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The Non-Participants

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THE NON-PARTICIPANTS

by

Eric Adams

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Partial Fulfillment of

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in English

at

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ABSTRACT

THE NON-PARTICIPANTS

by

Eric Adams

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2014

Under the Supervision of Professor George Clark

The Non-Participants is a collection of short stories that combine loosely to explore the movement of two characters from from the Upper Midwest from adolescence to young adulthood. Through a variety of narrative techniques the stories survey the literal and emotional landscapes of these characters' lives.

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Farm-House Girls

Volk was on the verge of going into detail. But he asked Champion to get him a soda from the vending machine. Volk waved his empty Cherry-Coke bottle and touched his fingers to his throat—feigning a raspy voice. These were the performances Champion had come to know as Volk's playful aggression. Instead of asking directly, he performed a pantomime of a parched man.

Champion moved through the visiting room as the blond curls and pretty lips of Abbey Haas resurfaced from high school memories. It was a collection of images and emotions from only about six years old obscured by less lucid moments from college. He returned with another Coke and sat down to listen, but it was difficult to focus on Volk's voice—the words fluttered into the oblivion of light behind him. Champion's attention had always been seduced by light sources. His fifth grade teacher had nearly held him back for daydreaming in a class with an entire wall of windows. The sunlight bathed a field behind Volk; the room had door-height windows and high ceilings with commercial-sized florescent lights. It all created a tension in his eyes that diverted him inward.

As Volk started describing a scene in Abbey's pickup truck, an entirely different memory of the “Three Crows” confronted Champion. It was a party, probably his very first. He thought he must be associating all these memories of high school girls with Volk. The buoyant image of Abbey Haas appeared in the shaggy bedroom of Jamie—blond straight-haired Jamie. Two people who must have known each other through Volk, but probably refused to be decent to each other in competition for his attention. Abbey certainly won that contest with boundless sexual experimentation. Champion realized Volk had always surrounded himself with girls in

his high school days. Champion was one of only a few male cohorts Volk kept in his circles and served as camouflage at social occasions.

The “Three Crows” were primarily Jamie Valley and her friends whose names seemed buried under time and the initial disassociation Champion had with them. He remembered them as projecting a certain confidence bordering on disregard. He had wondered how deep it went. He often inconspicuously observed them in an awe that inclined toward imitation. He thought now that their posture had been a near complete facade; real enough to convince the likes of him at sixteen. They wanted to be as carefree as Abbey, but had only taken minor steps in exposing themselves to the designs the world has for young women. They hadn't tried to harness that power. They stayed back to observe and seek out signs of their affect. Champion suddenly thought that's why Volk dubbed them the “Three Crows”. In eye-shadow and black fingernail polish, they collected in an isolated group, coolly eying others. No, that was too much—he thought that was a college idea. They called them the “Three Crows” because they hated *The Counting Crows*.

The three girls stood at a dresser, ashing into a Mountain Dew can while Volk, Champion and Kevin Flasch, the boys, sat on the bed. There were two more girls in the hallway just outside the room. Feelings of displacement and intrusion had finally washed out of Champion. He, staring into innocuous spaces of the room, listened to them chatting possessively about Metallica and cigarettes. He met again the feeling that they were in effect chameleons who moved from role to role as rooms changed. In the classroom they were idle, spiteful and vulnerable. But in this farmhouse bedroom, the winter wind thumping at the plastic over the widow, they counted the

moments with mounting swagger. Between the intermittent attempts to engage Volk and Flasch, Champion examined the girls. He knew the three faces. He had noticed them well enough over the years to see how they had evolved their look from puffy bangs and dirty sports team puffer coats to jean jackets and black eye-liner.

Jamie was the tallest and most representative. It was her house and it reminded Champion of Volk's house—something old and barely adapted for habitation. Jamie had straight blond hair that framed a round face. He had not figured out if he thought her pretty, but there was always the threat of attraction. She had big eyes that rested on others from an angle. It was something that always startled Champion; a pose combined with a challenge. He thought of her as available, because she was not associated with the beautiful or popular groups, but he had a lingering sense that he was still too far down for her to consider.

Jamie, with her slanted gaze, caught David looking at her. He quickly returned his attention to Volk, who flipped through a woman's magazine. Volk studied the pictures and captions closely. Without his attention Champion didn't know what to do. He was overwhelmed by the awkwardness of being in a room with his peers. It occurred to Champion then, this is what Volk did when they were not together. He knew Volk as a companion while parsing out weekend rituals such as exhausting a rented video game over 40oz bottles of root beer. But he wasn't certain about what they *were* doing. There wasn't anything as distinct as intent amongst the people collected in the farmhouse room. He thought, these people are just gathering together in order to say they had; perhaps hoping for something to break the monotony. Champion did not understand parties.

At that moment Champion wanted to get out. A wave of something akin to

nausea took hold and he started to look around the room wildly, chasing a dark flicker of motion in the periphery. He grew impatient so quickly as to bump Volk on the arm and ask the time.

“What does it matter, you're not going anywhere.”

“Are we waiting for someone?” His head sideways and eyes squinting.

“This is it. Chill out.” Volk pulled his finger from his lips. “We got at least a few hours before anybody gets home.”

Champion put his palms up and shook his head, pleading “why” or “what for”.

“Christ! Just sit back and be cool, we ain't got to be doing something every moment.” Then he got up and crossed the room to the three girls. “I know one of you can bum me a smoke.”

Champion wanted to go. But that's not how he remembered it ending. There was a commotion downstairs. Something simple, like Jamie's mother coming in the front door, before Jamie thought she would. The first pangs of mixed relief and anxiety came on as he saw an exit while worrying the mother would see three boys in her daughter's room, with cigarettes. But they all went downstairs. He followed to find Jamie offering a cigarette to a harried blond woman in her late thirties, in a jean jacket. It became apparent she was concerned or disappointed, angrily.

Champion wanted to break into Volk's story to ask him about the “Three Crows” or that night in particular, but it was just getting good. Stories of Abbey's sexual demands were familiar to him. This story had the making of something he saw on Cinemax after his mother went to bed.

“But wait, you're in the truck cab?” Champion tried to fix himself on Volk's

story. He knew it would be better than his memories. But instead of clearing his mind, he started to recall his own experiences with Abbey. They had the same junior Chemistry class. He was working as Abbey's lab partner. It was shortly after Volk had broken it off with her and she asked Champion to be her date at a wedding that coming weekend.

“Yeah, it was kinda awkward. She had to climb over the stick shift to get on my lap.” Volk hands briefly formed a two-handed football grip.

Champion shook his head. “So you were sitting in the passenger seat like normal?”

“Yeah, and she was just on my lap—back against me. Like backwards.”

“Oh.” That hadn't occurred to Champion.

Champion had said no to Abbey's invitation. A lot had occurred to him in the moments before and after he said it. But he had managed to keep it all locked out of his demeanor. She kept bringing up the fact that she was going to her cousin's wedding that weekend and he had kept nodding and smiling. He remembered the safety goggles they both had on as they worked at hexagonal lab tables. She seemed to know how to use the Bunsen burner better than he had. He enjoyed what he thought to be professional-like teamwork until she finally asked as they were cleaning up. She seemed nervous and he barely murmured that he couldn't; he had to go to his father's that weekend. He remembered thinking it was a very weak excuse even then. She seemed to almost expect the rejection. Champion remembered his mortification at her advance and yet felt sympathy for her.

Champion felt her rejection as if were his own. He tried to listen closely to Volk's story after allowing the feeling to fulfill its course. A part of Volk's gift was in

the details he kept, even years later. And the story came with a unique reverence. The build up had been matter of fact. Volk and Abbey had skipped school, driven to Creek Park or an access road to a corn field, he couldn't remember the specifics of this instance. He didn't describe her body or what they did in the truck cab so much as the way she seemed to switch between bargaining for different sex acts and offering them in an almost motherly way.

Volk described an image of her lips, where they seemed to curve out of her face, lacquered with something that made them shine a distinct pink. Champion imagined it like a movie shot, where the lips took up the whole screen. He got a sensual and quiet feeling from it. Volk didn't kiss this image of lips in the story, it was just the biggest aspect of her beauty. Champion knew Volk was embellishing in a way. He couldn't specifically remember finding Abbey attractive at the time, but he wanted to have Volk's vision of her now.

Then Champion saw Volk disconnect with him in the story telling. Volk's eyes moved to a private place—some space just over the industrial carpet, between Champion and the next visitor's table. His mind seemed fixated on another idea.

“She was a sad girl.” Volk broke the pause by leaning back in his chair and rubbing a small wart just behind his ear. His fingers found it often when he paused. “I don't know, I always thought she was crazy, but I wasn't really paying a lot of attention...to much of anything then.”

“She ended up in trouble with the cops didn't she?”

“Yeah,” a lifeless chuckle preceded another pause. “Her parents were both cops. She threw some party which other cops busted and she locked them out until they kicked in the door and arrested her. Her parents moved out of state before they

could prosecute her, or something like that. That was after I realized she was crazy and dumped her. But seriously. I can't get her out of my mind. She always seemed like she was trying to fix something. Either me, or herself, I don't know. But if I had stuck with her, I probably wouldn't have ended up here.”

At this admission Volk went silent. Champion nodded his head, feeling the mood between them getting heavy. There was nothing that was going to fix this moment. He had seen it more often when he first started visiting, but over the last couple of years routine had set in. Volk had reverted to the immediate devices of belaying boredom, just the same as when they were boys. It had been a relief to Champion when Volk gave up begging him to find a lawyer who might work pro bono and instead started nitpicking catalogs for the best possible prison radio, softball glove or even socks.

Champion decided to break in and change the atmosphere.

“So I didn't quite make that concert,” Champion said. “You wouldn't believe the crap I went through only to miss it,” he lied.

Volk rolled his eyes. “This happens every time. You either forget or screw up. You don't understand.” He pointed the empty Coke bottle at Champion in mock-seriousness. “I need to go to these concerts and you need to do it for me. If you can't fulfill your responsibilities, I'm just gonna have to find somebody else to live through vicariously on the streets.” He laughed as he talked.

Champion nodded shamefully, “I did see that movie...”

“Well that's something. But first what's on the menu? I want dinner and a movie.”

“Yes, sir. Will you have the usual?”

“That would be fantastic, could I get something from south of the border as well?”

“Straight away.” Champion gave his server bow before making his way back to the vending machines. It was Thursday at the beginning of visiting hours and there weren't many people in the room yet. He tried to find a casual way to look at the contents of the tables rather than the families or inmates. If not large platters of food on splayed plastic wrap there were board games or cards. He always looked at the ground or out the window when passing the guard's desk. In the white linoleum area where seven vending machines met in a corner he collected an Omelet sandwich and two burritos with red paper wrap. They were smaller and higher quality than the giant ones wrapped in plastic. He opened the end of the sandwich and put it in one microwave, then pulled back the paper on the two burritos and set them side by side in the other. While they heated he selected a Diet Pepsi for himself and prepared the paper plates, napkins, pepper and taco sauce packets so he could carry the whole bundle back at once. He had perfected this procedure to minimize the time Volk had to sit by himself.

When Champion brought the food back Volk's demeanor had changed. Champion noted this change whenever he left the table. Volk's appearance became stony and took on the weight of concern. He accepted the food seriously, without comment besides “thanks”. Champion knew he was trying to contain his excitement and would attempt to suppress his enjoyment of the salty, fatty food. He watched Volk carefully peel the paper wrap at the edges avoiding the steam. The burrito removed from the wrapper, he tenderly peeled up the lip of the tortilla. It was soft and threatened to tear but he got a clear separation from the beef and bean mixture. He

then poured a neat line of taco sauce along the contents and pushed the flap closed. After softly tapping the pouch with his large fingers, he raised his hands above the scene as if indecisive of his next action.

