waves, and Letty walks up the boat ramp. Beautiful Eva, in a navy blue polo t-shirt and khaki shorts, pours champagne into a plastic cup for Letty.

“Letty! How are you?”

The girls embrace.

“I’m good, just thought I’d clear my head and get some miles underneath me.”

“What do you feel like getting into tonight?”

“Let’s have a couple drinks when you’re finished working.”

“I’ll be ready in ten minutes”

Eva washes the boat and divvies out the tips between the captain and herself. She locks up the boat, and the girls head to the Green Parrot.

Smoky dark bluegrass band. Horns/horns/horns.

Eva buys the first round. They drink and listen to the band.

“Come on.”
Eva grabs Letty and pulls her on the dance floor. Two fall in close together. Eva grabs Letty’s left hand, twirls her around, spins her out, and catches her from behind. Her. Laughter. Another round of drinks. Letty buys this time.

Letty is cozy drunk again. Eva talks finance with the bartender. The three of them head back to Eva’s after last call. The bartender, Cyrus, grabs a bottle of rum from the liquor room.


Bartender Cyrus plops down on the blue couch with big soft pillows. Eva twists the cap off a beer and sits down next to him. Letty levitates in the overstuffed chair and focuses on the water ring on the coffee table to keep the room from falling. Bartender Cyrus fumbles for Eva. Pulls at her tank top her sarong with the persistence of a seven-year-old in a grocery store trying to get his mother to buy the good cereal.

Eva lights a bowl. The bowl floats from hand to hand, mouth to mouth.

“Get the fuck off me!”

Fumbly bumbly Bartender Cyrus is on top of Eva with the eagerness of a five-year-old boy next to a mechanical pony with a quarter in his pocket.

“Out! Get the fuck out!”

Bartender Cyrus leaves with sunken cheeks and a look of despair not unlike a little toddler that has just wrecked his tricycle.

Letty curls up on the soft couch next to Eva and rests her hand on Eva’s knee. Eva leans over and kisses Letty like she wants to swallow her up, feeding her existence for an entire year. Letty turns to syrup.

Letty and Eva climb three floors and sink into a feather bed with one thousand and seven pillows.

They begin to kiss. Their clothes fly out the open window. Tasting Eva reminds Letty of eating nasturtiums for the first time. New, soft, spicy. Except she is not spicy. Only salty. Giggles and shrieks escape the fibers of a tightly woven Guatemalan quilt. Finger, tongues, toes touch as their bodies are suspended in a space of bliss and relief for that magical hour before the rooster.
Dusty sunlight filters in the open skylight like smoke. Letty’s head weighs more than her body this morning. Red numbers on the black clock read 9:36. They lay entwined and begin to stir. Embarrassed laughs and bad breath. Each climbs out of bed for a cigarette and thoughts of breakfast.

Bacon grease spits out of a large skillet on the stove and Letty breaks eggs into a glass bowl. Eva walks in with the paper.

“Coffee.”

Eva pours a cup of coffee as Letty brushes against her. Eva recoils to avoid her skin.

Driving up 95 back to Jacksonville, Letty listens to the magnificent suffocating sound of bullfrogs. She is empty. She wants to be filled... by anyone. We. Poured into a glass. Drank down with satisfied lips into a mouth no longer thirsty because of her.

She walks into her room. The cardinal perches on a branch outside. His head bobs up and down, his wings jut out, and he comes toward the window. Thunk. Again, thunk. The bird rests on the branch shaking his feathers.

Letty notices a dead wasp caught between the panes. The wasp that buzzed around for its eternity until finally choking in the small space. Letty reaches over and tries to turn the rusty lock. Brick colored dust flakes off and finds its way under her fingernails. She tries to turn the stubborn latch. With a snap, the lock breaks away. She lifts the window. The wasp disintegrates.

The cardinal flies to the highest branch. A few minutes later he settles back at his post next to the open window. Letty lies on her bed and watches as he bobs and shakes.

The cardinal springs through the open space and alights on the ceiling fan. The bird plummets off the fan and strikes the mirror, shattering it. Letty laughs wildly. The bird, resting on the dresser, looks in her direction, seemingly startled. Letty covers her face with a pillow, still chuckling.

She approaches the cardinal. She reaches out and grabs him. The bird squawks and pecks at her hands. Tiny claws jut out and scrape the inside of Letty’s wrists. Thin trickles of blood drip down her skin. Letty lets go but a string now connects them.

The cardinal stretches wings and flies out the window. The
momentum of the cardinal’s flight pulls her along. Letty stumbles with bloody wrists. She trips and gets up. Her grass stained knees are bruised. The cardinal is a kite floating on her string. The thread becomes frayed because of her white-knuckled grip. The string pops. The cardinal ascends.
Trophies
By
Nathan Holic

I am thirty-eight, a model of good health.
When I married my wife, Diane, we pledged that we would
preserve ourselves, that we would not succumb to age and laziness.
We pledged that we'd never "let ourselves go," that we'd never
allow overtime hours to prevent us from morning or evening jogs,
that we'd never allow hectic schedules to force us into quick-fix
fast-food lunches and dinners, that we'd never forsake proper
hygiene or body maintenance—that we'd never stop putting in the
effort to stay attractive—simply because we'd be married and locked
into loving one another, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health.

Fifteen years of marriage, and I worry about the pledge, now.
I check my hair daily. I part it in several areas, examining as
closely as I can for patches that might be undetectable under a less
scrutinizing inspection. No sign of weakening or thinning. No sign of
receding. My shampoo is all-natural and contains copper peptide
for revitalizing and repairing hair follicles. I comb and brush, towel­
dry. I grab fistfuls, yank, and my hands are free of loose, plucked
hair. I am not going bald. I could mousse my hair like that American
Idol host if I wanted.

I am healthy and complete.
So what other conclusion can I draw? The hair is hers.

Our bed is large, comfortable, a therapeutic pillow mattress;
we have so much room that we could provide sleeping space for a
homeless family and still not notice. I sleep in a single spot, use only
a fraction of the bed, but somehow Diane always finds herself in
strange positions in the middle of the night, hoarding all the pillows
and sheets. By the time morning slices through our blinds, the bed
looks like an over-turned laundry basket: sheets ripped from the
corners of the mattress, blankets scrunched into balls, pillows on
the floor.

The last few mornings, after she's slid into the bathroom to begin
her daily routine, I've noticed something different while attempting
to reconstruct the wreckage into a bed. Long brown hairs, what looks like a forest’s floor of pine needles. Women always seem to shed like cats, I thought initially.

But this…is almost unnatural.

Some of them could be mine, I tried to think. We both have brown hair, after all. Age is not inescapable, and, though I maintain myself with the same vigor and discipline that I maintain my office, I understand the truth that—like the other men bumbling around my building—I am rotting. I will gray. I will lose hair. I will become bloated.

I will watch as my skin drips from my skull.
And I will watch my body die long before I die myself.
But not now. Right now I am a model of good health.
And right now, my wife should be a model of good health. She jogs four miles daily on our treadmill, cooks with a savage disdain for all things fatty and greasy, holds a membership to a tanning salon. We take vitamins each morning, three different varieties. We drink eight cups of water daily, and our breakfast always includes apple slices. Many times, our lunch includes baby carrots. We take vacations each Spring to clear our lungs of the Saint Louis exhaust. She’s 37, has never been pregnant, and wears clothes that most college sophomores would beg to wear again. She is a wife coveted by other men.

Diane has been cutting her hair shorter each year, of course, but these aren’t Golden Girls haircuts. Shorter. But contemporary and professional. Mature. The look of confidence and independence. Longer hair might suggest youth and adventure, but holding onto it for too long is like refusing to empty your closet and update your wardrobe. She has simply redefined herself.

Yesterday, I gathered the hair from the pillow, pulled several from my own scalp, and measured them side-by side. The hair from the bed: glistening and silky, smelling like watermelon body spray…different texture, different taste, different length than my own.

“Do you want to guess what I got you this year?” Diane asks, entering the empty lobby of my office with a metallic blue gift bag tied at the top with gold ribbon. She looks very…ordinary…tonight.
She has arrived to assist me in preparing for the annual office Christmas Party.

“Honey,” I say and shrug, “I love surprises.”

I don’t.

“Oh, just guess,” she says, taking hold of my forearm, smiling so brightly that she’s almost laughing.

“My current collection is very comprehensive,” I say, hoping perhaps to convey my dissatisfaction with the hobby she forced upon me. “I’m not certain what I’m even missing.”

“Well,” she says, “I researched a neat little riverboat casino outside of Memphis.” Her eyes roll upward slightly, and her gaze has redirected to my wall-length bookshelf and display cabinet where I keep a constantly updated collection of framed poker chips from casinos across the country. Hundreds of chips. Blue, green, white, prismatic, limited-edition prints with pictures of Billy Joel or the Playboy bunny logo. Hundreds of chips, tens of thousands of dollars. Trophies of an upper-class lifestyle: souvenirs from every vacation I’ve taken, gifts from clients, and friends, and family members.

But no one seems to understand that I hate gambling.

I live by routine. I live by sales scripts, by organized management, by results.

Not chance.

I sigh, stand up, take her by the waist playfully, and we walk into the conference room. Since July, I’ve received a total of twenty-five different hints. Memphis casinos, Nevada casinos, Florida casinos, Delaware casinos. Each year Diane buys me a single poker chip for Christmas: along with this poker chip, she buys and arranges a full-week vacation for early March. Memphis sounds boring. So does Nevada.

She leans under the light that hangs over the conference room’s thin boardroom-style table, kisses me on the cheek, and says: “I’m thinking Niagara Falls, also. Very romantic.” Hint #26. Another unimpressive idea.

“Hmm,” I say, attempting to stare into her eyes as I say it. But I can’t. Under the light, her scalp glistens beneath her thinning hair. The first I’ve noticed up close, really. For just a second... just a second... she appears skeletal, and I can picture how she will look
forty years from now... she backs away from the light, a quizzical look on her face.

I’ve seen the Rogaine commercials for women’s hair loss. I don’t know for certain that it’s medical, that it’s unavoidable, but I know there are treatments. The age we live in: there are always treatments. Surely, she’s thought of this.

“It’s beautiful up there in late Spring,” she says, “after the mud season is over.”

She grabs her end of the conference table, I grab mine, and we push the table into a corner, clearing some room for the party.

“Yes, yes,” I say.

She smiles and walks to the lobby to collect several bags of paper plates and napkins. I pluck a fallen brown hair from the collar of my black dress shirt. “I hope nobody gets too rowdy this year,” she says.

“Mmm,” I say.


Her hips seem wider than last year.

Last night I found our wine opener sitting on our kitchen counter. “Honey,” I said, projecting as well as I could down the hall to the study, where Diane worked on her laptop.

“Yes?” she asked back.

“Did you open a bottle of wine tonight?”

“Yeah.” Matter-of-factly. “I’ve got it in here.” As if she always...

“On a weeknight?”

We rarely drink, except on vacation. We are models of good health. *Models.*

“It’s the *hol*-idays,” she said.

I’ve worked for Expanding Minds Textbooks (EMT, most people call it) in Saint Louis for fifteen years, starting as an Account Executive. I accepted a promotion to Sales Manager ten years ago, and I organized our first in-office Christmas Party for the entire staff here in Central Tower, from the marketing team to the secretaries to
the account executives. As Sales Manager, I need EMT to function as a cohesive unit so that we can provide the best college and high school textbooks at the most reasonable prices in the Midwest and Great Plains (and, starting next fall, the Northeast). The event is casual, no-tie; I purchase gifts, have a plaque engraved for an Employee of the Year. The first year, I attempted a Pot Luck Dinner, but my organization of the event was amateurish, and we found ourselves with a conference room filled only with desserts and alcohol.

"Feels like New Year's," Robert Morgan told me, a glass of champagne in his right hand and an unopened bottle of Rolling Rock in the other. His wife stood beside him, holding a plate with enough rumballs, and baked fruit fillings, and whipped cream, and chocolate truffles to overwhelm the guest list of a fifth grade birthday party.

"You're going to have to buy me a treadmill for Christmas, Robert," his wife said, "to burn all of these calories."

Russell Blakely and William Adams—recent Washington University graduates—made their rounds through the party, taking bets from each employee that would participate, using two red Santa hats as sacks. "Who's gonna be the first one puking tonight?" Russell asked repeatedly, nudging people. "Two bucks a bet. Draw a name."

"I brought two cases of Sam Adams," Marie Lopez said to me apologetically. She drank eggnog from a red plastic cup. "Everyone brought alcohol. What the hell are we going to do with all of this?"

"Gift bags?" Diane said.

"Gift bags?" I asked.

"Sure," Diane confirmed, speaking as though this had been the plan all along. And she devised a system to distribute all of the remaining alcohol among every employee. She left the party for about twenty minutes and returned with a stack of nearly one hundred gift bags. "Everybody gets a bag," she said. "And everybody's getting a present. Six beers and one dessert. All this stuff isn't going to waste, and damned if we're taking it home. I'd like to keep my current waist size, thank you."

Ten years ago. A model of good health.

She walked from banker to secretary, hands grazing their backs—they turned quickly each time, as though jolted with
electricity—and handing out gift bags. From James to Sheryl to Garry. Moving along, explaining the process. Confidently. And the party seemed to freeze for her, chatter and gossip and conversation ceasing almost immediately—cups and bottles and cans and chips and forks stopped at the lips, and the room’s concentration focused exclusively on her. And they loved her.

A surge of power energized and brightened me. This was my wife speaking.

Other wives stepped back timidly, their thick red and green sweaters hiding a holiday season’s worth of overeating. Diane shimmered with youth and beauty, her figure highlighted in a pair of black pants and a tight maroon turtleneck. And I saw the whispered whistles and sighs each husband gave involuntarily after she passed, and I heard the shocked envious sighs their wives returned.

Ten years ago. That year, the year of our first Christmas Party at EMT, Diane also presented me with a long, framed, matted collection of poker chips from our previous summer trip across California and Nevada. During the vacation Diane urged me to keep the chips after each casino, and I assumed that she’d wanted to create some sort of scrapbook. No. She’d simply conceived a gift idea, a memento of our travels and our relationship, etc., and an ongoing idea for Christmas gifts from then until death. Diane’s gift received enthusiastic approval from the party. Diane received enthusiastic approval from the party. A model of good health, a wife coveted by other men.

“Better reward her for that one, Ray,” Teddy Kerber said to me, winking.

“So what’s her gift, pal?” Marshall asked, elbowing me in the ribs.

Comment after comment. Professional men, fifteen and twenty years older than me, their unhappiness with their own sex lives seeping into their tones as they joked. I smiled, but hoarded the comments as my real trophy.

The poker chips, of course, grew exponentially in popularity and in quantity when my birthday came the following March. I received forty-four different poker chips from twenty different states. In the years since that party, I scramble for appropriate gifts for my
coveted wife. A Jacuzzi for our back porch. Annual memberships to tanning salons and day spas. Diamond earrings so large that I’m certain they could give her back-pains if she wore them long enough. Five years ago, I even purchased a treadmill and a rack of dumbbells, and we converted half of our basement into an exercise room.

“Almost finished cooking,” Diane said to me from the kitchen two nights ago, very nearly shouting around the corner as I walked in the door from work. She generally arrives at home much earlier than I do—about 5:45, though sometimes later because of the traffic—and has already changed, worked out, and begun the preparations for dinner.

“Fantastic,” I said, removing my coat. We have a very nice coat rack beside our front door; when the seasons change and the temperature rises, we keep two or three light jackets on the rack so that it doesn’t look like a dead tree in winter. “This is for the Christmas Party on Thursday, I assume,” I said, motioning to a pot on the stove.

“It is,” she said. “It’s been a cold week. So I made chili.”

“Chili?”

“I’ve been cooking awhile. I promise you’ll love it. I’m putting together a smoked salmon dip, too. And a spinach dip with rye bread. And I’m making grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner tonight. They’ll go well with the chili.”

“Grilled cheese and chili have enough calories to keep us warm until Valentine’s Day,” I said slowly. She continued to stir the chili without looking up, without smiling. I didn’t see—couldn’t see—but I could almost feel her eyes roll. “I suppose I could just run an extra mile in the morning.”

“I can’t,” she said lightly.

“What do you mean?”

“I hurt my foot,” she said.

“You hurt your foot?” I asked. “Today?”

“No.”

“What happened? When was this?”
"October," she said. "I sprained my ankle at school."
"You didn’t tell me this. Doing what?"

*October.*

"I tripped. It wasn’t really a big deal," she said and shrugged, then unpeeled a slice of cheese from its wrapper.  
"Why didn’t you tell me about this?"
"Oh," she said dismissively, "I didn’t want to worry you. I’m fine. Really."
"But you can’t use the treadmill?"
"No. I don’t want to risk twisting it again."
"I could look online," I said, searching for some answer, some compromise, "maybe find an elliptical. They’re supposed to be just as good for your muscles, but you won’t have the pressure on your ankles. I’m sure Nautilus has some good products."
"I never really liked the elliptical at the Club," she said without concern. She smeared butter across a few slices of white bread. "Kind of awkward."
"I feel terrible," I said.
"I’m fine," she said and slapped a sandwich onto the skillet.
"So are you getting enough exercise right now?"
"Not really," and she flopped the other sandwich into the skillet.
"I’m taking a little time off. Taking it easy."
"Oh," I said. "All right."
"We’re getting old," she said, smiling. "Going on forty. The joints are creaking. The muscles are weak. We’re senior citizens now, honey."
"Maybe you," I said softly, and she laughed.

Our doorbell interrupted us. A delivery man. Another gift box: the neutral, non-offending, non-gender-biased holiday gift of choice, plastic-wrapped in indifference, delivered to the door or to the desk with such apathy, it might as well be anonymity.

"Cheesecake," Diane said, lifting the lid of the box. "Your parents had cheesecake delivered. Can you believe this? It’s even got two cooling packs inside the box."

"Guess we can’t just throw that in the pile," I said. The mound of gift baskets grows each year atop and around our living room table; it’s a landfill of sorts, a dumping site for all of this unwanted
food. Generally, in the weeks before Christmas, we receive so many gift baskets and boxes that our living room feels like a humanitarian relief effort. Stoned wheat crackers, bottles of wine, wax-covered cheese wheels in every color, wafers in every flavor, toast squares, sausage logs, fruit cakes, popcorn, peanut brittle, chocolate twigs, chocolate-covered cherries, mint patties. We never open and eat the contents of any of these baskets, just toss them out or give them away; we decided that we should not compromise our diet or our health just for courtesy.

"Cheesecake," Diane said again. "Do you want a slice?"

"Let me think," I said with good humor. "Of course not."

And I assumed she would do the same....

"Ooh," she said, her voice quivering with delight. "Your loss."

And she lifted a piece of the cheesecake out of the box, placed it carefully onto a small plate, licked her fingers. My loss? I didn’t think much of it, then. My wife should be a model of good health. Jogs four miles each day on our treadmill. Well. Hurt ankle, right now. Hates unhealthy foods...well...a wife coveted...a model of....

"Before I forget, could you do me a favor on your way to work tomorrow?" Diane asks, turning the dial on the crock pot. Queso sauce for the tortilla chips. The conference room is coming along nicely. It’s starting to feel like a Christmas Party, and not a meeting. The other employees should be arriving shortly.

"What can I do for you?" I ask her.

"Could you stop at Radio Shack?" Stray hairs seem to poke out in several different directions from her scalp, as though her head is an unraveling sweater. A medical condition? Treatable, though. She knows, certainly. We pledged to one another—pledged—that we would preserve ourselves, remain healthy and attractive. Medical condition. Or neglect?

"What for?" I ask.

"I need some headphones for my laptop."

"Headphones?"

"Well," she says, and she pats her head lightly, smooths her hair either subconsciously or self-consciously, "when I listen to music on my laptop, honey, I don’t need the whole school listening in."
“Very true,” I say. She knows. She must know. Does she see me staring?
“So,” she says, “would you stop at Radio Shack for me?”
She’s probably seen clumps in the shower drain.
“I’ll stop at Circuit City. Radio Shack is a little out of the way.”
It must bother her. It’s treatable.
“What day is New Year’s this year?” she asks me.
“Two weeks away,” I say. Her stomach looks a bit... expanded.
“Friday.”
“I need to find something to wear.”
“How about that white sweater?” I ask. “The one you wore to the Halloween Cocktail at the Winery?”
“I don’t know,” she says, but she does know. “Too small. Too tight.”
“That’s why I liked it so much,” I say.
“How sweet of you,” she says, kisses me on the cheek, then says “but no,” and walks off to the break room, probably to grab something from the refrigerator. She knows, of course. She knows, and she doesn’t care.

“You’ve seen the girl from Northwestern, right?” Dan Hayes asks me, a paper plate of cheese cubes in his hand. He doesn’t eat them, only plays with a toothpick in his mouth. “Amazing.”
“I haven’t,” I say.
“James Morton’s new wife.”
“New wife, you say?”
“Lucky Chicago bastard. They didn’t make ‘em like that where we went to school,” he says.
“Sure they did.”
“No, no. We went to Mizzou,” he says with a disdain born of four or five glasses of wine. “You think girls like that,” and he holds out his palm to the party before us, “would want to live in Columbia for four years?”
“I think we did all right,” I force myself to say.
“Maybe fifteen years ago, we did,” Dan says, taking a sip of his
Merlot and staring down into the cup, avoiding any eye contact. Reading my mind.

“Hmm,” I say.

“And there are these two girls from Wash-U,” he says, wine still swishing around in his mouth, unable to really use his tongue, the Wash-U sounding more like Wock-hoo. “Why can’t this be more like Hollywood, you know? Why can’t these girls do whatever it takes to get hired?”

“Where’s Cynthia?” I ask, breaking up the conversation.

“Fuck if I know. Where’s Diane?”

“I’m not sure,” I say.

“Well,” he says, heavy with sarcasm, “better go find her, huh,” coughs out one unhappy laugh, and he turns his back on me and stomps away, bumping into people who don’t seem to notice him.

Kyle Anderson approaches me next, and he’s actually eating the cheese cubes on his tray. I think he’s lapped Dan on the drinking track, however; I’ve seen him dip his hand into the beer cooler at least six times, and I haven’t exactly been monitoring him.

“Merry Christmas,” he says with true joviality.

“Merry Christmas, Kyle,” I say. “Enjoying yourself?”

“Oh, you know it,” he says.

“Is your wife here tonight?” I ask. “Diane enjoyed her company last year.”

“Huh?” he asks, but he heard me. “No. She’s at her parents’ place.”

“Oh?”

“She’s been a real bitch lately.”

“Sorry to hear that. Well,” I say, finished with this conversation.

“So where’s Diane, huh?” he asks.

“Around,” I say.

“That’s what happens when you get older, eh, chief,” he says, nudging me. “Don’t need to keep track of the old lady? Can’t wait till that day, quite honestly. Sara, shit, don’t know where she is half the time. But you,” he says and smiles the honest smile of a drunk man, “you got a hell of a gal. Probably hot as hell back in the day.”

“Hot,” I repeat, and I don’t even know why I say this to him.
Where is Diane? Old? We are incredibly healthy. Incredibly. When I turn back to Kyle, he’s gone. The beer cooler again, I imagine.


“Finally out of the consumption phase of my life, Raymond,” Teddy tells me. My co-workers spin by viciously; round and round, they’re like a super-efficient fan blade tearing through the office air. “I can finally start spending money on myself. You know I’ve always wanted a motorcycle? I own stock in Harley.”


Diane.

This is her own fault, this hair loss. This weight gain. Her own unhealthy habits, her own neglect. I could ask her about it, offer to help. Try to understand what’s going on with her diet, her routine, her life. Polish the trophy back to its original luster.

But she broke our pact, our pledge.

“You looked great tonight,” Diane says from the bed, later, and she’s wearing her Cabernet quarter-smile. I’ve changed into my Ralph Lauren pajama pants and a long sleeved white t-shirt for the night; I pull a small section of the bed’s blanket back, slide in. Her foot brushes against mine, and I know it isn’t accidental. It brushes across me again, slightly higher on my ankle. Her smile is growing. The sheets rustle: she is nestling closer. A kiss against my neck. Whispering, “I love you.”

I roll away, not violently, and tell her that I’m tired.
Mr. Anderson was a four year old trapped in a sixteen year old body. If you cut him, he bled nothing but white canvas stained with whatever happened to be around. He spent his teenage years ogling famous and brilliant people from afar, trying to force his pudgy, sagging body into their brilliantly inspired molds. He’d squirm and wriggle and pinch himself, but he never quite fit. And so, he spent his days trailing as many homegrown heroes as he could. Like a beaten puppy, he’d be a constant shadow hanging ten feet behind them, finding excuses to “go their way” and then hanging idly about with nothing interesting to contribute. He was shy. Persistent.

The brilliant ones used to laugh and scorn and mock him secretly behind silent corners. Mr. Anderson could feel it, no need for hearing. He could tell he looked foolish in the way they sped down the hallway, and rolled their eyes when they thought he wasn’t looking. But he always was. He saw more with his eyes on the floor than many people see in their whole lifetime. And then, like a cracked mirror, he would go off and imitate them, hoping with every fiber that a little of what made them great would rub off on him.

He especially admired a local filmmaker who had won several prestigious awards. Confident and collected, Mr. Anderson often dreamt of cutting out his own face and slapping it on that visionary’s body. The camera made the man, and so Mr. Anderson soon invested in his own, using what little money he had saved to buy the rattiest camera Circuit City could offer. And yes, he knew it was cheap. But it was his.

He spent weeks lolling about, vomiting back film jargon he only half understood, his camera always hanging off his shoulder or cupped in the palm of his hand. The filmmaker took no notice. Hadn’t the time. Had too many lunch dates and too many projects.

Good work attested to good character. And no matter what he said or how he held the camera, Mr. Anderson desperately needed work to back up his dormant brilliance. So he pumped out a story:
a small, sad rip off of an earlier work, got some of his friends together, and hit the record button. Two days later, Mr. Anderson had a crudely made mock up of a Hollywood hit eagerly hanging out of his hands. He spent all day in front of Gromelin’s Chinese Theatre, answering questions from imaginary reporters only pretending to be interested. But it wasn’t enough. He needed the affirmation to come from an inspired source. And so, he hung around the visionary until he finally broke down and watched the film.

It was going to be the beginning of something beautiful.