Champion simply unraveled the paper of his burrito. He decided to begin describing the movie. He paused while trying to find his starting point. Only once did he actually read a synopsis of the movie before coming to visit Volk. The movies often made too little or too much of an impression. Either they were forgettable or he was so immersed in them he only had emotional impressions. He found early on that no matter how powerful he felt about a movie-going experience, he still could not retell it through the emotional impressions alone.

“It started with a drunken king. He was celebrating in a big building with a lot of other men. He's almost naked and calls the men beautiful. There's a younger woman there who seems to be upset with his drunkenness, maybe embarrassed. He tries to give her a kiss but falls down. Then he starts throwing gold to all the men. He gives the building a name. Of course, I can never remember names.”

Volk nods his with his eyes closed.

“So the king kind of passes out and all the men start stomping and chanting his name. This draws the attention of the monster who is a ways away.”

“Do they show the monster?”

“Yeah, he's kinda human, but big and kind of half zombie and half troll. But he looks kinda human, like he might be a mutant outcast or something.”

“Nice.” Volk nods his head slightly. “What was the golden female thing from the trailer?”

“That's later. This monster screams a lot, like he's in pain. The singing seems

to drive him into a fury. Suddenly the doors to the building explode open and everybody stops and looks out into the snow. Then he's suddenly there picking up guys and throwing them around like dolls. He's twice the size of the men. He rips the leg off one soldier and throws it at another. Then a woman screams and this seems to freeze him before he kills the woman. He just blows through all the guys until he gets to the king who stands to face him but has no sword. The king keeps saying "fight me, fight me" but the monster doesn't. He just looks at him and kind of screams and whimpers at the same time. It's actually very strange. Then the monster is sucked into the fire, which has been emanating a strange blue light the whole time he was on the attack."

Champion can tell Volk is transfixed. His eyes are slightly wider and he does not blink. Volk had finished his food and neatly folded the paper plates, napkins and wrappers into a pile that Champion will take to the garbage when he goes to get dessert.

"Next it shows the monster wander around a cave carrying two dead men like fish. He hears a female voice that seems to scold him for attacking men. He lies on the ground crying like a boy. All of a sudden a tentacle comes and caresses his head as the voice asks if he hurt the king. He says no. Then back at the building they are cleaning up the bodies and the king is telling them to send for help. There's this guy I didn't mention before who seems kind of evil. He was kicking a crippled kid who was serving beer and then he hid in a pool of water while the attack was happening. He asks the king if he should pray to the new Christian god as well as the old gods Odin and somebody else. The king is like 'naw'." Champion chuckles. "He's like, we can

only really help ourselves. We need a hero. Cut to said hero on a boat coming through a storm.”

“That's Beowulf?” asked Volk.

“Exactly, he's the title character. So he lands his ship and the coast guards threaten him at first then take him to the king. There the king seems to know him from when he was boy or something and this same evil guy tries to undermine him by telling a story of how Beowulf lost a swimming contest. This is where it gets kind of cool. Beowulf acknowledges that he lost, but only because he had to fight sea-monsters. And as Beowulf is telling his side of the story, we see him repeatedly stabbing the eyes out of these giant whale-dragon type things. He says he lost because one grabbed him and pulled him under. Except the image of the monster is of a beautiful mermaid who he just stares at while—in the story he tells—he cuts its heart out.”

“So he is lying?”

“Yeah sort of, but a mermaid is still sea-monster. And he says he killed nine sea-monsters, but then one of his men says under his breath, 'last time it was three'.”

Volk laughs then leans back in chair. He seems to prepare his whole body for listening to the story.

“So they have a stare down, between Beowulf's men and the kings' men. But the king just waves off the aggression and they open the hall to drink and eat. This—they say—will draw the monster. Beowulf is real macho. He just keeps saying “and then we will kill your monster'. And that's pretty much what happens. The monster comes again, but Beowulf fights him—naked! I guess he felt because the monster didn't use any weapons or armor, neither should he.”

Volk frowned. He had already unconsciously leaned forward again as the action picked up.

“So he beats him of course. The monster blasts through the door again and kills a bunch of Beowulf’s men. He skewers two on spear. One guy runs at him and hits him right on the head with a sword, but the monster just grabs the man with one hand, pulls the sword out of his head before biting the guy’s head off. He chews it as he looks at Beowulf.”

Volk interjects another “nice.”

“Beowulf pours water on the blue fire, which, I dunno, weakens the monster. He then fights him. It’s a little too silly to explain. A bunch of acrobatics and what not. But he realizes that the ear of the monster is its weakness. He gets on the monster’s back and starts punching it, eventually busting it open and then the monster starts to shrink. The monster starts to cry and try to run away. It’s kind of disturbing actually. Beowulf kind of becomes the monster. Beowulf catches the monster in the door. It seems to ask him who he is. I’m not sure I didn’t ever understand what the monster was saying. Beowulf is surprised that it talks and yells ‘I am the monster who lusts and destroys’. Then he slams the door so hard it rips the monster’s arm off.

Volk nods again and says “nice”.

“Oh, I forgot to mention,” Champion smiles sheepishly, but Volk accepts the interludes to the narratives naturally. “Before the battle the King promises Beowulf a treasure, but as he’s talking about it, it’s pretty clear Beowulf wants his wife. The young woman from the beginning. And right before the battle and after it’s suggested that the monster is the illegitimate son of the king. The mother-monster, finds her son

wounded in the cave and watches him die. She screams and flies to the building where the men are.”

“That's the golden woman.”

“Yes, but she's never really shown. There are glimpses of her in the water as scaly and kind of monstrous, but she appears to Beowulf as the king's wife in a dream. She says she wants a son. Then her face turns monstrous with teeth. When he wakes up almost every one in the hall is dead and hanging from the rafters. So only Beowulf and one warrior go to a swamp filled with skeletons to fight the mother.” Champion stopped. He had a natural inclination to let the story rest a moment while he organized the coming scene in his head.

Volk was still. His eyes wandered around the room for a moment. He put his finger up. “This is a great moment for ice cream. I'm thinking anything chocolaty. You know what's good.” He laughed at his own demands.

Champion sipped his soda, noticing his throat actually felt rough from his long narration and grabbed the bag of change significantly reduced in weight since he walked up to the visiting room. He always held it in his hands. In his pocket thirty dollars of change pulled his pants down.

The ice cream vending machine was his favorite. There was a cooler box behind the glass face of the machine that opened automatically. A vacuum hose dropped down in the selected retainer and grabbed the package then dropped it in the bin. He watched it precisely. He was completely focused.

Volk's face had again turned to stone when he returned to the table. He took the ice cream sandwich graciously and peeled its paper very gingerly. “Now may I unpause my movie? I believe we were about to go into a cave.”

“Yes. He goes in alone. He finds a cavern with gold or something glowing gold in the walls. On an altar is the body of the monster. But it suddenly explodes and the head falls in the water. Then the mother comes up through the water and that's what you saw on the TV trailer. It's half beautiful and half monster. The skin is a mix of gold liquid and normal skin and she has a tail.”

“And huge boobs? Is it nudity?”

“Yeah, kind of. He tries to hit her with the sword, but she's like an illusion and it goes right through her. She starts to seduce him. She says he will be king and his name could live on past death while others die. She starts to promise him these things if he will give her another son. He just looks at her. She melts his sword and they start to kiss. Then it cuts to the building with the king. He gives the king the head of the monster, while later telling of how he killed its mother.”

“Wait, but it didn't show him killing her?” Volk interjected.

“No, he's lying. The king takes him to the next room and asks why he did not bring back the head of the mother. He suspects that Beowulf was seduced as well. He pretends to accept Beowulf's lie. He goes out and tells all the people that Beowulf shall have his kingdom, wife and treasure when he dies since he has no son. He then throws himself off the balcony of his tower. And everyone is shocked and crying.”

“I don't get it, why?”

“I guess he's free of the curse now that it's on Beowulf. The movie then fast forwards to when Beowulf is old and king of the land. All these other tribes are attacking for the glory of defeating him. He fights one of the warriors on the beach, but spares him so he will tell the tale of his courage. He thinks the gods won't let him die.”

Champion realizes that end is a blur to him. He doesn't remember the specific course of events. "The rest is going to have to be summed up. He had a child with the monster's mother and it became a dragon that attacks the town. There's a long fight scene that I can't remember too well, other than he's hanging from the dragon's neck by a chain. He has to cut off his own arm to reach into a hole in the dragon's throat. He kills it by ripping out its heart with his bare hands. The whole time this fight is going on the dragon is flying around the castle trying to kill Beowulf's wife and mistress, so when it dies they both fall to the shore below. The dragon slowly disintegrates in what looks like gold dust into the ocean. The people of the kingdom bury him by putting him in a boat with a bunch of treasure and setting it on fire at sea. His friend, who becomes king after him, sees the mother kiss the body as it goes down in the sea. Then the movie ends as she looks at him—seducing him to the same fate."

"That's how it ends." Volk didn't sound disappointed, but as if he concurred.

"Yes. I thought it was kind of a Hollywood action flick, but not a Hollywood story. I liked it."

"I thought you would. That's why I made you go see it." Volk looked content.

"Isn't it based on an old story?"

"Yes, an old English poem. I had to read a part of it in a class. The part where Beowulf kills the monster. I don't remember much other than it being pretty difficult to understand. It's like one of more important pieces of literature."

On the drive back to the city Champion thought of the "Three Crows" party. It was there still, underneath his skin. It wouldn't go away. Champion thought of asking about it on the phone, but Volk only recalled memories at his own pace. If asked about

a specific occasion, he would frown and shake his head then tell of a different time with the same people. Champion couldn't remember who else was at that party with them. He thought it must have been Kevin. Kevin would have been distracted and distant, more taken up with the girl's magazines and in his own world. He would have stayed in the room when everybody else left to talk to the mother down stairs.

Champion suddenly remembered telling Kevin about Abbey's invitation later—a week later or month, he didn't know. He had looked at Champion dumbly. “Really” he asked. Once confirmed he said “You totally could have gotten laid. She's a slut.”

The word “slut” had made Champion wince. He wondered if Kevin would have said it in the presence of Volk. But of course, they almost certainly called her that after he broke up with her. But Kevin was gone. He never made contact with Volk once he was in prison and he was already suffering from alcoholic tremors the last time he had seen him at maybe age twenty. Champion assumed him dead.

The reason he tried to remember was how the night ended. Jamie's mother was upset at something. Was there a man outside, or not a man outside when she had wanted one. And there was a hammer, he thought. He wondered if the man outside had a hammer or she was offering it to the one who would have to go outside. Champion remembered the distraction from the still companionship of the room had excited him very much. Though he had become terrified that he would have to do something. It all sounded like responsibility and he had already felt like the oldest one there. He and Volk were, to the mother, the men in the house. Champion had stood next to Volk and he could still see Jamie's mother looking at their equal heights over her cigarette.

A Doll's Dream

A tight nylon strap pressing across his chest held him in place. The boy was set on an artificial leather seat and strapped down by long arms stretching in from the open door; a cold breeze numbed his toes. He could not see much out the window except the occasional light suspended high overhead through the partially scraped rear windows. Looking between the two front seats he could see the same two hands that fastened the straps tightly gripping a wheel. They were covered in tight black cloth gloves.

The boy looked at his feet. They hung suspended over the rising smell of old french fries. The boy was slipping into a heavy-eyed daze. The deep sounds of the motor and slight vibration of the air moved him toward sleep. He felt warmed and comfortable; there was a draft of warmth from somewhere because his face was flushing in the sharp air that bit his ears.