Mr. Anderson was a ten year old trapped in a twenty two year old body. If you cut him, he felt nothing. Nothing but what he was told to feel by the sages of the University. He saw their mold and was fed that despicable lie that said it was the only one available. And so, tired and frustrated, he spent his four years trying to reflect what he thought they wanted to see. He spent any free time he had studying. He would crawl into his tiny, one room apartment and lock the door. He’d close himself up in a book on Chemistry so that he could vomit out what he half understood at the nightly lectures he attended.

Mr. Anderson hated chemistry, but he was willing to endure anything for the Chemist.

The Chemist sat in the seventh row from the front, in the fourth seat in from the aisle. He always brought a Coke with him, which he secretly sipped from while furiously writing out equations on his paper. Mr. Anderson could tell that, to him, these molecules weren’t just abstract, imaginary spheres floating thru space. To him they were visceral. He would often catch a glimpse of them ricocheting around in the Chemist’s eyes as he passed him in the hall. He would plant empty coke bottles all around him and bury himself in chemistry books hoping that a molecule might catch between them and spark conversation.

It never did.

The Chemist knew what he was talking about. His hand would fly up and, as though it were magic, brilliance would spill from him like aged wine. It would flow from his mouth and cover the room,
intoxicating Mr. Anderson into believing he would catch that brilliance, if only he reached far enough. If he studied hard enough and made just the right comment maybe, just maybe, the Chemist would realize his dormant brilliance. And this brilliance would carry them away to some inspired place.

Mr. Anderson would gain and lose courage fifty times during class, his hand jutting and falling through the air with every crest and dip of confidence. The words weren’t there because the words weren’t his.

The semester was drawing to a close: a semester of aborted conversations, false starts, and small, unnoticeable, unimpressive hiccups. It was now or never. He could sense it. And if he couldn’t be brilliant by proxy, maybe he could meet brilliance face to face.

On the last day of class, Mr. Anderson watched the Chemist as he always had — with an intent stare. It was the Chemist’s routine to confer with the teacher after class and Mr. Anderson could bide his time.

Mr. Anderson was a fifteen year old trapped in a thirty six year old body. If you cut him, he barely noticed. It had been a while since he had opened himself up to cold, rigid feeling. He enjoyed the solitude of his own company. Hunched over from nine to five in a cubicle no bigger than he was, he spent his days staring at gray corkboard and imagining what life might have been. If he had bled. Feeling was too difficult an emotional reaction for him to process. He worked off of single words now: happy, sad, elated, morose. He saw, but barely saw. He heard, but barely heard. He was a shell, echoing the past in small, unrecognizable vibrations.

He had been with the company for several years now. He majored in math and became an accountant and sat at a desk and crunched his life out in numbers that meant little and felt less. They were his brothers, these cold hard lines of digits.

The only time he ever really “felt” was when the lawyer was around.

He was overtly confident. He knew all the right people. He
knew all the right phrases. He was a career man with a wife and kids, a retirement set aside, and a house on Miami Beach that he talked about incessantly. A round tub of a man, he was filled with constant laughter, with a nose the size of a baby tomato and a hue to match. Mr. Anderson would spend his days watching the lawyer, copying his movements and mannerisms. He’d stare at his reflection in the computer screen and mimic the rise of his eyebrows, the constant smirk emblazoned on his cherry face, the way all of his teeth but none of his gum showed when he smiled. If only he could cut and paste a whole new him.

But he wasn’t the lawyer, therefore he wasn’t happy. With a chuckle you could hear all the way down the hall, the Lawyer attracted people to him as if he were magnetized. Like so many of the Chemist’s molecules, the people would radiate around him in varying orbitals, and the further away you were from him, the more attractive he became.

Mr. Anderson knew that this was who he was supposed to be. That no matter what he had tried in the past, he would only be happy if he were a lawyer: a fat, red nosed lawyer with a slight southern drawl and a constant smirk and gum that hid behind perfectly white teeth. So, he quit his job at the company. Went back to school to study law. Started to eat more, to fill out. He was so used to this costume change that by now it was becoming routine. But if it made him happy, even for a moment, he would take that happiness.

He worked hard. He learned the laws and spent countless hours imitating the lawyer while reciting the such and such a law or the such and such an amendment. He even went as far as buying the same clothes as the lawyer. He wanted it bad enough. And this time the change would be complete. His search would come to a simple and satisfying crescendo.

Looking at himself in the mirror, ten times fatter and less himself than he ever was, a smile crossed his face. Finally, he was getting somewhere.

He held the bottle in his hands. He turned it over, nervously reading the directions. Not that they mattered. He wouldn’t need
them. Setting the bottle down on the nightstand, he examined himself in the mirror. He had no reflection.

He remembered the look on the filmmaker’s face when the movie flickered off and the lights flicked on. A look of total disgust and aggravation at wasting so much time on so little.

He remembered how he looked in the mirror: heavy set with a brown tweed suit and a smile that wasn’t his. And a borrowed laugh that rang hollow.

He remembered the blank stare of the Chemist as he brushed past him without even uttering a single syllable. And how the molecules looked so very bright in his eyes that day.
Well good morning to you! It’s a beautiful warm morning here in Countryside Junction. We are gathered under the shade awning that extends out from the storefront windows of Doc and Lou’s shops and over the raised wooden walkway that goes past all the shops and businesses on this side of Main Street. There’s also a walkway on the other side of the street, but we’re on this side, and that’s all that matters. Sitting under that awning, in front of those two shop windows, on old straight-backed rocking chairs, are the town’s finest ne’er-do-wells, malingerers, and raconteurs, “The Rocking Chair Racers.”

Howdy all, my name is Ben Thayre, and I’m your narrator here in the Junction. I’m retired now, but in a younger day I was an egg peddler, a butter churner, a chicken plucker, and a spittoon polisher. Now I just freely associate with my contemporaries in those rocking chairs. Please note there is little difference between my current lifestyle and my past one.

Lou Swyer owns “The Clip Joint,” which is a tonsorial (and tasting) parlor, where for only $1.50 you can get a shave and a haircut, all the latest scuttlebutt, and a taste of Doc’s latest batch of “liquid hair invigorator.” (One taste is a hair-raising experience.) The shave and haircut are optional, especially the shave. Right next to Lou’s shop is Doc Syde’s drug and hardware store called, “The Pill and Hammer.” It’s a quietly held secret amongst us “gents” of the town that Doc runs the finest small batch, corn-mash still in these parts, right down in the basement of his shop.

Each batch of “liquid amnesia” has to be sampled for taste and quality control. So Doc devised a covered, copper sampling pot at the outlet of his still for just such purposes. Attached to the pot is a long clear plastic tube that runs through the basement wall, and up
through the floor of Lou’s shop, into the bottom of a stationary bottle with a hand pump on it. The bottle has a label which says, “hair fertilizer.” Lou dispenses tastes of Doc’s craft into small paper cups from the seemingly never empty bottle.

A wall-mounted electric fan does its best to keep the smells, from the assembled group without, from mixing with the aromas coming from within Lou’s shop. Seated immediately outside Lou’s door, and to the left, is Uncle David. His given name is David N. Goliath, but we just call him Uncle David. He’s not related to anyone around these parts though. Seated next to Uncle David is Mason Wall. We call him “Stony.” Whenever someone asks him to go somewhere, or do something, he just pulls his hat down over his eyes, leans back in his chair, and says, “nope, done that.” Then there’s our town constable, Heathrow Uppe. Next is the town’s mayor, Phillip Buster. And last, but not least, is Judge Knott who presides over the courthouse a few doors down the walkway. Not everyone shows up every day. In spite of some strongly held opinions in this town, we do have our chores to do, and some of us have more to do than others.

There is a six-inch diameter circle on the bed of the walkway, in amongst an ugly array of errant tobacco juice stains, caused mainly by bad aim. That circle is the exact spot where Lou sets down his spittoon. When that happens, it signifies that The Rocking Chair Racers first race is about to begin. We call it “target practice.” The object of the race is to be the first one to loft a wad of tobacco juice square into the open mouth of the spittoon. It wasn’t long after Lou set the spittoon down that a metallic but watery “splotch” was heard, followed by a shout of “BULL’S – EYE” from Uncle David. That, which we call the first race, was over.

Izzy Stiffe, the sexton over at the The Wholly Impetuous Theological Spectators church, has just stopped by to say hello. In addition to being sexton, he is also a well and gravedigger for the town. He never has a lot to say and is very soft spoken when he does. He is the younger twin brother (by three minutes) of Boise
Stiffe, the town undertaker, who owns “The Just Deserts Funeral Parlor.”

Uncle David is the first to notice the pair of very dark sun glasses under the deep bill of Izzy’s baseball cap and asked Izzy, “Why the glasses?”

Izzy very softly said, “You know how warm it’s been around here lately, right?” We all nodded yes. “Well, yesterday I was sitting in church and, as you all know, we do a lot of standing and sitting during the service. There was this poor young thing sitting in front of me whose filmy skirt kept getting caught in her hind end cleavage when she stood up. She tried to wiggle and jiggle the skirt free without being noticed, but she wasn’t having any luck. So in trying to be a good Christian, I reached down and pulled the skirt out for her. She didn’t appreciate my help, and she wheeled around with a haymaker and whopped me right in the eye.” Izzy then removed the sunglasses to show us two very black and swollen eyes.

Uncle David winced a little, started to snicker, and then asked, “So what happened to the other eye.”

“We got to the part of the service where everybody says something nice to everybody else. Try as I might to apologize to the young lady for my mistake, she just wasn’t having any of it. I then reasoned to myself, ‘Izz, you’ve just got to make amends for the wrong you did.’ So I reached down and tucked the skirt back in. She turned around, all right, and gave me a haymaker in the other eye.”

We all laughed until we took to coughing and wheezing. Doc stood up, grabbed Izzy by the wrist, and declared him the winner of the second race. Then he took Izzy inside for a little “liquid pain reliever” and first aid.
The tile is cheap. Poorly laid by a company that placed the lowest bid, and there is plenty of exposed grout. She knows the floor well. It greets her at two in the afternoon, mud streaked and dull, every day. This is the worst part of her day – the very first glimpse of the floor. She crosses the dinning room like playing hopscotch. Right foot green, left foot black. Green, black, green, black, black, start again.

As she punches her numbers into the time clock in the kitchen she taps the sides of the clock four times, four corners making a “Z” pattern. She ties her apron around her fat waist with a familiarity that only comes from decades of practice. The apron is white and starched crisp. It has two pockets on the front. The right one holds her order pad, the left one holds her pens – four of them, all blue.

Peeking around the corner from the kitchen into the dinning room, an hour into her shift, Shellie Robins surveys her tables. The regular crowd. Mac and Julie, the non-tippers, are huddled in a corner booth as usual splitting a slice of apple pie. John sits at the bar wiping up the last of his Salisbury steak with a piece of buttered bread. Jim and Lou never sit in the same place twice or eat the same meal two days in a row.

Lou claims, “you gotta change things up from time to time.” So on Mondays he has a tuna melt with fries. On Tuesdays a tuna melt with chips. Wednesdays with pasta salad.

“Well, what will it be today, potato salad or mashed,” Shellie asks.

“Ah Shellie, I’m unpredictable ya know. I think I’ll try something new. What’s the special today?”

“What do you think the special is, Lou? Isn’t it always the same?”

“Jeez Shellie, I’m only messin’ with ya.”

“Look, I’m busy here,” she says glancing at the empty diner, “do you want fries, pasta, or chips with your tuna melt?”

“Well, you’ve backed me into a corner here. Guess I’ll have
the fries.”

“How about you Jim?”

Shellie could count on Jim’s composure. They dated some years back, and she knew him to be a patient, predictable, and quiet man. She liked him for a while, but he had a terrible knuckle popping habit she just couldn’t take, and he clipped his toenails in front her once. He took the break-up well.

“Let me get the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and water. Oh, and listen Shell, will you please tell him not to cook it too long this time. Last time it was like eating a charcoal brick.”

“I’ll try,” she sighs.

Shellie clicks her pen and shoves it and the order pad back into their familiar pockets. She pulls them back out, clicks the pen again, and places them back into her apron. Then she scuffs around the bar to the order carousel, spins it, and waits.

The minutes pass slowly, drag on like years. Shellie leans on the counter next to the percolating pots and rows of aging meringues and home-style pies.

The bell on the door dings, and a rush of February wind pours through the diner’s double doors. The silent room is engulfed in sudden noise, and every set of eyes swing from its plate to meet a gruff, wind-blown face buried in a gray winter coat.

The whole scene reminds Shellie of the old Westerns her father used to watch. Movies with bars full of outlaws drinking whiskey, fondling women, and cheating at cards all suddenly silenced by the appearance of the town sheriff.

“Order up,” and the whole room returns to normal.

As she passes Shellie does her best to avoid his gaze, but she is immediately curious. She feels his eyes passing over her body, starting at her squeaky corrective shoes up to her too wide waist and saggy ass, before finally resting on her drooping jowl.

“Have a seat, I’ll be with you in a minute,” she says in an uncustomary quiet voice.

The stranger clomps across the floor to the seat at the end of the bar, dropping clumps of mud on the newly clean tiles.

Shellie glares at the mud, but she remains quiet and continues over to Jim and Lou’s table.
“What’s the deal Shellie? Not gonna to say anything about your pretty, clean floor? Look at all that mud. Guess you’re gonna have to mop again, huh? What is it four times over?”
“You want to eat or not Lou?”
“Alright sorry Shellie, just had to needle ya. You got a crush or somethin’ on this guy?”
“How can I have something for him when he just came in two minutes ago? I’ll have something for you in a minute, eat your tuna.”
“Not worried about gettin’ a tip are ya?”
Shellie can’t take much more. She shoots him a look over the top of her plastic framed glasses warning him not to say another word.
“Okay, okay, sorry.”
“There you go Jim, everything okay,” Shellie asks dismissing Lou’s apology.
“Yeah, thanks Shell.”
Ignoring everyone else in the diner, she walks over to take the stranger’s order.
“What’s the special today,” he asks.
“Boy, sure can tell you’re not from around here. The special’s the same today as it was yesterday and will be tomorrow. Fried pork chops, mashed potatoes and gravy, and home-style green beans. But nobody ever orders that.”
“Well then, that’s what I’ll have, with a biscuit and some milk.”
“Alright, but no guarantees George’ll remember how to make it. Be up soon.”
“Get me a special George and a biscuit,” says Shellie in her best waitress accent as she spins the order carousel around before returning to her coffee and pie perch.
When the order is finally ready Shellie carries the plate to the man like it is a heart waiting to be transplanted.
“Here you go, today’s special and a glass of milk.”
“Thanks,” the man replies, but to Shellie it comes across more like a grunt than words.
“So you got a name or somethin’,” Shellie asks trying to sound nonchalant.
She stands there waiting for a response, just staring, but nothing ever comes except the sounds of slurping and grease.
“Okay, I’ll be right over there. Just wave when you’re ready for the bill.”

Shellie turns and sees Lou in the corner waving his bill like a frantic pendulum. She rolls her eyes and returns to his table.

“You know Shellie I’ve been coming here for years now, and you were never that nice to me. Never told me nuthin’ ‘bout waving when I was ready to pay. You always make me come up to the counter.”

“Shut up Lou. You two ready to pay now or what?”

“Yeah, here ya go. Have fun with Mister Lovely over there. See ya tomorrow,” and the two men leave the diner with Shellie fuming at their table.

Two hours later, the stranger is still sitting at the end of the bar eating his third plate of pork chops. There is a substantial pile of crumbs and grease accumulating on the counter by his elbows, and he hasn’t bothered to use a napkin once to clean off his face. Shellie is not repulsed, but she is growing concerned that the man may never leave.

“You about finished here,” she asks in courteous but brisk tone.

“Let me get another plate.”

“Going for the world record or what? You know this isn’t the healthiest stuff, and you’re not even finished with the plate you’ve got.”

The room is suddenly silent as the man stops slurping, and his eyes meet Shellie’s.

“Are you my mother? No, get me the goddamn food.”

“Alright, you don’t have to swear. I’m just making small talk.”

“I didn’t come here to make friends with no fat-assed career waitress with nothing else to do but stare at the clock and make chitchat. I came here to eat.”

“Okay, coming up. But just so you know I have to close the place up soon, so you better be done by nine.”

The man tilts his face up again as if to say he’d be done when he felt like it, and Shellie remains silent. But something is stirring within her, unidentifiable at first but growing.

Despite his appetite the man is thin, spindly, and if he shaved his
face Shellie is certain he’d look presentable.

She likes things clean, orderly, in their proper place. She has her quirks. Clean hands, clean floors, whistle a tune, and tap the doorframe four times before entering a room. No stepping on cracks, and a home for her pen. They are quirks, but manageable. This man with his grease and filth and stubble is setting off all of her old ticks, but she can’t understand his peculiar appeal. The man exemplifies everything she loathes, and yet she can’t help liking him.

Shellie busies herself by checking and rechecking the saltshakers and napkin holders that haven’t been touched since the last time she checked them. She calls her constant checking and cleaning, quirks. Her doctor calls them a disorder. Others call them signs of insanity. To Shellie they’re manageable. In her mind a disorder only occurs when you have a life to disrupt. Shellie doesn’t have a life. Work, sleep, eat, work. Her quirks are what keep her from noticing her wrinkles and accumulating pounds.

Between napkin checks and saltshaker fill-ups Shellie watches the man. He eats like an escaped convict or mental patient. His food remains guarded in the nook of his elbow while his right hand flies from his plate to his mouth over and over again. He wipes grease from the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand and Shellie is entranced.

“Look, its nine o’clock. I’ve got to clean up before the next shift comes in. Are you done yet?”

“So clean up. I’m not stopping you.”

“You’re sitting in a huge pile of filth and grease. You’re what I need to clean up.”

“Let someone else deal with that, mop you’re damn floor, fill up the salt shakers no one has used, or do something else.”

“I can’t let you stay in here when the diner’s not open.”

“Of course you can.”

“Do you just like to come into restaurants and push people around or something?”

“Restaurant? There’s a difference between a restaurant and a diner. Restaurants have hostesses and waiters, busboys and specialized dishes – grouper alfredo, meatless lasagna, and shrimp primavera not fried pork chops. This is a diner. Don’t delude
yourself."

"I’m not deluding myself."

"You’re what fifty? You work in a diner in Georgia. You’ve been doing it for decades. You have no idea what you’re doing with your life."

"I know what I’m doing with my life. I’m working, I’m living, I’m kicking you out," she says growing increasingly hostile.

"You won’t kick me out. You don’t have the nerve, and you like me too much. You girls always like people who hate you. Lifetime waitresses."

"Why did you come in here? Trying to save my life? I don’t need saving. I know what I’m doing."

"I don’t think you do. I’ve been watching you watch me all night. Clicking your pen, playing games with the floor, whistling your tunes, and the damn tapping. I’ve seen you mess up your hopscotch game and you don’t always tap the same number of times. Hell, sometimes, if you think no one is looking, you don’t bother to tap at all. You’re a fake. Everyone thinks you crazy here in this little town. You’ve got them all convinced. I can see you for what you are. A phony and a loser."

Shellie can’t take it any longer. She no longer likes this man, she loves him for the few seconds it takes to pull him towards her and kiss his greasy lips.

Their lips come together suddenly with a force stronger than anything Shellie has ever felt before, like gravity and the big bang as one. The kiss doesn’t last long, but when they pull apart she glistens with pork chop happiness.

The man doesn’t acknowledge her kiss or her sudden glee. He only turns his head again to his plate.

Shellie stands in front of him gaping and wondering if their exchange really occurred. Finally and she turns toward the bucket and mop at the end of the bar.

An hour later, the floor is gleaming once again. Shellie unlocks the doors, and the man walks out without a word and no tip, leaving dried mud cakes on her newly cleaned floor. She sighs, pulls out the mop, and starts again. Four more times and she’ll be done.
"What would you have had me do?" she said to the man who was sitting in front of her. On the table between them was an ashtray with a lit cigarette in it.

You could have fucking offered me one, she thought. They always do on TV.

"You didn't think of doing anything?" He hit it and put it back in the ashtray.

"I already told you what I thought of." She took a deep breath and tried to really smell the smoke. Once a smoker, always a smoker, she thought.

She sighed loudly and looked out the long skinny thick window.

"You want one?" He picked up the pack and pointed it at her.

"I don't smoke," she said, still looking out the window. I have no sense of direction in here, she thought. What's out that window? Is that where we parked? Or is it the back of the place? I see the high limb of a tree.

"Right. Listen. I'll be back in a minute." He got up from the table and left the room.


She tamped the cigarette out in the tray and then fell back into the chair and exhaled one last time.

He came home early, around two p.m. She was reading. He just walked in because she'd left the door unlocked, which is something she normally did not do. He looked dejected, she thought.

"What's wrong? What are you doing home?" She closed the book.

"Nothing. Just not feeling so great."

"O."

She got up and followed him into the bedroom where he took off his work clothes and put on sweats. He told her he was
going to lie down a while and she said okay and gave him a sympathetic smile. She walked out and, after asking him if he needed anything and him telling her no, closed the bedroom door behind her. She went back to reading and then minutes later the sound.

She got up and walked to the door, opened it. He was there, in bed—sleeping, she assumed. She smelled just a hint of something like fireworks before closing the door. Shshshsh, she said to herself, he’s sleeping.

An hour and a half later she went in to wake him because he’d had enough sleep, she thought. Plus, if he gets up now, she thought, we’ll still have almost two hours before one of us has to go get the baby from daycare, so we can spend some time together, just the two of us, talking, or just whatever.

She stood there watching him sleep for a minute or two. She loved to watch him sleep. Didn’t like it when he got sad, though. She lay down next to him, on top of the covers. She turned his face to hers to kiss his lips, and that’s when she saw a brown-red hole right in the middle of his forehead. She kissed him.

That’s what she’d told them and they didn’t believe her.

The man came back and he had another man with him. The first man sat in the same place and the new one, a black guy carrying a clipboard, sat at the head of the table. He put the clipboard down and lit a cigarette. Christ, she thought.

“My names Mr. Willister,” said the new guy. “We’re going to need to hear your story one more time, please, mam. Mrs. Kendall.” He licked his lips. Dinner, she thought.

“One more time,” she said.

“Yes, mam.”

“A fourth time,” she said.

“Yes, mam. A fourth time,” said the man with the clipboard.

“It isn’t going to get any better,” she said.

“That’s not why we want to hear it, mam. Now, please, one more time.”

“You know what?” she said.

“What?” said the first guy, folding his arms over his chest.

“I’d like a cigarette, please.”

The first guy opened his box and handed it to her. She grabbed
the whole pack, took one out, and lit it with the other guy’s lighter. She took one drag and put it out.

“Are you ready now?” said the guy with the clipboard.

“No.”

“When do you think you’ll be ready?” said the first guy, blinking very slowly.

“Three is plenty,” she said. “I won’t say another fucking word if I don’t feel like it.”

“We’re not against you, mam.”

“Yes you are.” She picked up the cigarette and relit it with a shaky hand. “This doesn’t feel right.”

“What doesn’t feel right, mam?”

“Quit calling me mam. I’m not a fucking mam.” She put the cigarette in the ashtray and the first guy put it out for her.

“Look. You’re getting upset. We don’t want you to get upset. Do you want some coffee or something?”

“That’s just what I need, fucking coffee. What I want is for this fucking asshole to quit calling me mam... and I want to be treated like a normal person... and I don’t want you two smoking in here... This is a no-smoking building.”

“Okay,” the first guy said.

The second guy put his cigarette out.

They sat for a while and did and said nothing.

She leaned back and put her hands in her lap, and held them.

“Can I ask you something?” said the second guy.

No answer.

“Did you know your husband was cheating on you?”

She glanced at him and then looked straight ahead, through the first guy’s forehead. “You’re an idiot,” she said.

“Excuse me.”

“He doesn’t like being called names,” said the first guy.

“Hitting a little too close to home,” she said.

“Look bitch,” said the first guy, loudly. And then quietly: “You killed your husband. You’re a murderer. In fact, it doesn’t really matter what you tell us because forensics will find out everything. Don’t you watch tv? Don’t you know they always find out the truth?”
“Then I’ll be home within the hour.” For effect, she looked at the crooked clock hanging on the lime-green wall.

For the first time, the second guy wrote something on the piece of paper clipped to his clipboard.

“Don’t I get some phone calls?”

She lay there for a while, everything, every thought it seemed, occurred to her. She could feel the warm blood on her back, moving into and through her sweatshirt, and she could feel it on the back of her head, in her hair, and there was a little slash of it on the front of her shirt that went right through the letter U, in University. She was so hurt. She looked at his face and it wasn’t her husband’s face. Her husband’s face didn’t have a bullet hole in it. Her husband’s face was alive, and warm and pulsing, and tan. This face was white and still and cold, not alive. This is not a face, she thought. Where is my husband? He should be home any minute now.

But there was no one to call, and she didn’t have a lawyer. There hadn’t ever been a need for one, until now.

They were staring at her.

She started to cry, but forced it down.

“Let’s make a deal,” said the first guy.

“God,” she said. “This is like bad television.”

“Yes. It is, isn’t it?” said the second guy.

“You tell the story one more time and then we do some paper work and if you promise to be good you might get to go home.”

“What do you want to hear? You want me to say I shot him?”

She put her hands in her pants pockets and looked out the long skinny window. I’m always looking out windows, she thought.

“We want to hear the truth, mam. Is that the truth?”

“Here’s the truth. The God’s honest truth: I don’t know who that was today.” She couldn’t force it down anymore.

“He’s your husband, mam,” said the second guy, calmly. “A mister—” looking at his clipboard “—Gerald Wilson Kendall. Your husband. Who came home early from work today and told you about an affair he was having with a colleague and, what? Told you he loved her and he wanted a divorce? Something like that? And you were, rightfully, pissed. But you didn’t want a divorce, and he was insistent and so on and so
forth, and you shot him in the head. Something like that?” He stopped and looked at the first guy.

And the first guy picked it up: "Your husband, mam, who is, as I speak, being zipped up in a black bag and put in the back of a van, dead, so that he can be taken to a medical examiner and they can figure out what we already know...” He stopped and glanced at the second guy and then back to her. "Your husband, mam, that’s who he was."

"I know," she said in a hoarse voice, looking with red eyes out the long skinny window, "but that’s not my husband."