The fluidity of his suspension between sleep and consciousness changed. There was no longer a turbulence; it had calmed and stilled. Then the hum stopped. There was shuffling and then a wicked blast of cold air that made him pull tight at himself. The cold curled around the back of his naked neck, but he refused to open his eyes. The long arms began to work around his body again. He lay weak and tired, refusing to accommodate. The arms unfastened the strap and grabbed him beneath the arms. He was lifted out of the warmth of his seat and brought out into the cold. He was able to see a great deal for a few moments. There was a dim gray light in the sky, the streetlights were slowly dying and the snow was all present much as it had been before. It sat unavailable to him on the rooftops and windowsills, clean and undisturbed. The roads were coated with a soft surface of trampled snow and sand. It

had the texture of frosting smeared over an empty plate. This he was not supposed to play with but he would. Lining the roads on both sides were mountain ranges of snow, sand, and mud. There he would tower like a monster.

He then looked at the building he was standing before. It towered huge over him. There were twin towering peaks jutting from the main roof-line that looked over the yard of snow and onto the road. He looked all this over with a dulling interest before he was blinded. A blue cap was pulled over his head from behind and above him.

One of the hands pulled him along. It pulled him up to the curb where he stepped up to the walkway. He scuffled through the snow blindly, relying completely on the hand for guidance. He watched his boots just past his nose, passing over the walkway, crushing tufts of snow as he struggled to keep up with the hand's persistence. His feet hit a large stoop of concrete and he stumbled forward onto his hands and knees. He was quickly picked up and set on his feet again by the hands accompanied by a worried apology.

A rapping at the door brought a moment of silence as the boy stood there pushing the cap out of his eyes and listening to the winter air bump the chimes hanging from the awning above him. The large wooden door suddenly opened with a vacuum force that seemed to pull him against the outer screen-door. There stood a giant. Through the screen he could see the curves of what he thought to be a very large belly. He could not see above the belly, but he thought he saw the giant put her hand on top of it, as if holding it down. The boy's eyes fixed upward before the persistent hand moved him forward again. He stepped up into the house to avoid being pushed over again.

The other side of the red bricks was a small brown-carpeted room, which the giant was blocking. He stood between two figures who talked in an exchange of utterances too far up for him to bother to understand. He turned suddenly to look at the one who brought him. She stood in the entryway, not completely inside, but prepared to depart without him. He felt his body go weak as the door closed. He moved to grab the hand pulling the door shut when the giant picked him up with very strong hands and set him on a small bench. She told him to take his boots and jacket off. Her voice became clearer as it was deeper and more commanding than the departing one's. He sat there observing his new situation.

The giant, losing patience, loomed over him and began stripping his coat off his shoulders and telling him more fiercely to remove his boots. He bent over and slowly undid the Velcro on one boot then the other, carefully loosening them and lifting his heel out of them. He moved slowly, trying to absorb his surroundings. The carpet was reddish with black flower-like designs. There stood a coat rack in the corner of the small room with a multitude of other jackets hanging from it. His jacket, being newly added atop many others, looked very foreign among the other jackets, which differed radically from his own in shape and colors. He looked at the piles of boots and other shoes stacked beneath the rack, carelessly arranged in pairs. He didn't want to give away his boots.

Two large hands suddenly grabbed his arms and lifted him up. He was swung around the belly and set on the carpet of a vastly larger room. A large bay window displayed dead trees and snow smothered-roofs. The giant gestured him along one edge of the room where the carpet was well worn. He walked past the dormant television, looking into a darkened hall with several doors and listened to the heavy

footfalls of the giant behind him. Not knowing how far to walk, he turned to look up at her when he ran into the door her long arms had reached ahead of him and opened. There was a sharp scolding of caution and she turned him toward the entrance, which revealed a stairway down.

The staircase was bare lumber that still retained its wood smell. The tan carpet which he stood on went down only one step before it became all wood. The walls rose high on both sides of the staircase to an unlit ceiling. At the bottom of the stairs he saw wood walls. There was light to left and darkness to the right.

“Go on down, I’ll check up on you later. Stay on the carpet, the other room is off limits,” she said. She let him take the first step down before shutting the door. He listened to her foot falls trail away without taking his eyes off the lit room below.

He lowered his right foot slowly, allowing it to settle on the only carpeted step very gently. It made no noise. His other foot followed. He moved his foot down to the wood surface, which seemed like touching nakedness. He moved more quickly down to a place where he was still not able to see into either room. The air was still below, no movement, no sound, only the hum of a machine. He listened until he could hear the silence ringing in his ears. He went farther down.

A room was framed by shelves of miscellaneous discarded toys that sat below a white paneled ceiling. There was more carpet. It ended in a tattered stringy edge draped over the gray cement floor. It was greenish and thin, not like what he had seen in the room above. His eyes examined the collection of cheap, mostly broken toys on the shelves. Nothing of interest to the boy—stuff he would have pushed under his bed. He turned to look into the forbidden room. He could see nothing but a concrete floor that ran into the darkness. The hum was somewhere in there.

He turned to look at the length of the carpeted room. There were two halves. The green carpet ended and a brownish carpet started at a split where a pair of pillars of red bricks stood next to the walls. The far half of the room had a large round table covered with a worn light blue sheet, a one-piece desk, and the background to both was a stack of cardboard blocks—designed to look like red bricks—along the far wall. He wondered briefly why the sheet was half hanging off the table, but the heavy footfalls of the giant with the huge belly passed overhead. He watched the paneled ceiling and waited to hear the door open and a huge booming voice telling him it was time to go. He blinked once then twice in suspense before turning in deflation to inspect the shelves of toys.

He found a box of building blocks on the floor underneath the bottom shelf. In the corner farthest from the dark room he pried the lid off a plastic box as quietly as possible. He plucked the longer pieces off the top. He could not dig any deeper without making a clattering noise. He picked up the little blocks with his red fingers and examined each. Some were broken and others did not belong in the box at all. As he became absorbed with details he began to dig.

He looked at the two piles between his knees. He was not sure what he could build with them. The possibilities arose in his head and he knocked them down one at a time. He didn't have the right kind of blocks to make anything good. As he tried to consider other forms to construct he realized there were sounds lurking behind the noise of his digging through the box. He looked up. He had forgotten where he was and the sight of the two pillars put him back in divided basement. The noise sounded like a cough. He looked for a cougher. There was none. He knew it came from the far half of the room. He left the piles of blocks and stood up. He gave the dark room a

glance and took a few steps toward the pillars. There were words in his chest but he bit them back. The silence was thick and real for the boy; he might have leaned his little body against it.

He did not say anything, but they started to come out. A pair of brown eyes and dark hair eased from behind the sheet then back. It was a quick and smooth movement. Another pair of eyes, blue, topped in blond hair, rose from behind the wall of cardboard. There was a sound like hissing from under the table. Then a small one crawled out. It looked at him from all fours. A small boy, it had curly brown hair. Another small one crawled out and stared at him—a girl. There was now an audible whispering going on under the table.

The boy stood there looking at all the eyes. Each pair ran their fingers up and down his body, poking the belly under the blue sweatshirt, tugging the brown corduroy of his pants and putting a thumb in his open mouth. The eyes did not recognize him, his form or his face. He wore neither the dresses nor jumpsuits they were wrapped in. There was a sleepiness in their look, like he had woken them. Some of their mouths hung open, letting the fluids slip out; he could see teeth, sprouting everywhere. Each face was smooth and puffy with holes punched through for features. The one behind the table rose a little so her entire face was visible. It was older and larger than any of the others.

“Is it lunch yet?” asked the blond girl.

“What..?” He shook his head a little.

“He wants to know if we can go upstairs yet. But we can’t because it’s not.”

The one behind the table had a slightly lower voice than his own. The little boy on all fours let out a whine and its arms went limp. It laid its face on the floor and began

dragging its teeth across the carpet. After a few seconds it raised itself again, a line of fluid stretched between the floor and its lip. It crawled back under the table, as the little girl looked wide-eyed at everything. The blond one that had been behind the wall was looking at his pants with slit eyes. The one that stood behind the table still probed him with a tilted head. There were twin pig tails that jutted at a backward angle from her head, wrapped at the base in pink string. He observed the two; they both seemed large, taller than he was. The blond one had dark eyes that were very crunched, she looked like she was squinting.

“Quit staring at me!” the blond one said.

He turned his head quickly. Then he saw her head rotate and tilt a little. She stood up and came directly at him. She *was* bigger than he was. He took a few quick steps away and she passed him. She bent over and gathered up the two piles of blocks and dumped them back into the bucket. She put the lid back on and shoved it back to its spot.

“You didn’t get permission. You already woke us up and it ain’t even lunch yet!” She glared at him. His eye leveled at her neck. She walked back to her cubbyhole behind the cardboard block wall. He took a few steps after her and she noticed.

“Oh no, you stay over there! You’ve been bad and now it’ll take forever if you come over here.” She marched back to the far wall.

“And stay out of the other room,” the pig-tailed girl added.

After a while the older ones arose from the far side of the room. The boy had sat in his corner silently fearing the dark room. It had no door and seemed to draw his

eyes. He wondered what was in there. He lay crumpled in the corner when the blond one came over and stood over him. His eyes flickered and focused on her. She just stood there looking at him. He got up and straightened his pants. He felt her gaze and looked up at her, waiting for a command or a complaint.

“You can’t just come here and start touching stuff that ain’t yours,” she said, completely uninterested in her own words. “You can come over only if....” She paused and lipped some words to herself. “You can come over if you do some things.”

“Over where?” the boy asked.

“Over there,” She pointed toward the far side of the room. She frowned. She walked over to the other side where the pig-tailed girl gave her a plastic box. She opened it and returned shortly with her fist curled loosely into a fist.

“Open your mouth.”

He grimaced and pulled his head away.

“What?” she said. “I won’t hurt, you gotta do this before you go over.” She held her fist in front of his face.

“What is it?”

“*You* can’t know, it’s part of coming over” She shook her fist a little. “Come on!”

He clamped his jaw shut and stared at the fist. “I don’t wanna...”

He tried to get her to show him once more. When he opened his mouth to plead with her she turned and slapped his mouth with a cupped hand. His lips pursed in a pucker before his teeth clamped shut. He could feel a hardness surrounded by a prickliness, like a small jagged rock, but he felt a little branch go between his lips. He pushed her arm out of the way and wildly spit and buzzed his lips. It clung to his

lower lip and chin. He screamed and wiped it away. It was a small reddish beetle. The insect was on its back with legs scrambling in the air before it caught a leg in the carpet and turned itself over.

He yelped and his voice cracked a squeal mid-cry. His eyes watered as he curled and rubbed the sensation off his lip.

She only looked at him. After a moment she said, “Why did you have to scream?”

He then heard the footfalls, quick and heavy over the ceiling. They came to halt—they heard the door handle turn hard and open at the top of the stairs. The naked stairs creaked and whined as the feet pounded down them. He leaned against the wall where his view was partly obscured. He saw the belly emerge first.

The giant bellowed at the group as she entered the room. He tried to push himself tighter into the corner. There was no hesitation however; the girl with twin pig-tails pointed out the blond who still stood in front of him, towering over him.

“She slapped him in the face.” Her voice was high and bright.

There was a quick movement and the blond who had been standing over him was gone, ripped away by the unseen giant with the belly. He peeked his head out and watched. The giant had her by each arm, the huge hands wrapped around the tiny sticks. She was up in the air, then set over the bent knee of the giant, who he now saw had red hair. It was the first time the boy had seen the giant’s head closely. He listened to the dull thud that was the large hand making solid contact with beetle-pusher’s backside. The force was enormous on the relatively little body of the blond. Impact vibrations seemed to rise in her cheeks. Then the girl was picked up high in the air

again and set on her feet. She hobbled away, tears streaming down her face. She did not make a sound.