And then she got out of the bed and went to the phone and dialed the three numbers, and a very weak voice on the other end said "nine-one-one emergency, how can I assist you?" and she knew it was the first in a series of very hard to answer questions.
“Grandpa! Grandpa!” I shouted as I ran across the field heading from my house to my grandparents’. I couldn’t believe summer had finally arrived. School was out, which meant that I was free to study what I wanted without a straight-backed chair and teachers prattling on and on about square roots, the first expedition of Columbus, or the digestive tract of a frog. My idea of learning was reading *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* for the fiftieth time using the light that filtered through the leaves of my favorite tree as they whispered in the breeze. I discovered much more about myself, and the world for that matter, in silence. Recess was a complete waste of time. The same was true for music class. And as for my opinion on slumber parties, well, many pink invitations entered my house, never to be RSVP’d.

I haven’t ever been much for conformity. I decided a long time ago that my squinty green eyes and brown hair are something to be proud of—not changed. Perhaps I was too tall for fourteen, but who decides who fits and who doesn’t? Maybe that’s why I slept better in a tree. Somehow, I knew how to balance in one in a way I just couldn’t grasp on land.

However, before I could do all the things I wanted, I had to make sure Grandpa knew I was going to our spot. He always wanted to be there with me even though he can’t climb the branches and perch on one. Instead, he liked to sit at the base in an old, weathered wicker chair, read his newspaper, and smoke his pipe while I chattered on like a squirrel, dangling my foot as I sat on a low branch.

I finally made it across the grassy field, my legs covered in sandspurs, and burst through the screen door onto the porch of my grandparents’ house. I let it slam back into the frame, rattling the cheap brass hook my dad installed a few years ago to keep the door from banging all night and terrifying the bejesus out of Nana. Mom hates it when I slam doors almost as much as when I push on
the screen to open one—maybe that’s why I do both so often.

I noticed that the door was starting to warp from all the rain we had this year and also that the lemon yellow paint I applied last summer was starting to fade and peel away like sun burnt skin. *I’ll need to fix that soon,* I thought.

The shabbiness of the door caught my eye. The porch, once neatly swept, was covered in red Georgia clay and oak leaves. Windows that once reflected light like a perfect diamond were now dingy and streaked with greasy handprints. Thriving plants that had grown on the porch had withered into a scraggle of twisted, sepia leaves. The whole porch looked faded and old. Dying, in fact. And it had looked this way for weeks. Sure, Nana wasn’t around to keep the place perfect anymore, but Grandpa had seemed sad. That probably explained why he’d let the place go a little.

I decided that the best way to cheer up the old fella was to pull my patented run-and-jump. I don’t think either of us ever got tired of it. I would run, screaming, “Kamikaze!” and dive bomb across his waiting lap. Both of us would end up sprawled across the cream and country blue plaid couch laughing like loonies. I quietly opened the door and geared up for an all out sprint across the kitchen into the living room where my prey was most likely reclining. *Here I come Grandpa!* I thought, but before I had a chance to scream my battle cry out loud, I slipped on the kitchen floor. My feet flew upwards, and my head collided with the tile, making a dull, thwacking sound. I felt no pain as the kitchen faded to black.

Gradually, I came to, but I don’t know how long I lay there with the wind knocked out of me and rainbows dancing in the corners of my eyes. But when I finally managed to sit up, I found a knot the size of a golf ball on the back of my head. I touched it and jerked my hand back quickly, wincing when the pain lanced down my spine. It was then that I noticed the smell of copper pennies and burning sulfur. I realized with a head clearing jerk that there was blood all in my hair. *Oh Jesus, help me,* I thought. Then I stopped acting like the girl everyone wanted me to be. If the wound was on my head, why was there blood on my shoes, my hands, and the dirty legs of my Gitano jeans? I wasn’t the one bleeding; I wasn’t dying. I heaved a sigh of relief and then looked around the room.
"Oh, Christ!" I screamed.

My grandfather was slumped in front of the sage green kitchen wall now spattered with bones, brain, and blood like paint slung angrily across a canvas. I also realized with a nauseating lurch that the blood I was lying in had, until recently, belonged to him. I turned my head and vomited in a corner next to a potted plant. After I cleared my stomach of three bowls of Cap’n Crunch, which came out in a golden mess, I wiped my bottom lip with the back of my hand. As I did, I left a streak of blood across my left cheek. I just talked to him this morning, I thought. I told him about how Uncle Eddie reminded me of Puddleglum...

I couldn’t see straight. I doubted I could walk, but I couldn’t very well stay where I was either, so I carefully pulled myself to my feet, using the edge of the countertop, and stepped out of the puddle. When my sneakers hit the floor and squeaked, threatening to throw me off my feet again, I pulled them off and set them neatly by the door, just like Nana had asked every time I’d come in after school, and even though she was gone, the rules remained. How odd. By this point, manners were a virtue that should have been well forgotten, and the more I thought about it, the funnier the idea became. A high-pitched laugh that threatened to break me in two escaped my lips, but I pushed it back down before I lost myself completely.

I walked across the kitchen floor, trying not to soil my yellow monkey socks, and after what seemed like an eternity, I finally reached my grandfather. I didn’t know what to do. Do I touch him? I asked myself. Anxiety crawled around in my stomach like palmetto bugs, and I began to pace. Hot, salty tears washed down my face and blurred my vision. My hands moved with a will of their own, and to stop them from shaking, I wrung them together. I noticed that the blood that covered my hands had dried, and the lines in my palms looked like rivers on an ancient map. A lady at the carnival had once told my fortune by reading this same palm, and she had said I was destined for a lifetime of romance and adventure. Had she seen this? I wondered. Was there a line I could have read to see this day and stop it from happening? I’m here alone, and there’s no one to help me. Is there?

I managed to squeak out a weak, "Hello? Is anyone here?" the
words caught in my throat like lint, and I choked on them. There was no reply. I had to face this by myself. Resigned to the fact that I was alone with the dead, I slowly turned back to the problem at hand. But my word choice made me ashamed. Why was I referring to him as a problem? The man had taken care of me, accepted me for who I was and not what my parents or my friends expected me to be. He had slipped me folded ten dollar bills when my parents refused to give me money for another book and explained the beauty of a hit and run as we watched baseball on Saturday afternoons. Every school play. Every awards ceremony. For every little proud moment in my life, he had been there. This man was not my problem; he was my best friend, and now he was gone.

I looked around my grandfather’s tanned, khaki clad body and saw, wedged under the microwave stand, his pistol staring back at me—its mouth a gaping 0, like it was also still in shock. I could see the damage it had already done, and I wondered if it could somehow hurt me, too. My nerves were near the breaking point already, and I couldn’t do what I needed to do while it stared at me. I grabbed a knife from the butcher’s block on the counter behind me and used it to turn the gun towards the back wall; the trigger now faced out, and I felt in control again.

As I moved it, I found a piece of paper sticking out of Grandpa’s leathery fist. I shook the nervousness out of my hands, wiped them on my jeans, and squatted down next to him. I had blocked out the smells and somehow overcome the strange silence, but touching him, having to feel his rigid skin, made me uneasy. Leaning against the gritty wall, I pulled, but the note would not come loose. I leaned forward and tugged—still nothing. Finally, I screwed up my courage and opened his hand with mine. Sadly, as if to announce how recently he had died, it was still warm. I had shied away from this because I did not want to feel how the heat had seeped from his body, but the warmth I found instead was somehow worse. It only confirmed how close I had come to stopping this from happening. Had I been here half an hour sooner…I stopped myself mid-sentence. I could not allow myself to dwell on it.

I slid my fingers into his cupped palm to remove the note, his grip tightened down. His grasp was strong, as it had been in life.
That was it. Reflexes took over.

I fell backwards on my rear end and scrambled across the kitchen floor on all fours in a mad dash, screaming, “Oh Jesus help me . . . oh God what is this . . . ohmygod . . . ohmygod,” the note clasped between my cherry-red fingers.

I hid behind the kitchen counter for a few minutes, clutching onto the handles and blubbering. I tried to shut down the voices inside my head that were begging me to run, to hide, to escape from this nightmare set in daylight streaming through gingham curtains, but I realized that I had seen to many slasher movies and my imagination was on speed. I took three measured breaths, and when my heart stopped wrestling with my lungs for space, I unfolded the note written on faded, lavender stationary.

It was written in my grandfather’s handwriting—neat but slightly tilted to the left. I remembered he once told me he was born left handed and was forced by an unforgiving shrew of a teacher to write with his right hand. The end result was the strained perfection of all his letters that always leaned the way God had originally intended them to go. He’d written excuses for missed school days for me in that neat, yearning script, and the sudden rush of memory broke my heart. Oh damn it, here I go again, I thought. I always try to be such an adult, so mature, and I can’t... I bit my lip to stop the tears from coming again.

The lavender paper was easy to explain. I purchased it for my grandmother a few years ago from the stationary shop where I bought my journals. I remember her saying, “Sissy, this is just too pretty to write on,” and I knew she had saved every single page of it. I also knew that Grandpa had never sent much in the way of correspondence, but he knew this paper was important and bound to be noticed, so he dug it out of its hiding place to write to me. I smoothed back my sweaty hair, pulled myself together, and began to read.

Dear Maggie,

I don’t know how I know this, but you will be the one to find me. Something in my old bones won’t let me believe otherwise.
Baby girl, my Maggie May, I’m sick and there is nothing the doctors can do. The cancer is in my bones baby, chewing on ‘em, and I don’t want to face it anymore. I want to go home to your Nana and leave this world when I feel like I’m ready. I wish I could find another way to do this, but this was all I could think of. Do what you can to make me look presentable and then go run and fetch your daddy for the rest. He’ll know what do, he’s a good man. He loves you and your Mama, and he’s always acted like a man should. Oh Maggie, the only thing I’m going to miss is your love. You gave my life back to me, and I think it is fitting that you should be here now to help me end it. I miss you already.

Grandpa

I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes to force back the tears. They came anyway. I struck my head against the cabinet doors and kneaded the note between my fists. Why hadn’t he told anyone he was sick? He must have known what was coming. I knew him. His pride. He didn’t want to waste away in a bed that was not his own, hooked to technology to keep him breathing and pissing and alive.

When the realization set in, I didn’t feel like crying any longer. Now, it was time for me to get to work. I couldn’t close my eyes and wish it all away. I couldn’t step into a wardrobe and walk away from this place, and this was my responsibility. I didn’t have long before my family would wonder where I was, so I jabbed the note into my pocket and began to do what was asked of me.

I ran to the bathroom and grabbed towels, washcloths, and a huge bowl my grandmother had used to soak her feet each night. I filled the bowl full of hot water from the bathroom tap and carried it and the cloths to the bedroom. With one towel in hand, I returned to the kitchen and began to tend to Grandpa. I wrapped his head carefully in the thick burgundy towel, secured it with a hairclip I pulled from my ponytail, and turned him away from the wall where he had been leaning. Once this was done, I began the laborious process of transporting him to his bedroom to lay him out.
My fourteen-year-old arms weren’t tough enough to lift him, so I pulled him down the hall, his booted feet dragging like anchors across the floor. My muscles strained, and my breath came in deep, brokenhearted gasps as I stretched and strained to lift my grandfather onto his bed. It might have taken fifteen minutes from beginning to end, but I felt like I’d been doing this macabre task all my life.

I brushed and straightened his clothing, crossed his arms on his chest, and braced his head up on the burgundy towel. Next, I scrubbed his face and hands with one of the wet washcloths and patted him dry. He looked so normal, so peaceful, like he was simply taking his afternoon nap before he came to our house for supper.

I couldn’t stop staring at him.

He still looked so strong and handsome to me. Just like he did in the pictures he’d had taken in his uniform during World War II. He had been a gunner, and the stories of his bravery had given me the strength I was now using, but I couldn’t bear this much longer. This wasn’t fitting for my warrior. He deserved waving flags and resounding trumpets to announce his death, not the pitiful tears of a teenage girl, but I would have to do. I tucked the rag into my back pocket and headed back to the kitchen, shutting the door softly behind me so as not to wake him.

Tending to the body had been a painful, but simple duty. The kitchen was another matter altogether. I scrubbed until the water in the bucket was a murky, russet pool. Then, on my knees, I dried the floor with paper towels covered in happy teddy bears and bouncing balls. Who bought them? Grandpa wasn’t the type to give a damn about paper towel designs; they must have been my mother’s doing. I also cleaned up my own vomit, which, for once, didn’t even faze me. I scrubbed without thinking and eventually arrived at the point I dreaded. Knowing it couldn’t be avoided any longer; I gathered up my nerve and began working like a robot on the green tiled wall, trying not to notice the texture and the smell of the tissue I sponged from it.

Before long, it was like the whole thing had never happened. The house was clean, but I sure wasn’t. I knew that I couldn’t call my father over to finish this when I was literally covered in blood, sweat, and tears. That was going against my promise to Grandpa.
There should be no sign of the deed anywhere when Dad showed up. I knew I still wasn’t done, so I put my supplies away and carried the towels and rags with me to the guest bathroom to take a shower.

I turned on the water and began undressing, leaving my clothes in a pile on the pink rug. I looked up, and for a split second, I saw myself in the rapidly fogging bathroom mirror. This couldn’t be me. The small-breasted girl who looked back at me was naked, filthy, and crushed, and the streak on my cheek was still there, as were the now dried tears. I wondered if I would ever feel normal again. I shuddered at the sight of myself and stepped under the stinging spray of water, and as I washed, the smell of Grandpa’s strong soap filled my nostrils and calmed me.

After I’d bathed and dressed in a spare set of clothes I left there for emergencies, I walked through the house, stopping to look at Grandpa’s picture for a brief second. However, as I put one foot out of the kitchen door, I decided that I didn’t want to break the small measure of peace in my heart. I went to the kitchen phone and called my father instead.

“Daddy?” I said.

“Yes,” I said, hesitating, “Daddy, don’t talk. Just listen to me. Grandpa is dead. I cleaned it up like he asked. He said that after that you could handle it because you were a good man, so I’m leaving the rest to you. The instructions he left are on a piece of paper under the cookie jar, and the gun is under the microwave. I couldn’t bear to pick it up.”

It all came out of me in a rush, and after I’d said it all, I hung up the phone, closed my eyes, and spoke the last words I would ever say to him aloud, “Mission’s accomplished, Grandpa. Maggie took care of it like you asked.”

Finally, with my heart at ease and the smell of my grandfather’s soap taking the place of copper and sulfur, I stepped out of the door I still vowed to paint and headed for our tree, silently hoping it could still rock me to sleep.
In the five days she’d lived here, she’d received mail for eight different people. On her fourth day in the apartment, she’d walked to the honeycomb of little mail slots in the brick wall halfway down the block, and found two dozen letters waiting, though the last resident had moved out only the week before.

The next day, the mail slot was full of letters, bills, and catalogs for three other people. Back inside, she dropped the mail onto yesterday’s mail on the kitchen counter. She picked up the envelopes, the catalogs for stereo equipment, lingerie, and swords, and she crinkled them between her fingers.


She sat on the kitchen floor and organized the mail in stacks. Most of it was for Maria Burgos and Lisa Walton, and most of the other people only had one piece of mail. She counted it. There were thirty-two pieces altogether.

She piled them into one stack, and then she knocked them across the kitchen. She leaned back against the wall and counted the cracks in the floor tiles. A white marble was wedged into a crack beginning in the middle of the floor and disappearing under the tiny electric stove.

She walked across the empty living room to the front window and looked down on the street. The apartment was situated over a Persian rug shop. From her window she could see a coffee shop, a sushi bar, a boutique, a tattoo parlor, and a kite shop. She could hear a hundred conversations passing below, but could only decipher occasional words: Jesus Christ, fucking bitch, problem with this city, guitar.

Julie stood at the window and smiled. She held her arms straight
out to the sides and closed her eyes. She felt she was in the middle of an enormity of very small things, and her ribcage tingled. The voices curled into the air with the cigarette smoke and car exhaust, hip hop from cars, and frantic jazz from the bar next door. It was all muffled, but it was all here, and it scintillated.

She turned away from the windows and walked back to the mail, her bare feet hopping from piece to piece, stepping on Nabil, Cherryl, Dorian, Jacob.

They were all here, the voices outside were all here, all the eating and drinking and talking and loving and thinking from the neighborhood were here. History was here and was heavy. History was constantly accumulating here. Through the present. The enormity of the present. The enormity of small things.

Including the crack that split like a delta in the plaster of the far kitchen wall. Including the eel skin purse that had demagnetized all her credit cards. Including all the unacknowledged and unknowns skimming the outsides of her peripheries.

She opened a bottle of wine. Allan would be here in fifteen minutes.

And in fifteen minutes, Allan would be there. He took off his seat belt and slumped against the door handle, impatiently looking down at the trudging traffic lighting up the dark interstate before him.

He was intensely aware of the cars, sensed them individually. They reminded him of insects or lobsters. Great metal and fiberglass carapaces creeping towards burrows in the earth.

He was intensely aware of the buildings standing up around the bridges like fingers that might fold in on him. He felt grasped by millions of people and their desperations for proof they were ever here.

And he was intensely aware of Julie, because Julie had intensified his awareness of everything. There was Julie in the line of headlights, in the lit-up phalangeal skyline. There was Julie in the velvet blue clouds he could only see when the heat lightning silently lit them up. There was Julie in the graceful slope of old rowhouses growing out of the embankments at the bottom of the bridge.
Now the traffic moved faster, and Julie was in it. She was in the pushing forward. She was in the acceleration. She was in her apartment above the Persian rug shop.

He was intensely aware of Julie in everything around him, standing there on Lisa Walton and Maria Burgos and another Maria Burgos and Edward Peal. She knelt, her dark skirt rustling against her legs, and began to pick the mail back up, when the phone rang.

She scooped up the phone and held it to her face with her shoulder. Her hair sprung down lushly over her side like two hundred black telephone chords.

The voice said, "Kenneth, please."
"Uh, I'm sorry. You have the wrong number."
The voice said, "Kenneth, please."
"There's no Kenneth here. You have the wrong number."
"Kenneth," the voice said. "Kenneth Malston."
"I'm telling you, there's no Kenneth here," she said, slammed down the phone,

and now traffic was bottlenecked again.

Everything in front of him was Julie, and he was stunned with how much she had made him forget already. He was stunned with what he wasn't thinking about. He wasn't thinking about the death threats, he thought. He wasn't thinking about the deadlines, he thought. He wasn't thinking about the pressure that if he didn't get this one right, he'd be out of work.

He wasn't thinking about so many things that had no form so easily specific as death threats and deadlines, things—senses—he couldn't identify but thought about anyway, things—senses—he didn't even know how to think about. He wasn't thinking about them.

What was far more absorbing was how a woman like Julie could be so unaware of her brilliance and her beauty.

"Be honest with me. You've written three books, Julie, books of poetry and a book of criticism. You have an MFA in Poetry. You review books in one of the most sophisticated cities in the country. Don't you ever, even for a second, think you're brilliant?"
And the most beautiful and brilliant woman had looked into his eyes and said, “No.”
And he asked, “Don’t you ever, even for a second, think you’re beautiful?”
And the most beautiful and brilliant woman had looked into his eyes and said, “No.”
He wanted to reserve everything. He didn’t want to sleep with her until they couldn’t restrain themselves any more. He didn’t want to take her in his arms until everything else was out of his hands, but constantly, he wanted her in his arms. She took the threats and the deadlines away from him. She took the larger things too.
He wanted to reserve his words, because people said “beautiful,” when they meant “pretty,” and “brilliant” when they meant “pretty damn talented.” People said “crazy,” when they meant “stressed” or “dramatic” or dozens of other weaker words. People said something was “the most,” when they meant “very.” People made umbrella statements and exaggerations.
He wanted to reserve all this and he decided that moment “the most beautiful and brilliant woman” was a phrase that could only be used once, and he’d never used it before.
How adolescent to say anything was the most, and how absolutely necessary!
He wanted to tell her something trivial and funny. He wanted her to say something unimportant that could consume its moment with laughter nonetheless.
A few days ago, she’d said, “Did you know that a group of frogs is an army of frogs and a group of toads is a knot of toads?”
And he’d spit Chardonnay all over the table.

There was something very black about Julie, but there was nothing dark about her. It had taken him the longest time to figure out this distinction. It had taken a lot of staring, repeated images of Julie’s eyes and hair, the images sifting through his senses. It had taken hours collected from many nights of his fingers loping through her hair and her hair looping around his fingers, hours of looking from one eye to the other and back.
The only way to look into Julie’s eyes was with both of his into
one of hers, and Allan had thought this unfair, until he realized, staring into her eyes, that she was looking with both of her eyes into one of his own. This was symmetry.

There was nothing dark in her, but there was something very black. What came from those eyes was sharp and elegant, like the Space Needle. Julie’s eyes were bright, black Space Needles, and bright blackness was much more penetrating than bright white light. Bright blackness was inherently loving, whether it wanted to be or not, smooth and sweet, and he wanted to make love to it for millennia.

The phone began ringing the specific second of the knock on the door. She opened the door to Allan, held up one index finger, and ran to the phone.

A male voice said, “Kelly? Hey, I’ll be there in 20 minutes,” and hung up.

She stood there in front of Allan, staring blankly at the phone. Allan walked in and sat sideways in the corner of the couch. The room was dark. He turned his head slightly to the side, raised his eyebrows, and held a single rose out to her.

She saw the rose peripherally before she could break her gaze away from the phone. Her smile was slight, too slight.

“What is it?” Allan said.

Then her smile grew. “Nothing. Nothing. Just weird phone calls.” She took the rose and very gently kissed his lips.

“Would’ve been here sooner, but traffic was terrible.” She leaned over him and put her finger to his lips. She whispered, “Listen.”

There was the honking of a car horn, and people yelling in the street. There was the high-pitched giggling of teenage girls. There was conversation, a dozen conversations in conversation with each other without even knowing it. The whole street. The whole neighborhood. The city.

He smiled at her and looked into her black eyes. “That’s fantastic,” he said.

She sat down next to him and kissed him, mouth soft wet, and he pulled her on top of him. Now there could be no thought of thought. No thought of symmetry, no conscious sifting through the
senses, because the sense that overwhelmed was one of body, the entire body of a human being, this human being, the whole physical grounding of this woman, everything through which Julie physically knew the world, it was all pushing into his body, his grounding, his whole physicality, and their respective groundings ground together. These bodies pushed into each other. Her breasts, soft powerful, pushed into the same chest his heart beat in. Her hips, the center of her body, and his hips, his physical center, pushed into each other, wanting into each other with their own intelligences, centers pushing into centers, hips the heart of the body, hearts pushing physically together.

Mouths ate at each other and hips ate at hips. More symmetry. So many physical symmetries between two people’s bodies. Between Julie’s and Allan’s bodies. But no thought was allowed here, no conscious sifting of the senses, no conscious realization of hips kissing with all the strength hips can push with, no conscious realization of mouths fucking one another, soft wet pushing soft wet.

So many physical symmetries between two people’s bodies. Between Julie’s and Allan’s bodies. But no thought was allowed here, no conscious sifting of the senses, no conscious realization of hips kissing with all the strength hips can push with, no conscious realization of mouths fucking one another, soft wet pushing soft wet.

Someone pushed the buzzer down on the street.

The mouths didn’t hear the buzzer and the hips didn’t hear the buzzer.

Someone pushed the buzzer down on the street.

"I think," Allan said, pulling out of the kiss, but absorbing her deeper into his arms, "I think sex is the only social interaction where desperation is not only acceptable and allowed, but better for it."

"Major distinction necessary," she said. "Only the bodies can be desperate."

Someone pushed the buzzer down on the street.

"Where does body end and emotion begin?" he said.

"The desperation of the body leads to the satisfaction of emotion."

"Said the sage. But what’s satisfaction? When something’s satisfied, it dies."

She breathed into his neck, into his skin, into his pores. "My satisfactions are never satisfied."

Someone pushed the buzzer down on the street.

And all the noises from the street were full of Julie. The rattling
of the grocery cart, pushed speedily along by someone with no home, was full of Julie. The talking, turned to murmuring by the distance, and the occasional shout, were full of Julie. The dog barking was full of Julie. The sound of the door buzzer, after Julie had left in irritation to see who was there but before she’d apparently come to the bottom of the stairs to the street-level door, was full of Julie.

Just as he stood with the thought of glancing around her new place, the voice from the back of the apartment—it too was Julie. He looked down the hall, but all he could see was the closed bedroom door. He looked towards the closed door Julie had just left through.

He heard his name, and he heard Julie, and he heard Julie say his name. From the back of the apartment. And he walked warily towards her voice.

He stopped at the door, uncertain.

“There’s always a sadness in you,” Julie said from the other side of the door.

His forehead touched the door softly.

“It’s always there,” she said. “And it has nothing to do with your work. I know about the threats you started getting right after you did the story on the abortion clinic murders. And, Allan, I know you’re working on another story about the clinic, and that it’s one you’re way behind on.”

The door felt very present against his forehead.

“But I know you’re not even there, Allan. You’re not even in the story. You’re not even in the threats. You’re not even in the deadlines. The sadness keeps you on top of everything.”

The door was present.

“You’re not present there, Allan, I know. You’re only present here. Everything’s present here. There’s an enormity of small things here. And you’re only present here. With me.”

“And what does the sadness do here?” he said.

“What are you doing?”

“What?”

“What are you doing?”

He turned around and looked into the bright black eyes.

“There was nobody down there,” Julie said, “I guess they got
tired of waiting.

"I was just, uh, looking around your place."

"Were you talking to yourself?"

He smiled nervously and faked a laugh.

Someone pushed the buzzer down on the street.

A certain literacy of the soul was the problem. He could stare, could touch, could kiss her, but sometimes he’d like to stare, touch, kiss her and not have to read her. Perhaps that would come. But until it did, he would find himself running his hands along her arms as if to read something there. It had taken him long enough to figure out the brightness of the blackness in her, but the brightness had its own secret text.

He would pull her to him and find that as much as he wanted to kiss her, he also wanted to find some Rosetta Stone beating in her chest, and to read its rhythms.

Something would have to tell him why Julie could never be happy with herself, why she could be such a perfectionist that her own perfection couldn’t satisfy her, why she was blind to her own wonders, and why she called her blindness honesty. Why she could be so blind to herself, when she could see everything else no one else could see. Everything.

He kept reading her, but there was so much text in between the text that it almost made him blind. Maybe going blindly into her body would be the truest way to experience her most completely. Maybe she didn’t need the hermeneutics and the semiotics. Maybe she didn’t need priests deciphering and transcribing her inner bibles by hand in sealed chambers without sunlight.

Someone pushed the buzzer down on the street.