“I’m the only one that does the hitting around here.” When the giant stood erect he noticed that she was as tall as the dark room’s doorway. “You all pipe down, I almost finished lunch and I don’t want the herd of you raising hell!” Turning and leaving them with a warning glare, she disappeared up the steps.

The boy felt lightheaded; he had seen too much. The beaten blond-girl returned to her place behind the cardboard wall. The pig-tailed girl went to round up the smaller ones from under the table who had watched the series of events from behind the sheets. She stood a little upright and spoke with the same high and bright voice.

The blond-girl behind the wall gave out a single subtle whimper as her breathing slowly calmed. He listened to this and looked at his feet. The beetle was crawling toward the center of the room. He got off the floor and smashed it with his fist.

It was the large amounts of cold ketchup on the mushy meat sandwich that the boy could not stomach. He was sent downstairs early as punishment with the little boy who refused to drink the colored water. He asked if he could stay, he wanted to look out the large windows that surrounded the table. The giant's response was to pull him off his chair and set him at the top of the stairs. The little-boy came from behind him and skittered down the stairs quickly with its little legs. The boy had not thought it could move so fast. He followed slowly still feeling the sting in his arms where the giant had hoisted him. He would have to pass the dark room’s entrance again.

Although he found himself less afraid of darkness and more concerned with avoiding the attention of the giant. He got to the bottom step and stopped. He turned to see if the door was shut at the top of the stairs and the giant with the huge belly was not watching him from above. He then peered into the darkness, sticking the better part of his head in the doorway. There was a little window that provided only a beam of light that hit the opposing wall somewhere out of his sight.

He heard the doorknob turning and he pulled himself out of the dark-room and walked toward his corner, but he stopped in the middle of the room. He wanted to do something, but he seemed restricted to the empty half of the room with a toy shelf he was not allowed to touch. He did not see the little-one, he assumed it was under the table again. He sat in his corner and waited. It was a risk, he supposed, to wait for the blond one. She had been completely inanimate at the table, picking at all her food with her fingers and chewing it slowly with her mouth open. The pig-tailed girl seemed to take control of the bunch on the way up the stairs, talking down to the two little ones like they were pets and prodding the blond one not to lag behind and cause trouble. The pig-tailed girl did not include the boy in her control on the way up, but told him what seat to take when they got to the table. He had taken it without question and she seemed to dwell on him for a few moments before taking her own seat. He decided to wait for her, to see if she would allow him to come over to the other side of the room. They seemed to think the time passed quicker over there. He noticed that with nothing to occupy his hands, the time seemed to stop.

He heard the doorknob again and this time the slow tick and thump of the little-girl making her way down the stairs. It was accompanied with a quicker movement, which changed into the bare feet of the pig-tailed girl slapping the wood

of the step. She walked through the room, eyeing him, then went back to the shrouded table. The boy got up and followed her. She turned around and stared directly into his eyes. He stopped just before the split in the carpet. He wanted to ask her a question, but it was gone and he felt he had intruded where he did not belong.

“I was going to ask you a question,” the boy said. He did not wait for her to imbue her stare with the answer. “I was just wondering if you know why I can’t play with the blocks?”

She cocked her head at an angle and said, “You can,” in a very matter-of-fact way. She continued staring him in the eye and set her hand on the table. It reminded him of something he had seen on television and it meant something he did not understand.

“Oh. 'Kay.” He quickly turned and went back to the shelf. Grabbing the box, he pulled it over to his corner and sat down, his back to the far side of the room. The blocks promised to be a blanket for the remaining time. The boy told himself he would ignore any noises or actions that might occur, except for the bellow of the giant above.

He did not see the blond girl come down as he obsessed over the blocks. When he did see her he was startled by the way she looked at him. Her eyes were large as if concerned with his activity, he had seen this look before. She was staring at him from the edge of the carpet. She moved on, slowly across the same path each of the others had taken, back towards their side of the room. He felt a pang in his stomach as if he might need to protect his blocks from her, but she moved on and disappeared behind the fake cardboard wall.

The boy did pass time more quickly with the blocks. He made walls first, only one with a doorway, then he used one large square piece as a floor. He left out a ceiling so he could lord over this newly created domain. Once the elaborate walls were erected inside a square he simply stared into the corridors and small chambers. His eyes followed paths he might have taken if he were there, exploring different doors he imagined in the corridors, but each door he opened led to nothing. His creativity seemed to have fallen off after the original construction, each room was a dry and bare compartment.

After a long period the boy's eyes began to water from peering into the small crevasses. Looking up, he reexamined the environment in front of him. He felt as if he were just waking up again. He heard the machine again and wondered how long it had hummed away at the air without him listening to it. He looked at the construction and realized he knew it very well, every angled wall, every door it should have and every small room that lay so blank. He had tried to fill them, but could only think of insects. Agitated, the boy picked up the structure and dropped it into the bucket. It disintegrated, the pieces freeing themselves from the whole and rejoining the formless pile of the bucket.

"Hey! Why did you do that?"

The boy looked around to find the blond girl, returned to her spot standing over him. "Why did you break that?" her voice gently poked again. The boy thought she sounded confused and he did not understand this.

"What? I was just done with it."

She was not satisfied with the answer. He looked up at her with much the same emotion. "What...are you doing?" he asked.

Her face recoiled in disgust. "Nothing." She spun around and walked back toward the other side of the room where there was a great deal of more activity. The pig-tailed girl watched her come back then returned her attention to the smaller ones who sat across from each other, passing a ball back and forth. The boy had not seen the ball on the shelf. The blond girl walked in a very powerful manner back to the wall and appeared to sit down behind it. He could still see her legs, they crossed in a sitting position, one bare foot pointing back at him. The pig-tailed girl turned to talk with her, but seemed to get no response.

The boy began putting all pieces back in the bucket, noticing a pile of blocks that he did not use. He moved quickly, fearing that the giant could come down and see his mess. The pig-tailed girl noticed the boy's quick movements and approached him. When he looked up at her, she began by tilting her head and raising one eyebrow.

The pig-tailed girl said while gesturing to the floor above with her thumb, "She said you should go in the other room and get a jar of fruit." Her voice was high and straight, unlike the beaten girl's sometimes-quiet voice.

"I'm not supposed to go in there," he said. He glanced at what he assumed she was talking about. "She even said so."

"Yeah, but we all go in there once and she said you should go and get some fruit. It's in a jar. She might be making a snack." She said this with a swing in her tone to suggest something very good.

"When did she say that?"

"When I went to pee, she told me so. You'd better do it before too long," the pig-tailed girl said. "It was a few minutes ago. When you were playing with the Legos."

The boy did not know what *Legos* were but he assumed she meant the building blocks. He considered it and got up. "I don't know where. You have to show me."

"Right there," she said, pointing at the darkness. "Go, now!" She put her hand on his shoulder and pushed him toward the door. He looked over to the other children as if they might give him some confirmation, but they only stared. The blond girl was watching as well, her head leaning past the block wall.

"Go!" the pig-tailed girl insisted and pushed him harder.

He protested and yanked his shoulder out of her grip. "I'm going!" He walked to the doorway and was shocked by the coldness of the concrete. His little toe felt numb almost instantly. He paused and looked up the stairway. He thought he would go up and ask the giant himself, but he thought there might be a problem with that. He didn't want to get spanked the way the blond girl had. He took three very large steps into the room and stopped. The humming was definitely coming from here. The floor vibrated just slightly as if taking a deep breath. Another few steps and he could not see the floor any more. His heart began to pump faster as he realized where he was.

"Where are the fruits? I can't see." His words seemed to bounce a little in the darkness and he looked back. The pig-tailed girl was standing there wide-eyed, watching him as he was swallowed by the darkness. The blond girl, who watched with a very sad face, accompanied her.

"I'll get the lights," the pig-tailed girl said, and then ran up the stairs. He almost cried out as she went. He turned around, but something reached out and knocked him over. Something crashed to the ground with him, it made a loud clanging noise and he panicked as the noise split the blackness and penetrated the walls. He breathed hard, forcing each breath out with an audible effort. The footsteps of the girl

only made it half way up the stairs before the door opened. He gulped hard and scrambled frantically to get up and out of the darkness.

He heard the pig-tailed girl pause and he imagined her head tilting all the way back to look up at the giant's belly. The pig-tailed girl began humming and spitting trying to get her words out. "He—He is in there. In the, in the—dark room."

He managed to get to his feet and run straight out of the room. Once out the boy looked up at the giant who was coming to the bottom of the stairs. He cringed and prepared himself.

"Now didn't I tell you to stay outta there!" her voice boomed in his ears. "I remember. Why don't you?" The giant's hands clamped his waist. "Next time you remember," she lifted him. He tightened to receive blows. She swung him around so he was hovering over the stairs behind her. "Why don't you go on up, it's time for you to go."

When the boy heard this he began to wriggle violently in her grip. He could already smell the slush outside. She dropped the wriggling body. He landed on his knees then scrambled up the stairs. The others stared in awe. The pig-tailed girl asked in a small voice while twisting at her fingers: "Can I go yet?"

The giant smiled and shook her head. "Not yet."

In the Weeds

David sat in the back seat of a car, the radio deck was playing a CD and there were moments of silence. This car was full. Two in the front and three in the back. Instead of watching the shadowing of landscapes over snow he fixated his gaze on the orange firefly of a cigarette in the front passenger seat. The scent was distant and pleasant, but it was accumulating. He could not get comfortable in his seat. It was leather and too comfortable; the other reason was the girl, Tiffany, sitting next to him. Her leg leaned against his. When making turns, her body swayed and bumped against him. He was using every muscle in his body to prevent this contact with the stranger. Above all he feared her accusation.

David's head flickered up toward the front of the car when the music stopped mid-song. Christian peered back at him from the front passenger seat—the firefly cast dim illumination on his chin and nose. David looked at the silhouette of short choppy hair that raised above the orange nose. He thought he saw the cheeks rise as if Christian was squinting at him or smiling.

“David, right?”

David watched the firefly dance.

“Yeah.” David's voice was hoarse and filled with liquid. It had been a long time since he had spoken.

“You like *Gish*?”

David nodded. Christian stared back at him for several moments. A silence of several moments lingered as they faced each other. David opened his mouth to say “Yeah, old stuff. I like it a lot,” when Christian turned back toward the radio and

began digging through a pile of CD's. He was glad he had not said anything. He didn't want them to know that much about him.

He was not comfortable listening to music he liked in the presence of the others. On David's own terms *Gish* was a history of emotion and hopeful anticipation—whatever he'd felt at the initial experience. If he was forced to listen to it anew, rehearsing each note in the company of a different audience, it took on a different form and became alien to him. He did not want to re-associate the music with those people at that moment. He did not ask to change it or even try to ignore the music. His muscles were becoming sore from trying to hold still and the heat generated between his leg and Tiffany's was microwaving a ball of excited tension in his stomach. He felt nauseated and pulled his leg away.

David giggled to himself as he considered his situation. He was sitting next to an attractive woman—the type he had and would certainly fantasize about—but her actuality made him ill. He found that empowering for the moment. He also found that safe—he planned to extend the ideal through the rest of the night. When he allowed his peripheral vision to wander he noticed that Tiffany was looking at him.

“Did I miss a joke?” Her voice was kind and teasing.

Shaking his head and shrugging his shoulders he realized he was not going to be too safe. The ball in his stomach developed a new layer. She looked at him for another moment then winked and returned her attention forward. As she looked away, he forced a lust-less smile and rolled his eyes toward his window.

David searched for the firefly and found it pointing at him. The firefly displayed its fullest intensity and then quickly zipped out of the car. Christian resealed the window and continued his analysis of David.

David looked back trying to reproduce the same disinterested curiosity he imagined to be on Christian's face.

"You know Cormac, hey?" Christian said over robust upturn in the song.

David nodded and forced a drowned "Yea—p" to sound at ease.