"Jesus fucking Christ!" She stormed out, and almost immediately, she stormed back in, setting an enormous box in the middle of the living room floor. It was addressed to a Julie, but not this Julie.

"Julie Montieth," Allan read aloud.

She rolled her eyes. "UPS special delivery. You wouldn’t believe how many different names are on the mail that comes to this apartment. It’s ridiculous."
“Did you sign for Julie Montieth?”
“Yeah.”
“Why?”
She shook her head and her mouth scrunched into one corner of her face. “Not sure.”
“That thing’s huge. It’s as big as my fucking kitchen.”
“Yeah,” she said, “but it feels like it’s empty.”
“You gonna open it?”
She stared at the box without saying anything for a while, but then her head turned resolutely to Allan. She walked to him slowly, but confidently. Her head cocked back. She took his chin in her hand. Her other hand moved down the center of his chest, moved down the center of his stomach, moved down inside his black jeans to his cock.

His fingers moved through the brightness of her black hair, fingers moved across the goose bumps that rose to meet his fingers moving across her neck, their bodies so bodily, their skin so epidermal, their lips so vulvate, their hunger hungry, and so, so, very hungry, that Julie’s grasping fingers moving up and down his cock overrode death threats and deadlines, that Julie’s fingers were in every sound from the street, in the whole concrete, wood, steel, glass, brick and plaster city around them.

And he asked her how she found out about the story he was working on.
She didn’t answer him.
“What does the sadness do here?” he said.
And she didn’t answer him.
She pushed him down onto the enormous empty box and ripped down his zipper.
She kissed his mouth.
She kissed his chest.
The black hair fell all over him, bright.
Her face moved to the center of his body, and she kissed it. She kissed it.
She kissed it.
She took it in her mouth. Everything was here. Such an enormity of small things.
His eyes slipped open, and he saw them. They were seated in folding chairs at the back of the room. Cherryl Brown was there and Edward Peal. Jacob Gant was smiling like he’d never been happier for anyone. Heeyand and Dorian watched with intense intellectual interest. Julie Montieth held Nabil Saad’s hand and they watched like proud parents.

This was when Maria Burgos stood and walked over to them. Her face pleaded, but she took her time. She shook her head, and said, “Don’t you ever, even for a second, think you’re brilliant? What does the sadness do here? Don’t you ever, even for a second, think you’re beautiful?”

Allan closed his eyes, smiled to himself, and the ghosts were gone, as gone as they could ever be, and no pleasure had ever been so good.

She didn’t move away. She didn’t take her mouth from him. He cupped the back of her head with both hands. And when he had finished coming, and she had looked at him like she could love him, he took her hands, and stood her up. He turned her around in the dark room and stripped her with force and with affection. And as she sat down on the enormous box, he realized just how ready for her he was, though he’d just come, and he was more than amazed to find her opened up for him.

He slid slowly inside her, and she said, “I think I understand it.”

He moved in and out of her and said, “What do you think you understand?”

Her eyes were bright, and her whole face lit up, and her whole body burned, and she said, “The sadness.”

“Your beauty, your brilliance,” he said, fucking her faster now. And she said, “I understand all of it.”

“Of course you do. No one understands things like you understand them. You see things. You see everything,” he said.

And she fucked him as hard as he fucked her.

“You see everything,” he said, and she fucked him as hard as he fucked her.

The whole street had been here in the room, the whole history of the building, of the street, of the neighborhood. The whole city had been here in the room.
But now there was just the two of them.

Her voice was coming from someplace beneath her voice now, someplace above it, and behind it. Her voice was slipping through her breath, was slipping through her whole body, through orgasm.

"It's only the weight of the world. We all bear the weight of the world," she managed to say, and he said, "There's nothing you can't see."

The weight of the world was gone, their bodies were beautiful, and they were brilliant.

They had come to the center of the body. They had come to the center of their own bodies. They had come to the center of each other. It was beautiful, the weight of the world was gone, and there were tears running down their faces.

They slept there, on the enormous empty box, in the center of everything, but alone with each other, and when they woke up in the morning, his penis was still inside her.
Three rocking chairs creak together on the porch. In line, we three men push ourselves back and forth in perfect unity and talk to each other through the windy air. This is one of them fine days, where the sun never gets too bright, and the birds chirp out their songs not too loudly. In all my forty-eight years, I never noticed how still my house behind me can seem against all the movement of out here. And Phil’s got to go and ruin it all by shooting off some nasty stuff. He’s giggling his belly sore and snorting, and he looks to me and says,

“I just wanted you to know what my insides smell like.”

“That’s awful fucking sweet of you, Phil.”

“Come on, now. I told you I’m trying to keep my ears and mouth clean. I’d think you’d be able to respect that.”

“How about you keep my nose clean of your insides?” I say.

“How about you two assholes cut it out?” says God.

“Watch your language, God!” Phil yells.

It’s not that he is really God. It’s just that, when he arrived here, he said his name was “God.” It was either that or make something up. So we just stuck to calling him “God.” Here’s the part where Phil always asks God:

“God?”

“Yeah?”

“Tell me again,” he snickers, “how you created this place.”

God looks off into the distance and says,

“It was so quick; you wouldn’t even know it wasn’t here. It’s not like in the Bible, Holy as it is. I thought of it one day, and next thing, I looked up, and here was here, and everywhere.”

“So Earth’s like bad gas?” Phil says, and me and him laugh, but God doesn’t seem to be so amused.
“Hey, him with his bad gas and you with yours, God, that makes you two practically brothers!” I say.

“I hate you,” God retorts.

This is why it is certain he’s faking his divineness. Anybody who’s got half-a brain can figure Mr. Omniscient didn’t leak creation all over the place like an old man with no control of his stuff. No, no, it is most certain that God gave in. I mean, just think about it for a minute. So God exists all by His lonesome. There He is, sitting pretty and perfect for a trillion years, if years exist, which they don’t. Anyway, He’s twiddling his thumbs in a manner most flawless, not clunking them together. He’s perfect and happy, but He just happens to get in His brain that He’d like to make a bunch of messed up people? Thought it’d be a good idea, why hadn’t He thoughta it earlier? It seems more likely to me that the Divine Schizophrenic said to Himselves, “You know, being alone is kind of boring. It’s just about the same as being nothing.” So, “Whoops,” He says, to cover the intentional mishap (although, who from I’m not quite sure), and the one flawed act goes boom-a-bam-bomb: humans, butt cheeks, and ham.

Phil starts smirking, and he looks to God, “Hey, did Jesus ever do it?”

“What?” says God.

“You know,” Phil says, “I mean like, did he ever soak his turkey?”

“What?” says God, his face turning a bit pink.

“Get his dinky stinky; bury Petey deep in a grassy field of happiness and dew.”

God’s just staring at him with his jaw dropped a bit.

“Go deep sea fish—”

“No!” yells God. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

Phil and I are giggling with our faces at the sky.

“I should whip you like a rabbit, you shit mouth.” He gets up out of his chair and pushes Phil’s rocking chair over the edge of the porch. Phil startles a bit, stands up, and goes in the house. He comes back out a bit red and he’s got three beers in his hands.

“These are all for me so you two keep off.” He don’t trust us enough to put them down so he can pick up his chair, so he fumbles with them for a while and then sits. His rocker squeaks every time
he rocks back.
“Cut it out, Phil,” says God.
“What? It’s your fault; you broke it.”
“Right...how convenient.”
A truck stops in front of my house and a woman jumps out of the passenger seat, slamming the door behind her. Some guy gets out the other side, goes to her, and starts yelling,
“What! Are you Queen of the Fucking Stereo now?”
“Oh! Oh! Shut up! Shut up! You’re such a child!”
“Oh no! Cora called me a child! Maybe I should give in!”
“I can’t stand you!” She opens the door and grabs a purse from the floor.
“Good! Good! You’re leaving then!”
Phil, God, and me shift in our chairs and stare at the floor.
“Yes!” the woman yells. “And don’t bother looking for me when you want sex! That’s all you ever want! Sex, sex, sex!”
God starts coughing.
“I won’t, whore!” The man runs to the other side of the truck, jumps in, and drives off. The woman stares down between her feet and then looks around. She walks up to my porch and practically collapses onto the bottom step. She puckers out her lips and sticks her hands between her knees, and starts to cry.
“Umm....Miss?” I say. She turns to me. She looks at me with pinkish eyes. Her brown hair falls off her shoulder.
“Yeah?” she asks.
“Would you like a drink or something?”
“Yeah.” She follows me inside, and I open my fridge indicating she can take what she wants. From outside, Phil yells,
“Hey...ugh...you need any help in there?” He opens the door and steps inside, strutting all funny into the kitchen.
“Hello there, my name is Phil.” He sticks his hand out and she goes to shake it, but the idiot pulls her hand to his mouth instead.
“Say, Cora is it? I suppose you’re going to be here a little while, I hope? I sure would enjoy getting to know you better.”
“Phil, go home to your wife. Go on, get.”
“Awww. Bill, you always ruin everything.” Phil storms out and heads down the street with God.
I pull my fingers through my hair that I don’t ever brush, and the woman makes herself comfy at my kitchen table.

“I’m Cora,” she says and takes a tiny sip of her orange juice.

I go sit across from her and say, “Well, it’s good to meet you, Cora, my name’s Bill.”

“Bill,” she says, “can I sleep here tonight?”

I start to tap my foot under the table. “Well, I don’t suppose you have anywhere else to go then, do you?”

She shakes her head.

“I couldn’t just go turning you out on the street or nothing.”

She looks into my eyes.

“It’s not like you’d be a bother, since I live alone.”

She puts her hands in her lap.

“I have a bed and a couch, so it’s not like anyone’d have to sleep on the floor.”

“I can stay then?”

“Sure; sure.”

“Would you mind terribly if I were to go to sleep now? I’m really tired.”

“No, Cora, that’s fine. Let me just change the bed sheets, and I’ll move my things out to the couch.”

She doesn’t protest, even though most women would, and quickly disappears into the bedroom.

I go into the bathroom, which is just across from where she is, and look to see just how I look now, only because I’m curious. Come to find, my nose is sort of an odd shape. It’s kind of big and round at the end, and my lips are kind of thin and crooked – in the opposite direction that my chin is slanted. My eyes are still puke green as they ever were. At least my hair’s still that sandy color; well, I guess it does almost look silver though.

“Bill?”

“Holy…hi. What, were you watching me?”

“Only for a little while.”

“Well, that hardly seems polite.”

“I’m sorry. I just…can’t sleep.” Her eyes start to go all glassy.

“Oh. Shoot, I’m sorry. Shoot. Is there anything I can do?”

“Will you talk to me?” she asks, looking down to the floor.
“Of course, of course I will.” I lead her to the couch, and she’s not upset anymore. She puts a face on to show me she’s thinking. Pushing her lips together and looking to the side.

“Bill, aren’t you married?”
“I’m a widower.” I don’t like the way this conversation is heading.

“Why were you looking in the mirror like that?”
“I was just looking.”

“Bill, do you think I’m pretty?”

“You’re an odd woman, aren’t you,” I say, and cross my feet in front of me.

“That man was my husband; he yells a lot. I have a son; I don’t love my husband. I like to talk, won’t you tell me something interesting? A really great idea?”

I stare at her.

“Please?”

“Well, I guess. Sometimes; sometimes I think about how we’re much closer to the people that are all around us than we act like. Like, you know, we can get each other sick—that’s because parts of me are getting in parts of other people.” She’s just looking at me, so I guess she doesn’t get it.

“I guess, I think people think that they’re close with someone else only when—you know. But really...we’re much more involved with other people than we might think, physically speaking. Particles mixing. You know?”

Cora sits back. “So, really...although we seem separate sitting across from each other...we’re really much more—intimate than that.”

My face is turning red and all she does about it is smile.

“Yeah...yeah.” Well, I can’t think of anything to say now. Her using that word like that, with the pause and everything, like she wanted to draw attention there.

“Say, um, Cora, why are you with him if you don’t love him?” I shouldn’t have asked that.

“I’m not.”

“You’re not?”

“No, I’m here.”

“Oh. Oh yeah.”

“So, um, hey, uh...”
“Bill, you don’t have to worry so much about what you say.”
“Oh. Right.”
She sighs. “Why are people sad?”
That seems kind of like a silly question. Well, but, the way she
leans close to me now, it does seem like it’s important. “Well, I
suppose… I suppose they’re just raised that way. Or maybe it’s
their bodies. Their biology. Something in their brains. Or maybe
they’ve just had hard lives or something. I don’t know. Does it
matter?”
“Are you sad?”
“No; no. Why would I be sad? I’m not sad; no.”
She’s playing with the skin on her knuckles. Pulling it up and
smoothing it out, and then she says, “No? Me neither,” she says,
“me neither.”
She keeps asking questions, so we carry on practically all night
like this, until she asks me to talk about how my wife looked in the
morning, which I don’t remember very much.
“Well, I don’t remember that much. But the best was when I
would take her to the flower field, because then she stopped worrying
about herself so much. After she got used to being there, she’d start
smiling for I don’t know what reason. It was like the flowers
surprised her or….”
Cora’s asleep. She’s so peaceful looking I’m damn near afraid
the world’s going to end for it. Resting her head on the arm of the
couch like that, sleeping under my blanket, pretty brown hair all
messy. I could just about watch her do that all night, pretty as she
is. Pretty as she is. Messy as her hair is, and her hands holding
each other by her face, I’m damn near afraid the world’ll end when
I could watch her all night.
Except the sun’s starting to rise, so I guess I won’t be able to do
that. Phil and God’ll be wandering over here, I suppose. They’ll be
looking for me out there in about an hour, me with no sleep and this
pretty lady sleeping, I sure as heck hope those idiots don’t wake
her. Sure hope. The world must not be looking at her. Otherwise,
it’d be gone by now.
Cora’s still asleep when I mosey outside and discover my two
friends haven’t arrived yet. I stare out at the trees. I notice how the
bottom of the trunk is still, but the top is swaying in the wind. Things look so alive when I just stand here. It’s when I move around that they seem still. Unless I’m in this house I made. I guess men started making houses and didn’t expect they’d be keeping themselves away from so much motion. I walk back inside and go to the bedroom and make up the bed. On my way out of the room, I catch Cora looking in the mirror. She’s pulling at her lips, and then she stops and smiles in the mirror. Then she puts on a worried face and opens her mouth. She sticks out her tongue and stretches it up towards her nose. She laughs.