"You've never come out with us before?"

David smiled and put his hands in the air and lied. "I have a girlfriend."

Christian's silhouette changed with a smile and he released half a grunt that might have been a laugh. "What changed your mind?"

"I promised Cormac I would. Once, before I left town."

"I see." Christian nodded his head as if to the music and turned casually to the woman driving the car. She had not introduced herself at any point, but David knew her to be Michelle. Her eyes remained on the road. David could see her hand on the wheel by the light of the display. It was small and had a lot of rings up and down each finger, including one on the thumb. Christian's head snapped back toward David.

"Where are you going?" Christian asked.

"Milwaukee."

"Oh yeah. Ever been there before?"

"A few baseball games."

"Brewers. Yeah, how bout that boy Burnitz!"

"It was like, seven years ago when I was a kid."

"Ahhh, not a fan anymore." Christian paused for a moment, nodding to the music again. "You know I've seen you around a lot. Do you remember when we were in gym class a few years back? You hit a home run. We were playing baseball, first hour. You hit a home run. I remember that."

David's jaw locked. He shook his head slowly and bit his lip. He calmed and said playfully, "Naa, I try and block out gym class." It was not convincing. "Where are we going to meet Cormac?"

"I remember that because Brandon was pitching." There was slight yelp from the other side of Tiffany. David could not see around her breasts and did not try. "Do you remember Brandon?"

"I went to the funeral." David felt like he had caused the questioning, but didn't know how.

"Oh, you knew him that well! Or were you there just for the free food?" He giggled at himself. "Did they serve tacos at his funeral?" He giggled even harder.

"He wasn't Mexican, you fucking redneck!" A sharp voice came from the other side of Tiffany. David recognized it. He had not seen the entire contents of the car when he had opened the door—he just jumped in and discovered and endured his situation as it came.

Christian turned more completely around to stare at Anne who sat directly behind him. Anne only looked at Christian, seemingly wary of her place. After a moment she looked out the window.

David did not expect much more out of her. He thought her a pretty girl, but one who appeared to starve herself to try and look like Tiffany who was much taller.

"Again, it was about several years ago." David said.

Christian relented and relaxed in his seat. "Back in the day, hey? Back when even Brandon was a little fucker."

David straightened his face and nodded. The car was approaching civilization again. The excessively bright lights of the Super America gas station and Taco Bell

attracted Christian's attention and he turned away from David. Michele made the declaration as she confidently turned the wheel that everyone in the car was to keep an eye open for County V.

They met Cormac at a McDonald's on the other side of the village. Cormac had come alone and his empty car looked inviting to David. When they pulled up next to Cormac's car, David got out immediately and looked back in without looking at anyone in particular and forced a smile. He said, "Give you guys some breathing room," then shut the door. The lighting around the restaurant allowed David to see Tiffany smile as he walked away. It was a smile that suggested she knew he was afraid of them.

He got into Cormac's car and they nodded at each other. Cormac thanked Michele for picking up David and proceeded to explain the route they were going to take. Then the back door opened and Christian got in behind David.

"Girls against boys" he punched Cormac's extended fist. Christian put his hand on David's shoulder and produced a pack of cigarettes in front of him.

"Smoke?"

"I don't." After a moment of consideration he added, "Thanks."

Christian withdrew the cigarettes and leaned back in the seat.

The night finally came to an end. David realized he did not know how to drink alcohol. He felt weary and could not connect with the outbursts of ebullience he had seen at the gathering in the woods. There had been several people he recognized from his high school and many more he did not. Cormac told him some of the kids came

from towns further north. The kids from David's school had been surprised to see him at all and further amused he was holding a can of beer.

They left the weedy opening and its ring of cars early and stopped at the same McDonald's for food. Christian was leaning against David's shoulder. David had grown accustomed to Christian's presence throughout the night. Tiffany and Anne sat across from them. Tiffany maintained her mischievous smile; it had become a little more exaggerated after each Miller Lite. Anne was badly drunk, she rested her head against the wall with her eyes closed, occasionally a whimper of complaint would escape her. David's eyes had not adjusted to the harsh florescence that bounced off every brightly colored surface. He squinted and looked down at the table. Cormac was ordering food.

Christian smiled, a large and dumb smile. His eyes did not suggest stupidity to David. They were set back in his head a little, his brow cast a slight shadow over them in the florescence. He had thick black eyelashes, as if covered in mascara. David assumed this came with health. Christian's head bobbed backward and revealed the brown eyes. David blinked several times and let his vision wave and blur away from Christian.

"I guess we kinda popped your cherry, heh?" Christian pinched David's cheek.

David did not recoil, but considered for a moment then nodded his head.

"You never got drunk before?" asked Christian.

"I've never had alcohol before."

"David, you don't drink, you don't smoke, you don't dance. What else don't you do?"

David shrugged his shoulders.

“That’s OK, I was pretty sure you didn’t.” He laughed and leaned back against the wall. He gave David a solid slap on the back. “That’s why I was sent! To clean your fucking act up.” He giggled a little more.

Smiling against his will, David found his eyes wandering over Anne. She was paying no attention to the conversation. Locked in world of sickness that David imagined by multiplying his own weariness of the alcohol by ten. He was only able to drink three High Life's. Beer tasted worse than he had thought. He had watched Tiffany shove drinks in Anne's face all night. He had watched Tiffany all night.

It was more of an after thought to him then. *Tiffany was a very attractive woman*. David repeated that over and over in his head. He tried to challenge his instinctive lust for her, but by the time he found himself in the McDonald’s he was content with the simplicity of sexual attraction. He had not even cracked that surface. As he analyzed her up and down he tried to isolate the qualities that made her so much more stimulating than other girls. By fragmenting the qualities of human beauty into categories he had effectively found some hidden flaws. He obsessed over the flaws before retreating to the ever-comfortable personality excuse. She had none. He had classified her a long time earlier in their time at school as brainless. She may have changed, but he was very comfortable with the existing designation.

Looking at Anne, he felt sorry for her again. The empathy was magnified into a pang in his stomach by whatever alcohol was still in his system. He had pretended to drink from his second can for over an hour and a half and he thought himself more weary than drunk. Christian abruptly grabbed David’s neck and with some force brought together their gazes. Christian smiled and tried to hold David’s flickering eyes.

“Oh leave him alone,” Tiffany said as she got up and went to the bathroom.

Christian’s smile faded. He half squinted to signify knowledge and to question. “Watcha lookin at?” His smile then resurfaced.

David smiled. “Nothing.”

Christian seemed to think about it for a moment then let go. He put his arm around David’s shoulder. He stared into his eyes again, his nose was almost touching David’s. “You’re a funny guy, but you know what? I have to piss. Get the hell out of my way.”

David got up and let him out. He sat back down and continued to look over the virtually unconscious Anne. She had short brown hair, a surprising difference from Tiffany’s long black hair. Aside from the redness of her face, her skin was pale. He eyed the smoothness of her nose, down her chin then along her jaw line; her neck was thin and was rebounded by the curve of her shoulder.

“One too many?” He bit his lip.

Her eyes opened and looked at him from the wall she used as a pillow. She rolled her eyes in anger or disgust. “Yeah. And whatever you gave me is really too much right now.” She swallowed and took some deep breaths.

David shifted in his seat. “What?”

“Your gift.” She continued to take deep breaths.

“I didn’t give you anything.” David sat forward and put his arms on the table.

“Tiffany said it was your birthday gift.”

David felt a sweat breakout on his forehead. “You said thanks and kissed me on the cheek,” he said more to himself. He had not known why she had done that at the time.

She nodded and there were hints of a smile, but it seemed inhibited by her muscles. She looked very tired.

“Yeah. Just before we left.” She yawned and it seemed to David for too long. “It started to kick in about ten minutes ago.” Her voice had calmed and softened. She lay still for a moment then sat bolt upright. She gritted her teeth, “Shit! I shouldn’t have drank.” She put her head between her arms and her shoulders began to tighten then loosen. She drawled on between her arms “Fuck, fuck, fuck.”

“Are you okay?” David took her hand and held it. She squeezed it very hard. He saw Tiffany coming back from the bathroom. She saw the look on David's face.

“What’s wrong.”

“It’s OK,” Anne paused a moment, her head still under her left arm, “the vodka is not reacting well with the E.”

“You took it? Sweetheart, that wasn't E!” Tiffany’s voice wavered for a moment then returned to her smooth cool voice. David thought she sounded like she was acting in a movie whenever she spoke. “You were supposed to save that for some other time.”

Anne’s grip became tighter around David’s weakening hand. She made no attempt to reply. David put his other hand on Anne’s head. He glared up at Tiffany.

“Is that the pill you tried giving me? I didn’t give it to her!” His words became strained as he prevented himself from raising his voice.

“You said 'give them to your friend.' She's my friend and I was trying to score you some points.” She turned and tilted her head in response to his anger. She sat down next to Anne and began rubbing her back. “I’m sorry, I should have told you.”

Anne made no reply. She produced a sustained moan. “I...I feel like I

swallowed a vibrating bowling ball. I...” Her grip tightened again. David thought that every muscle in her body contracted. Then it just gave out and her whole body relaxed like a deflated balloon.

“Shit! Are you okay, Anne, are you okay?” Tiffany’s voice had strained and was on the edge of crying.

Anne began to shudder. She pulled on David’s hand. He got up and waved Tiffany out of the seat. He sat next to her and put his arms around her. He tried to warm her. He put his head close to her ear and said, “Shhhh, come on now. Just calm down. Shhhh.” She was small. He felt like he was cradling a child. He turned to Tiffany. “Why the fuck did you say I gave those to her?”

Tiffany’s eyes welled up and she looked confused. “What! I didn’t”

Christian came back. He looked at the scene and walked over casually. “I see that something is amiss.”

“I gave her her birthday present and she fucking took them with all those drinks.” Tiffany’s smile was not completely gone even as she appeared on the edge of panic. Her face contorted.

“That’s right! You fucking gave her those pills.”

“Fuck you!”

“Alright, alright. Just take it easy. Anne, baby, you gotta chill. You’re just fighting it. If you just chill and relax you will be able to puke and feel soooo much better.” Christian stood cross-legged while leaning against the table across the aisle. David thought he looked like a car salesman.

Tiffany had calmed and was wiping her eyes though there were no tears. “Do you think we should call 911 or something?”

“No!” David said increasing his embrace of Anne. He looked around to see if anyone else was around. She shivered in his arms. She moaned again. There was no one in the seating area, only the people behind the counter. He rocked her and whispered calming things in her ear. His own heart was vibrating. He took some deep breaths. He thought he could feel the other two staring down on him. Waiting for him to explain what they *should* do. He felt her warmth and size like a baby in his arms. Her face was pressed against the inside of his right elbow. He put his lips to her ear and whispered. “Those weren’t my pills.”

Bough Picking

Picking at lunch buckets the four sat on logs cut from the clearing. They sat with their backs to the hole as the cooing sound of the tussling treetops rained down on them. The trunks held that orchestration close, but a breeze was never felt on the forest floor.

David found neither the will to ration his cold drink nor the desire to eat solid food. Between the soggy jeans slicking the inside of his thighs and the jagged edge of the chain-sawed stool prickling his bottom he felt a teetering sense of relief. He tried to collect in his hand the condensation forming on the Sprite can's surface while his father unpacked the cooler.

He surveyed the group for signs of wear, wondering how his own exhaustion ranked. Paul's face was drawn longer than usual, but he only smiled before rubbing an apple and touching a pocketknife to its skin. David thought the pain of work and weather was drowned out by the excitement of working on one's own house. Paul was his father's friend and had been drawing up plans for his retirement house for at least a decade.

Alex, a young boy Paul had hired from town, looked anxious and distracted. He couldn't find a comfortable spot on his log or an empty space to gaze in.