“Cora?”
She looks at me from the corner of her eye and grins.
“What’re you doing?” I ask.
“Looking in the mirror.”
“Why?” I say, and grin back.
“I was just looking,” she says, using my accent.
“What for?” I say in a high-pitched girly voice, and she smiles wider.
“Because I’m cute!” she says.
“Oh, really?”
“Yes. Look at this chicken pox scar by my nose. Isn’t that the best place for a chicken pox scar? Have you ever seen a chicken pox scar as cute as this?”
“That’s a pretty cute chicken pox scar.”
“I know,” she says in almost a song, “and, by the way, you have quite a handsome nose.”
“Handsome? My nose? What reason is there to like this funny shaped thing? Wouldn’t you rather I had one of those perfect shaped Greek noses like all those famous people have?”
“Boring!”
There’s a knock at the door.
“Your friends from yesterday?” Cora asks.
“Yeah.”
“Well, I think I’ll just go back to sleep then, if that’s okay?”
“Of course. I’ll see you later then.”
I walk out onto the porch and sit in my chair.
“Say, you look like shit,” says Phil.
"I thought you weren't cussing," I say.
"I changed my mind. Say, you look like shit. Where's that woman, huh?"
"She's sleeping."
Phil starts grinning. "Wore her out, did you?"
I look at him like he's an idiot, but I don't say anything to disprove his comment.
"Yeah, thought so," he says.
"Listen, she's sleeping so you better keep quiet and not wake her."
"Oh, defensive of your woman, huh?"
"Shush. Will you shut up? She ain't my woman, and she'll hear you."
I sit down hard to show Phil I mean business.
We both look over to God, and he's got his eyes closed.
"Hey, God, are you praying?" says Phil.
"Yeah," says God.
"To who?" Phil says, and God opens his eyes and says, "Shut up."
I guess Cora changed her mind about sleeping, because she comes out. I give her my chair and sit on the steps.
"Such a gentleman," says Phil, and I glare at him to let him know I'll cook him dead if he implies anything in her presence.
I'm just about to introduce Cora to God when God leans forward in his chair a little and lets out a low-pitched gurgle from his throat.
"God burped," giggles Phil, and Cora laughs at the strangeness.
God looks to Cora and starts to turn all red.
"I'd appreciate it if you'd keep your burp in while the lady's here," I say, and he gets redder.
"It's okay," she says, "It's not new to me. I burp too."
Now it's my turn to turn red for my unnecessary comment.
"I do apologize," says God.
"God burped," giggles Phil, and Cora laughs at the strangeness.
"I'm God, by the way," he offers his hand.
"God? As in the creator of the universe?" she asks.
"That's the one!" shouts Phil, and Cora startles at his loudness.
"Yep," says God, and then nothing happens. God stares down
at the grey-brown wood beneath his rocker. God gets up, goes in my house, and comes out with a beer.

"God's off his rocker!" shouts Phil, and then God sits back down.

Phil turns around to the curtainless window behind him and makes a face at his reflection, in an attempt to mask the shame he feels for making a joke that no one thought was funny. Cora watches.

We all sit and stare and it's about as quiet out as I've ever heard. I begin to wonder what the silence means. If the rest of the world really can exist despite how blank it seems. I wonder if it'll be this quiet when there is no more world. Maybe rocking chairs will be the cause. Maybe a wrong statement made everything into fragments like it is now, and maybe a chair rocking in the air'll do the reverse.

Cora looks at me and says, "Bill? What do you think about when you get that way?"

"What way?"

"You know, when you stare at the chair leg like it has all the answers."

"Yeah," says Phil, knocking his noggin, "what's going on in there?"

"Well. You guys wouldn't understand."

"Oh-ho," says God, "I think you'd be surprised, my friend."

"Well...okay. I'm just thinking about this big, silly world is all. Like, how it's going to end, mostly."

God leans forward in his chair. Phil starts rocking and pinching his nostril. Cora raises her eyebrows and says,

"Well?"

"Well, what?" I say.

"Well, how?" God says.

"Well, okay. You see, it's my belief that the world will end because some perfect act... well, let me give an example. Like, it ain't gonna be nothing obvious, I'll tell you that. Like sex or charity or any of that sweet and explosive stuff, but it'll be some commonplace thing, with all the parts just right. Something that happens every day, like, say, and this is the one I usually think, because it's unlikely: maybe it'll be some dog dying."
"You think God is a dog?" God chuckles.
"No, no, I...."
"Bow wow! I'm your king! Bow to me, bow wow!" ejaculates Phil. They laugh their stupid faces off, and I turn to Cora, and she's smirking like she's trying not to so I go inside.
"To hell with you jerk offs."
"Bark, bark!" I hear from behind, "Man is Dog's best friend!"
I go in the kitchen and grab a beer, and by the time I'm finished Cora walks in and looks at me in my eye.
"They didn't mean anything by it. Don't worry about it, okay?"
"You sure seemed to get your pleasure out of it."
She stares at me, and I feel bad for the comment. Her long chin rises as she presses her fat lips together, and she crosses her arms.
"Don't be a fool, Bill, you know I like big ideas."
She looks into my face and then drops her arms. "Did you really expect those two to understand?"
"No. I guess not. They didn't even let me explain, Cora." I stare at the refrigerator.
"I know, poor thing. But do you really think those knuckle-heads would have understood anyway?" She leans closer to me, and her voice is the softest I think I've ever heard.
"No. You're right; you're right. I'm sorry for what I said that hurt you."
She brushes my back in a soft way, and I feel a little awkward. I can smell her sweat and I wonder if she can smell mine.
"Let's go on back out there, then," I say.
"Of course." She leads me out. She walks slower when we get to the living room, and I suspect it's because that way she can mush her feet into the thick brown carpet as she walks. The carpet that matches her hair.
This is how it'll happen, I'm sure. I was wrong about all that dog stuff. This is how it'll happen. A man'll brush a woman's arm. Then she'll look over because he gave her some reason to. She'll feel like her eyes are dripping with things like love and truth. The droplets will rest in between the rise of her cheek and the small circles below her pretty little eyes. And the concern that was on her face from living in this here weary world will burst away like she'd
been in ice all these years, and she’ll feel like she’s real.

Maybe not. Maybe that’s too big – maybe it needs to be something smaller. Like the way Cora just put her hand on my back, the sweet thing.

Phil and God are trying not to laugh, so I figure Cora must’ve given them a good talking to about not making light of my thoughts. Phil’s trying so hard not to laugh that he looks like he’s having a seizure so he says, somewhat forcefully,

“Well, I better go. Wanna walk with me, God?”

“Sure.”

They take off down the street and when we can’t see them no more, we hear them start to laugh. Their sound fades. Cora and I sit in two of the rockers that are kind of close together. It’s a windy day again and her hair whips around. She stares at the empty road in front, and I see tears forming in her eyes. I wonder what she left when she came here. If she wants to go back.

“Are you okay, Cora?”

She shakes her head up and down.

“You know, Bill, sometimes a life doesn’t even have to be half bad and it feels like a tragedy.”

“Is that how you feel about your life?” I ask.

She shakes her head back and forth and presses her lips tight.

“No. But I married someone I don’t love and had a child with him.”

Her eyes are brown and she looks into mine.

The air has stopped playing with her hair. I realize I should feel uncomfortable, but I don’t.

“But you’re not there anymore, Cora. You’re here.”

She looks up at me and smiles just as a tear has worked its way out of her left eye. I haven’t done many good things for women in this life, I suppose, but maybe I just did. I think I’d like to.

“You know, Cora, you’re not like most women. You’re not uptight like they are. You’re loose. You’re a loose woman is what you are.”

“Bill!”

“What? Oh! That’s not what I meant; no, you’re not loose, you’re not loose at all, I bet you’re so tight—”

“Bill!”
That’s when my ears started ringing. I stand up. I’ve done it now. I’ve ruined things. My face feels so hot.

“Bill?” Cora says, and stands up.

“What.” My empty chair rocks behind me.

“Bill, don’t be upset, there’s no reason for that. I’m not mad at you, I promise, I was just playing, that’s all.”

I look at the wall. She knows I’m dreaming about being with her, I know. She knows. She walks toward me and puts her arms right around my stomach and then she squeezes my sides with her hands. She knows.

“Cora, where did you come from?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She slips the fingers on her right hand in my left pocket. She puts her left hand on my chest and looks up at me. I’m stiff; I don’t know what to do but stand here and feel how her hands feel on my leg and chest. She just stares at me.

“Why don’t you kiss me, Bill?”

“I—”

“Kiss me. Won’t you kiss me?” She pushes her hands into my body.

I kiss her. I kiss her again. She’s so sweet; I kiss her again. She knocks me on the head and I say,

“I’m sorry, did I—”

“Shhh! Stop being so worried you silly thing! Chase me!”

“What?”

“You should kiss me again, but you have to catch me first!” She runs inside, and I get her game, so I chase after her. I snatch her up in my arms from behind and kiss her head. She squirms away and says to me,

“If you get to the bedroom before me, then we’ll have sex!” She darts for the bedroom, but there’s no way I’m letting her win this one, so I catch up and scoop her into my arms and walk backwards to the bedroom.

“You snake!” she yells, and kicks her legs back and forth. “You devil spawn! You horny toad!” and spreads her arms behind her.

“You piss monster! Butt face! I ought to bonk you on the head!” She bonks me on the head, and I throw her on the bed. She inches her pants down to her knees, and I discover each section of peach
and each random freckle. She kicks them off and gets on all fours. She looks over her shoulder at me and yells,

“Smack my ass! Rip my undies off!”

I pull on the little things and they stretch, about to break. I’m a beast!

“Damn it! Not that way!” she falls onto her stomach. “You owe me a pair for that!”

“Oh, sorry.” I stare at the underwear.

“Well, don’t dwell on it. Come on, get them off.”

I wiggle them down her legs and she yells,

“Blow on my butt cheeks!”

I take turns, one then the other, and she grabs them from my lips and giggles through her teeth,

“That tickles!”

“You told me to do it.”

She turns around, looks up at me like a little girl, and talks like one too when she says to me, “I know. I liked it.”

A honking noise comes from outside and Cora jumps up. She grabs her clothes; she looks out the window, and I do too.

A little black truck pulls up, and Cora turns to me crinkly faced. She races to the bathroom. It wasn’t until she did that that I realized it was him come back for her. I go after her. She puts her clothes on, gathers up her belongings.

“Cora...”

She spreads her things back out and looks at me. The horn honks, she collects her belongings again.

“Cora...”

“I have to go, Bill.” She keeps gathering, pulling her things close in a little pile, and she shoves them all in her handbag. She starts to go out the door, and her face is red.

“Cora! Will you wait for just one minute, for Christ sake, please? What—”

“What?”

“Is that all?” I say.

“Yeah. I miss my little boy.”

She misses her little boy. “Well. Alright then.”

She turns to leave again.
“Cora, I—”
“What, Bill? What?” Her voice is all shaky.
“Nothing,” I say, “nothing,” and look to the ground or anywhere that isn’t her eyes.

She walks to me and kisses me so soft on the lips.
“You’re a good man, Bill.” And she just stands there, close.

I’m sure tired of being separate. I’m sure tired of that, and I think the rest of this place is too. It’s not that things haven’t happened like this before. It’s just that this time. It’s so thick, the air. I’m sure tired of; it’s just that she’s looking at the ground. She’s being separate. Through the liquid. I pull my arm through the liquid and brush hers. She’s looking at; she looks at me. Dripping. Through the liquid. She looks; me and her eyes are dripping. I pull my arm through; I touch her cheek this time. It’s so thick, my fingers in her hair, dripping. This time she looks and I lean forward to.

... "Dark is Dark is Dark.”
“No Light is No Light is No.”
“Dark is Dark is Dark.”

“Dark is Dark is Dark.”
“No Light is No Light is No.”
“Dark is Dark is Dark.”

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“Dark is Dark is Dark.”
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“Dark is Dark is Dark is...”
Submission Guidelines

We are accepting submissions for Fiction Fix Volume V. due to be published in 2007. This issue will be open for submissions of short fiction and novel excerpts. Please submit each submission electronically as a Microsoft Word attachment to:

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Fiction Fix does not set a word limit, but greater consideration will be given to stories under 3000 words.

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