Too tired to consider himself, David stared at Alex. He looked well built, with wiry muscles covered in a thin layer of tanned, clear skin. David was reminded of his best friend from elementary school, Lucas. More so he remembered Lucas' mother. He tried to remember her name, but could only remember the home-made tortillas she served to them buttered and sprinkled with sugar. They often came with a rebuke of her son's inability to say "please" and "thank you" in Spanish. She seemed to approve

of David, because he talked to her about Stephen King books. Alex was slimmer than Lucas and had a different face—one that resembled instead Lucas and David's bully. The memory seemed particularly distant as the work site was five hours north of the town he'd grown up in. He and his father were staying with Paul in his current house in Hayward for the summer, a small tourist town. Paul, like David's father, Harold, was drawn to remoteness and away from communities of any kind.

David's father set out the food from the cooler. A ham and cheese sandwich, made from left over hamburger buns sat on the cooler lid. David considered the sandwich for a moment, disgusted. He had the inclination to sit there and drink the rest of his soda instead of eating anything solid. But he knew that would be a terrible error later, when the three o'clock sun would be pouring into the hole—the excavation for Paul's basement. He still felt it just behind him, at his back, a hole that pushed outward with ashen breath.

David was sinking back into his daydream when Alex stood up still working his jaw around a candy bar. "Anybody mind if I smoke?"

David's eyes twitched, as if opening, and he realized he was still staring at Alex. He shook his head, but he knew he didn't have the say.

Paul's eyes lit up a bit as he worked out a sentence. "Well, I sure don't mind. We are outside aren't we?" He showed his big toothed smile to David and his father.

Harold, hunched over his knees and popping a grape in his mouth, shifted his eyes from the empty woods to Alex. He said nothing for a moment. "Where's your lunch?"

Alex grinned and David recognized the smile from some place in his past. It

was a city smile, the type of gesture that was honed in groups of peers. It was clever, but kind. “Naw, I just ate it. Now I got to enjoy it.”

“Did you forget your lunch?” Harold tumbled a grape in his palm.

“I just ate.”

Harold’s eyes loosened and his bearded face opened a bit with a grin. “You just ate! We just sat down.”

Alex recessed as he searched for the point of the questioning. He pointed at the candy bar wrapper on the ground.

Paul adjusting his observation from Harold to Alex saw the candy wrapper. “Is that what you call lunch. Boy, I sure wouldn’t want to work on that stomach.”

Alex shifted his weight from one foot to the other and whipped his hand in the air. “All those damn kids keep eating my food.”

“David and I can throw you some scraps if you like,” Harold looked at David for moment, then back at Alex, “we got some grapes and carrots here. Some Cheetos too, but they’re not much better than the Snickers bar. You gotta eat something with this kind of work.” He tossed the grape in his mouth. “But if you don’t mind, I can’t take the smell of smoke when I’m eating, can you wait until after lunch to smoke?”

“Oh, don’t like smoke. Yeah, that’s okay I’ll just go smoke in my car. Thanks for the offer, but I can’t eat your lunch. Thanks, though.” Alex walked down the tractor-torn ground that would eventually become a driveway.

David watched him disappear behind the trees that blocked out the gravel road only twenty yards from where they sat. He thought of volunteering his sandwich, but when he picked it up and felt how cold it had become sitting under the ice pack he found a greed for it. There was also an anguish that Alex wanted to go out to his car

where there was no shade from the sun. He looked briefly over his shoulder at the glare radiating out of the sandy hole. The sight of it tightened his stomach. It reminded him that the moment was coming, the one that forced him back in.

The sound of a radio drifted through the trees and Harold looked over at Paul and shook his head. "He can't be more than eighteen years old and he has to smoke every half hour. Pretty sad."

Paul's brow rose over dull eyes as he looked at his bran muffin. "You know these kids are being taken earlier and earlier. I just can't say why their parents let them get that way." He brushed crumbs off his bony knee and then looked up, toward the car. "I can tell him to cut out the smoking, Harold. This is your show, we run it how you want it."

"No, no. I don't care if he smokes over away from me."

"What kids is he talking about?" David asked.

"I suspect they're his girlfriend's younger siblings. I'm not too sure what he's doing feeding them though."

David pondered a horde of children pulling apart the contents of a fridge. Their little hands crowding in but working in unison as they held open a crisper door and disappearing with bags of sandwich meats. He couldn't understand why children would have interest in anything but candy. He took a bite of this sandwich and savored the coldness of the ham.

The following day was overcast and the wind roared through the needle tops of the pines. David moved with more ease through the sand. In desperation, he had cut off a pair of his work jeans above the knees and wore his lightest colored shirt; a billowing white thing that fit like a tent and constantly got tied up in his work.

Alex had not shown up in the morning. Harold barked orders at David from the ridge of the hole. David knew his father was annoyed. The cement trucks were coming the following day and the grade of the basement floor had to be brought up before the rain came.

David filled a wheelbarrow with sand and pushed it over scrap wood embedded in the sand at the base of the pit. The path was narrow and the wheel often ran into the sand, bringing David's exposed knees crashing into the edge of the steel bucket, and tipping over the load. Agitated and in pain, he looked up to see if his father had noticed, only to see the flailing arms and bared teeth of Harold. The boss hissed at the incompetent worker.

"Move! Don't just stand there! Pick it up!" David moved too quickly and the barrel tipped the other way spilling the rest of the contents. This brought Harold to snarl at the sky. Harold climbed down into the pit, leaving his shovel at the lip; he steadied and refilled the barrel himself as rain drops started to pop in the sand.

"Dammit!" He braced the wheelbarrow, pushed it ahead, dumping it precisely then bringing it back across, navigating the wood blocks perfectly. "Just like that!" Harold said. He rattled the handles violently in place. "Do you need to shovel? We need to get this done."

David grabbed the handles with vigor, as if diving into the work. He rolled the wheelbarrow back to Paul, who had watched the exchange but kept his head down as he began to dig. David smiled at him and said, "You mean you want a flat floor."

Paul raised his face in surprise and laughed loudly as he dropped the sand in the bucket of the orange wheelbarrow.

Alex appeared at the lip of the hole with a tall Native American boy at noon. Harold gave them a side glance as he bent over the footing frames.

“Car problems?” he asked. David recognized the tone of his voice.

Alex quickly explained that he had presumed work canceled due to the forecast. Harold stood up to move to the next board but glanced over at Paul, who in turn waved the boys over to the other side of the hole.

David took the moment to rest and tried to listen. Paul announced that he was in charge of weather forecasts. He heard him explain in a clear but firm voice that Harold was in charge, but it was his house they were building so he wrote the checks. David couldn't quite make out the following words as Paul lowered his voice. He assumed it was about being late. Then Paul's voice lifted as he asked to be introduced to Alex's friend. He then pointed to the wheelbarrow and shovel. Alex and the Native boy proceeded to drop down into the hole, while Paul waved David up.

“Hey David, do you think we can convince your dad that it's lunch time?”

Paul explained to Harold and David as they ate and the boys hauled sand, that Manny was Alex's friend and was looking for work. Paul said that he could get it there provided he showed up at the proper time in the morning and put in a full day of work.

David left the lunch early to inspect how the new arrival performed on the wooden tight rope. He found them walking their shovels across the expanse of the basement, losing a third of the load on the way. David quickly moved in thinking he had at five to seven minutes before his father saw them. He grabbed the wheelbarrow, which they agreed to fill rapidly.

The two boys immediately tried to pump David for inside info. They asked if Harold was a hard-ass and if he really paid at the end of the week. David reassured them, delivered a barrel of sand then came back to find them waiting to tell him about being really hung over and sleeping in. Manny was Alex's girlfriend's brother and they had gone to a party outside Hayward the night before. Alex wanted to know how much money David made and asked if it would be a bad idea to ask for money at the end of the day for food and gas.

David fielded their questions readily as he tried to keep up the impression of work. He was excited to talk.

“So you guys live nearby?”

Manny responded with a “Yeah” first, and then Alex, tipping a shovel into the barrel shook his head. “Naw, I just come up here for work. I'm from Tampa.”

“Tampa? You mean Florida? How the hell do you end all the way up here.”

David asked as he steadied the orange handles of the wheel barrel.

“I don't know. I just met someone who told me there was work up here, you know. In the forests and stuff.”

Manny laughed and looked at David, “Yeah, lots of work up here by the Rez. Somebody was lying to you.”

“Naw, it ain't too bad. It's cheap up here, people are pretty nice and bough-picking season is coming up pretty soon.”

David looked around and could see his father and Paul putting away the rest of their lunch. He gestured to them to wait with his index finger and ran the load over the scrap wood. Once back he asked what season Alex was talking about.

“Boughs, like tree branches this long,” he measured a space in the air with his

arms, “you pick them by the bundle and sell them to the Christmas wreath makers. It’s good work. You can do it when you want and without somebody looking over your shoulder. It’s great once you get the hang of it.” He pushed a thumb at Manny, “His sister can pick six bundles more than me a day, but once you get going it don’t even bother you how much you make, it’s just nice to be on your own, you know.”

David thought about picking branches, but couldn’t quite visualize what it was that Alex was taking about. It sounded horrible to him. He remembered picking berries in the woods outside his father’s house and hating it. The thorns slicing his fingers, the constant buzz and bite of insects over his skin and the endless muggy heat. It didn’t seem much more appealing than working in the hole.

They filled the barrel quickly and David pushed it gingerly across the wood, trying to regain his prior concentration. He wanted to ask more questions and tell them where he was from. He saw Paul reappear at the lip and decided to play it mum. After another trip, with the older men looking on, Alex and Manny picked up on his apprehension and began to work in silence. For most of early afternoon a relaxing sprinkle tickled his face and arms, but it began to thicken.

David was called away from the two young men as soon as Harold recognized that it was only a two-man job. David looked at them as they filled one last load. He thought they looked like real workers. Their clothes fit over their darkly lean and muscled bodies. He thought of the darkly tanned road crews he often saw on the roads, the orange warning blazers contrasting with their almost bronze bodies. They never sweated or breathed deeply.

The awkwardness they would reveal in him seemed to shine over his vision like an unshaded light. All his father’s commands sounded louder and shorter, and

suddenly he could not see beyond the sandy soil that was kicked up in the air by his boots. He felt the shame of his haphazard movement, the large work boots clunking along under the balloon-like shirt. Nothing could be done right, he kept thinking. Nothing can be done. Pale, panic-eyed, David went to the other side of the hole.

Behind the Gravel Pit

1. A Failed Escape

“It’s cold. It’s colder than... fuck I don’t know, the end of the world.” Winter steam pumped out of David Champion's mouth like exhaust. He raised his shoulders and sniffed back mucus collecting at the tip of his nose.

David stood ankle-deep in the brown molding of slush-sprinkled snow along Highway 13 with his friend Cormac Volk. David was already regretting taking the bus home with Cormac. He could have walked to his own house in fifteen minutes. The plan had been to get a lift to the east-side mall in Madison from Cormac's house where his mother was always home. From there they could take a bus to State Street. Beyond that seemed open to David.

They surveyed the path ahead and behind. The stretch of highway was a straight swath of asphalt cutting a plain of farmland in two. There were isolated wooded hills that rose out of blanketed horizon to the north and the raised grade and bridge of Highway 51 to the West and South. It looked like a distant wall to the boys.

“But we're almost to the on-ramp,” Cormac said. He stood erect, his bright purple and gold Phoenix Suns coat obscuring his form.

David’s feet were numb except the thin pricks around his ankles where snow had found its way between skin and sock. He sucked hard at blasting February air, but hints of car exhaust collected in his chest. “We should just go back. I won’t be able to feel my legs by the time we get there.”

Cormac squinted and raised his face into the wind. “Town is just down that highway.”

David stood in the filthy snow for several moments without responding. He tried to take a step forward, but stumbled and fell. He swore loudly pulling his exposed hands from the snow.

Cormac watched him awkwardly right himself.

“I don't want to go back.” Cormac looked around him as if there were no other way. “I'm going to lose it if I have to sit in that house anymore this week.” His eyes clung to each car that moved west toward the city.

David thought it over, but then looked at his hands that burned red. The wind had picked up and the light had begun to dim. “Have you ever walked to town before? It's got to be ten miles.”

Cormac began again, moving past David in the snow. “I've seen it from the bus. It's not that far.”

“Aren't you fucking cold?” David yelled. “Let's just go back and ask nicely, *nicely*, to get a ride to my house.”

“We should have done that right when we got off the bus.” Cormac stopped and shook his head slowly. “She's not going to do anything that doesn't involve changing a VCR tape.” He looked at David after spitting once.

“What about Jefferson?” David asked.

“No chance in hell. He won't get home for another hour and he doesn't leave after that. Besides he's always in a bad mood.”

Both boys felt as if they were talking to themselves; the words lost in the wind and rush of traffic on the highway.

David hadn't really needed an answer. He thought of the loud and biting voice that Jefferson used in ordinary conversation, and he had rarely heard him in ordinary

conversation. They stood in the snow, looking past each other for several stiff moments before Cormac looked at David directly and waited. It lasted only a moment before Cormac turned to push briskly down the path they had tread.

“I can't wait until I'm sixteen and I can drive my self,” Cormac said.

“That's just next year,” David said.

Cormac passed David with a glare. David flinched and recoiled into his gray coat. He followed a few seconds later.

2. The House

The two boys stood on gravel still wet from morning dew on a warming spring day. They were waiting next to a running tractor and looked back foggy-eyed at the farm-house and its peeling white panels. Only a hundred yards from the main highway they still felt hidden from the world by a string of mixed woods that obscured the house and gravel pit from view. The house, along with a collection of tin and wood barns tucked between a gravel pit and a plain of cash crops.

Jefferson had left the tractor idling while he instructed another man on how to drive through the fields with a front-loader. He had offered them five dollars an hour each to pick rocks from the field. Cormac and David both accepted readily as they were only thirteen and not able to work yet.

In the loud silence next to the tractor Cormac considered the conversation from the night before. They had spent the night talking about people and places on the floor of Cormac's bedroom after they had thoroughly exhausted the newness of a rented video game. It had begun with a mild insult and then David asked how Cormac could stand living in “this dead house”.

When Cormac responded with a desire for elaboration instead of the next logical insult, David began to gush in an almost eloquent string of descriptions and feelings he had of Cormac's house. The house seemed “cursed with a crazy kind of stillness” he had said. It seemed as if nothing had ever happened there.

Cormac then added to David's dread when he relayed what Jefferson, his mother's boyfriend had told him. It was part of some turn-of-the-century farm, passed down the line until the farm went belly-up. The house, the land and buildings were all rented out to different people by a company; the house became an apartment in the

middle of nowhere. Jefferson rented the house with Cormac's mother and worked part-time for the farmer renting the surrounding farm land.

And then David said something that Cormac knew intuitively, but never would have considered putting into words. David compared Cormac's bedroom to another he had been trapped in at a younger age. He said he'd remembered watching the sunlight's slow progression over dusty carpet with a building sense of being crushed. He said he felt the same anxiousness when he'd slept over at Cormac's before.

David relented saying, "All rooms other than my own feel wrong to me." Cormac brushed that away and said he felt the same way.

This is when they had begun to talk about Cormac's house at length. They tied their descriptions of the world to movies they liked—their favorite being horror. These new details about the house seemed similar and therefore drove their enthusiasm for the conversation. They often planned to come up with ideas and store them to write when they were older or didn't have to go to school anymore. Once Cormac's mother had invited David to the supper club they went to every first Friday of the month. The club was located on a rural highway not far from where Jefferson had grown up. David was apprehensive as always, but they both thought it was eerie after talking about it. It was in the middle of nowhere and they started imagining how the operators might be a family conducting a secret fry of people. They elaborated details such as this family's using the same oil for the humans as the fish to add distinct flavors. The topic of the house was a continuation of that practice to Cormac. But that kind of imaginative talk with David, which usually would eat up hours, seemed to be threatened. The house didn't have a ghoulish presence. It was simply a place that was not wanted.

The sense of disillusion dispelled quickly once they started thinking of the house in mythical terms. It's soul. It was a building that never housed any human emotion or activity beyond the most ordinary and boring rituals of daily life. There had never been a romance between husband and wife or teenage lust, they continued: there had not even been violence or hatred in this house. It would have been palatable to their minds (and the presumed audience) if it were haunted with some kind of human misery: a suicide or beaten children or murder, the things they read in books or saw in movies. Anything to enliven the rooms with some kind of proof that life transpired at some time because the building provided shelter to it. Without direct knowledge, they knew this had to be true.

Cormac thought this was good stuff. He went to bed hearing a deep serious voice narrating the odd lore of his house. It had completely washed away the sense that he'd squandered a visit to the rental store. The story and effects of the video game had grown repetitive and absurd too quickly. He worried that he should have gotten a movie, but the empty and fertile setting he and David had created had filled the space of intrigue in him.

Cormac looked at the house as the diesel-engine's pitch raised and the tractor moved away. It was the house his mother had first found in Wisconsin after fleeing Iowa. It must have meant something to her, but he didn't want to feel that. He wasn't going to add that to the lore of the house. The house was his nemesis, it was something he vowed not to return to once he got away from it. He thought it strange for a moment to have a feeling for a house at all.

David waited for him to follow the tractor Jefferson navigated into the field. They went to pick rocks from the furrows of recently plowed soil. At least they would both have some cash at the end of the day, Cormac thought.

3. Circumventing

David and Cormac were both damp when they went back outside. They had been in Cormac's house only long enough to warm up, but not dry out. The wind quickly found the soft areas under their arms. They walked across the yard casually then shifted behind an old wooden farm shed converted into storage. Cormac looked around to make sure they were out of sight before producing a cigarette and lighter. David pulled his coat tightly to his torso as he felt a strong shiver come on.

“We should go out to the highway to wait for your mom, her little car will probably get stuck in my driveway.” Cormac grimaced and shook his thumb violently; the lighter was resistant in the wind.

David nodded.

The driveway was long and curved around the perimeter of a small gravel pit. A thick hedge of trees and bushes hid the pit from view of the house or the highway. David had seen the pit only once. He didn't remember there being much to see but exposed earth and stone. The two of them had hiked the surprisingly long fork in the driveway to inspect a few pieces of heavy machinery parked at the bottom. He recalled having the wind knocked out of him while Cormac sat in the operator's seat of a Caterpillar. The driver had left the keys hanging on the safety grate. Cormac tried to start it. There was an electronic whine, a violent grinding of metal and then the machine lurched forward as David was climbing up the tire tread. He hadn't lost his grip so much as he jumped off in fright. He landed squarely on his back. There was a blaze of white in his eyes and tears as he tried to suck in air. It was the only time he had the wind knocked out of him.

They walked along a wooden building's eastern side, on the far side from the

house. Cormac blew a puff of smoke up in the air and David looked around to make sure he could not see the house. The eastern field spread out before them with a late winter's snow. The field had a subtle incline that prevented them from seeing what was beyond the property line. They both gazed into it—the low evening sun lit it up like a reddish ocean.

“What do they grow out there in the summer?” David asked.

“Hell if I know. Plants.”

“Looks like corn. Didn't we set off a rocket out there once?”

Cormac peeked around the corner of the building as they approached it. “Oh, yeah. I remember, those were for class or something. I ordered the expensive one.”

Cormac laughed. “I forgot about that.” He sucked on the cigarette as if it was an act of memory. “I spent weeks going through different catalogs finding the right one. My mother actually came through with extra cash so I could get the one I wanted. Deluxe size, or something.”

“I think that was right at the beginning of middle school, when all you outlying elementary kids started coming to town for school.” David huffed the cold air to punctuate his words. They passed another small building before crossing onto the driveway.

Cormac looked again at the house before it became obscured by the trees.

“And it was freezing that day too. We shot it off and in thirty seconds it came back on its parachute and we ran in.” Cormac kicked small snow boulders across the iced-over driveway. “Hey, do you think your mom will give us cash for Taco Bell?”

“I suppose.” David shifted in his coat several times.

“How are you going to ask her?”

David shrugged violently. "I'll just ask her."

"Not good enough, what if she says 'no'. You need to have a story ready."

Cormac talked with his cigarette in the corner of his mouth. "We're going to meet people and we'll be expected to pay our own way. Like a school group or something."

"That doesn't sound like us. What are we going to do anyway, besides eat?"

David tried to shift Cormac's attention away from lying to his mother. He had no problem doing so, but only on his own inventions.

"I don't know. Go to State Street, find some people." Cormac put a foot in the shoulder of the snow and flicked the cigarette-butt deep into the underbrush that hid the pit.

"What people?"

"People! I don't fucking know." Cormac extended his arms out in front of him abruptly as if pleading to an audience. "Maybe we can find you a girlfriend."

"Oh joy." David pushed his mouth into the collar of his coat.

Cormac marched up to the deeply rutted snow where the driveway met the highway, "You think you're going to be a virgin forever?"

"No." David looked for his mother's red car in the east-bound lane.

"You know, you're going to marry the first nice girl that lets you put it in her. You realize that don't you?" Cormac looked David over for a moment. Splatters of gray slush sprinkled their now dark wet Airwalks. "No. It's totally true, you are going to be owned by some sorority chick." Cormac's voice cracked as he held back a giggle.

"Sorority?" David looked at him cockeyed. "Sorority girls are rich."

Cormac straightened his face for effect. “You’re going to be rich and owned.”

He let the laughter come out and he slapped his knee.

“I know.” David turned to look down the highway and pointed out his mother's Ford Festiva.

Cormac spotted it as well. “Here comes the gerbil-propelled machine. Don’t forget: Taco Bell.”

4. A Steady Ship

Cormac loved David's car.

It was an '84 dark brown Volkswagen Rabbit. David's father brought it back from Cincinnati, after visiting his brother. It was to be David's and his sister's first car; a gift from their uncle. His father remarked that it was in good condition because roads were rarely salted that far south. David still looked at it suspiciously at first. It appeared like a boxier, elder version of his mother's car. In fact, the first car he could remember his mother driving was a Rabbit, though he thought that one had been yellow. The night his father dropped the car off at his mother's house he remembered the fate of the yellow Rabbit. A fire in the parking lot of the movie theater. They were supposed to see *Back to the Future*, but a flame suddenly started dancing on the hood as they pulled in. He had always wondered if that fire was his fault. Earlier that day he'd thrown sand over the engine while his father had been away from the open hood. He was six and imagined the sand magical or somehow able to repair the engine. He had never been blamed for it, but uncertain guilt rose with the memory.

A few days after telling Cormac about it at lunch break, he saw him in Kevin's car, one of his other friends who David only knew through Cormac. They were driving from school toward the west side of town where Kevin lived in the older subdivisions. David pulled up beside of them at a stop sign and in moment of bravado peeled out of the stop and sped past them. They were both amazed at David's sudden outburst. It was one of the rare instances where Cormac was surprised by David.

Cormac named David's car the USS Lepus. They stood around the car on the gravel driveway in front of Cormac's house. It was a scene that reminded David of his father. Standing around a car and talking about it. Those moments his father

participated in had no value to David, but this version, with Cormac, seemed invigorating.

“It's the USS Lepus. A mighty and veteran vessel. Here look. A torpedo blast.” With a sharpie he drew a small arrow pointing at a dent in the body above the rear-driver-side wheel housing and wrote “photon impact”. David watched as if in slow motion. He realized Cormac's intent before he acted, but decided he was open to anything now. He liked how it allowed him to forget the reality of the car being a practical tool and mythologized the car. He allowed the fact of his uncle's life to inform the myth; a far traveling computer teacher who always seemed to call from different cities. The markings were like a tattoo of pride.

It wasn't until David realized the ease at which he could move that he fully accepted the vehicle and all its costs. He fantasized about driving to school one day and simply not making the turn, but proceeding to the highway and not stopping until Chicago. The delight lay in the blossom of added logistics. How would he pay for the gas? How far could he get on the little money he had? Could he disappear from this life and be a completely different person in some large anonymous city? He romanticized getting minimum wage jobs and living in a tiny apartment, no bigger than his current bedroom. It would be like a universe unto itself.

When they had first got their licenses it had always been a battle for Cormac to convince David to borrow his mother's car. Cormac believed David's mother an easy going and generous person. David was more familiar with her boundaries and always resisted, more to protect Cormac's reputation in her eyes. But shortly after the arrival of the Rabbit in David's life, Cormac started going to a school in Madison. He suddenly had a car of his own and a job at a gas station.

5. High Seas

David sped his mother's car out of the intersection of the main town road and the highway into Madison. It swept deep into the left lane. Cormac held on to the passenger-side door handles which he always called the “oh-shit handles” and hollered obscenities at a wailing Buick. David swung the car back to his lane and sped up enough to avoid being hit from behind. Cormac covered his eyes and tried to suck in the laughter.

“I can't believe you can actually drive.” Cormac said.

The road was clear ahead of them, but David felt uncertain about the patches of black on the asphalt. He wondered if they were ice or just tar. The rest of the road was a grayish white as if the asphalt was powdered with salt. Cormac slouched his shoulders as David slowed the car, but said nothing. After a mile he leaned over and looked at the speedometer.

“How fast can this thing go?”

“I don't know. Not very.” David pushed the pedal to the floor. The engine whined louder, but there was no sensation of acceleration. “I'm flooring it now.”

“For shit!” Cormac looked at the speedometer again and leaned back chuckling. “Seventy miles per hour. Stop! You're going to hurt the gerbils!”

David didn't respond for awhile. “Can you imagine being run off the road by a semi in this?”

“Not off the road. Into the road.” Cormac rubbed a wart on his elbow, moving his face in close enough to see if it bled.

“Actually, it happened to my mother. Some drunk on Christmas Eve. She was going too slow and he bumped her into the ditch.”

Cormac mouthed a “Wow.” “Sounds like my father.”

“Really?” David waited. “He still in Iowa?”

“He’s wherever.” He continued probing the elbow. “He just likes to run people over.”

“Because he’s drunk?” David pushed the car into the left lane when the highway widened into two lanes.

“No. Just because he wanted to. He’s an idiot. I doesn’t really matter, I’m not seeing him anytime soon. He lives with his psychotic girlfriend in Lincoln and she kicked me out last time I saw him so it’s not even my fault.” Cormac exhaled heavily and dropped his arm. He fingered the radio for a few moments before giving up and putting his head back, closing his eyes.

“Hey, I buried the needle!” David shouted.

Cormac looked at the speedometer and started laughing violently. He wasn't ready for it and the rising convulsions froze his diaphragm. David smiled and laughed a little.

“Christ, are you okay?” David asked.

Cormac waved his hand limply. A cough racked him. He rested his head against the passenger-side window. “I’m alright.” He chuckled intermittently, between harsh coughs. “I’m sorry, I just....”

“It wasn’t even funny. Christ, what are you on?”

“I wish.” His head was still against the window while his body heaved in air at slower and slower paces.

It was getting dark. David knew they were approaching the city when he saw the lights of the airport. Cormac was still, his arm resting across his face.

6. Fathers

The silence of observation broke forty-five minutes after David and Cormac secured a spot in Concrete Park. The Christmas light displays were still hanging over the street. Cormac thought they looked like blue lights sprinkled over cobwebs and thought they were the brightest thing he'd seen in weeks.

“What's your father do these days?” David's voice wavered for a moment.

“What was he doing when you left?”

Cormac's head tilted toward David for a moment, before he casually shifted his weight the other way. “He was getting drunk. Why do you ask?”

“I'm just interested. It may be bad, but it's more interesting than these college students.” He waved his hand carelessly in front of his face, as if gesturing to their entire view.

“I don't know what he does. He doesn't do anything as far as I know. He's a stereotype. A drunk vet, who used to beat my mother while listening to Pink Floyd.”

“Pink Floyd? Do you remember that?”

“Sure.”

“What about you?”

Cormac smiled and pointed at himself as the person in question. “No. That was worse. He wanted to be my friend. He was always trying to get me to smoke pot or drink with him.” Cormac considered his words and then bit his finger nail as he spoke. “You know, your father is all strict and scary, but that's better, Champion. My dad is an idiot. He's not really worth talking about. At least your dad doesn't run people over when he feels like it.” Cormac leaned back and puffed out a billow of steam above his head.

“I thought it was drunk driving.”

Cormac shrugged. “Probably, but he did it for the hell of it too.”

David nodded continuously.

Cormac looked at David trying to find words. He looked at the concrete benches and planters that composed the small inlet off State Street.

“Did he hit the girlfriend?”

“Hell no!” Cormac snorted. “She was pure evil.”

David laughed.

7. Navigations

It was a month after he was supposed to get his driver's license when Cormac explained to David the key to getting into college parties. It was something he had developed in those days he cut school and found rides into Madison with the girls. He explained that convincing people of one's importance depended on how attractive the people around them were. With just David as his companion, Cormac knew he would need help.

“This is my friend, David Champion. He is kind of a sourpuss, so you may need to ask him sweetly.” Cormac held out one arm presenting David and kept the other just under the arm of a girl their age with wavy blond hair flowing out of her stocking cap. Her wide rosy smile radiated at Cormac then fell back to a more neutral state when she turned toward David.

“Hi.” She looked at Cormac again, in question, then back to David. “There’s an open party on the west side.”

Cormac saw David already had his best smile on, but was slow to reply. Cormac turned his head to one side and made his eyes hard.

“Oh yeah?” David coughed.

Cormac quickly chimed in. “Yeah, so do you think we can fit two or three people in the back of your car?” He left his face blank. The girl looked back and forth between their faces.

“Oh, I suppose, maybe three if they are small,” David said.

Cormac shot David a wink.

The girl’s face lit up. This time she was looking at David. “Cool. Oh, I’m sorry, my name is Abbey.” She pulled off her mitten and held out her hand.

8. In Bloom

Cormac sat thinking of the pickup truck Abbey's parents had given her for her seventeenth birthday. It was a small white Toyota with a stick-shift and clean, compact compartment. He couldn't shake the sensations of her skin pressing him against the window and the new world beyond that. They had found a small wilderness only five miles from his house that he had never seen before. He wondered what else there was within grasp with her little white pickup.

In a stranger's bedroom he called David's house and left a message that he had to work late and wouldn't make it. He set the phone down slowly, but snapped his fingers and jumped off the bed. The bedroom door opened to a quiet, dim room where the figures of all the people he had just met seemed to melt into the furniture. They seemed hidden in plain view but he felt their heads rise and cheer his entrance.

Cormac winked at the crowd he couldn't distinguish and gave a thumbs up. He moved around a coffee table littered with bottles and cups bathed in a yellowish mood lighting and saw Abbey had moved into his chair. She gave him a big smile and held out her arms as if she wanted him to sit on her lap. In one motion he ducked down and spun to the floor in front of her, his back against the sofa chair. His fingers slid around her ankle and lifted her left leg over his right shoulder.

“So I'm officially free for the night. We can stay.” He looked around the room, making out the shapes of faces by the white impressions left in the darkness.

Burton emerged from a displaced light emanating from the kitchen with a bottle of Old Crow. “This is your drink isn't it?”

Cormac smiled and nodded. “Yeah, that's it.”

Burton set the bottle on the glass coffee table. “Well get to work, dude.”

Abbey ran her fingers through Cormac's hair. "Did you call your friend?"

Cormac shrugged his shoulders while nodding. "Got a cup I can use?" he asked Burton as he balanced Abbey's leg and reached for the bottle.

"Do you need one? No one else is going to drink that shit." He winked and pointed at Cormac, holding a silver beer can. "Don't worry about it, this is a place of hospitality. If Abigail likes you, so do we." He sat on a kitchen chair next to the couch leaning elbows on his knees, looking over the young audience that filled his apartment.

Cormac watched him and felt a wave of comfort as he took his first drink.

"Wow, thanks. This is really great. I'll have to get you back some how. I don't know how, because I don't have a thing." He laughed and opened his hands before him.

"See, I told you he was great." Abbey said behind him.

"Yes, Cormac you're a good dude. I'm glad you're taking care of our friend Abbey."

9. Discord

David found Cormac throwing up in a basement. Every muscle in Cormac's body seemed to go taut and quiver as liquid hit the bottom of the tub. David had been able to walk into the house without knocking. It was another party where everyone seemed to expect strangers to pass through. It had taken him twenty minutes to find a parking spot.

Cormac tried to breathe; he spat and took a breath, spat and took another.

David realized Cormac had been crying. David put a hand on his back. Wailing at the touch, Cormac turned to look. The tears were running into streaks of vomit around his mouth. He quickly put his arm around David's neck.

Another round of convulsions began and he nearly pulled David over by his neck. David tried to support him, shifting his weight forward and slipping his other arm around his waist, but Cormac had to push him off. The action coming was more like a giant sneeze. His stomach ripped inward, the muscles collapsing in and crushing.

Cormac managed a sigh and quick chuckle. He breathed. Oxygen reached vital spots and the contractions stopped. Slowly his moans settled into whimpers. He found his body more under his own control again and leaned against David with all his weight as David tried to pull him upright.

“Think you can make it up the stairs? We can get out of here.”

Cormac moaned.

David started moving him away from the laundry tub. “Come on, leave them a pile in the snow.” And then Cormac came to life, briefly at first; he stood up and clumsily pulled his body from David. He returned to the tub.

“I’m not going.” Cormac wiped his mouth with his sleeve. His eyes were red and strained. “I’m going to stay here.”

“Come on. Do you even know these people? Will they let you stay while a party goes on upstairs. Let’s just go.” He motioned with his hand, but Cormac stood and did not turn.

“No, I just walked in. If I can’t stay here let’s go back to State and find some...” his words trailed off. He spit reluctant saliva into the sink.

“No. I’m leaving.”

“You can’t, let’s go find something better. Come on man, you’re my ride.”

David shook his head. “I can’t stay any longer. This place is bullshit.” He walked to the stairs, pausing for a moment. “You coming?”

Cormac stared into the tub.

David went outside, got in his car and left Madison.

10. A Free Man

Cormac tried to call Burton one last time before leaving. He still wasn't sure about his standing with Burton since he'd broken up with Abbey, or she had left town. He looked out the window; the view of his exhaust puffing into the gravel was distorted by plastic still tacked on outside. Straining his ears, he tried to determine which song was playing in his car, but the room raising large around him seemed to filter the outside world. The walls, an off-green color he had known since he was ten, seemed to swallow what the windows allowed in. It was stuffy; he thought he should punch a hole through the plastic to let the spring in. He dropped the receiver onto the base and tossed the piece of paper with the number over his shoulder. Perhaps, he thought, he would find one of his two options before midnight.

Cormac bounded down the narrow stairs and through the kitchen. The rooms seemed to disappear before he left them. All he could see was the road to Zoe's and the feeling of his door vibrating with Pantera. He calculated the money. He could hang with her until she tired of him and then make his way to town. Whoever he found first would have to do. He didn't expect to see Champion. They hadn't managed to link up since Champion left for college, but he was back in town. Burton was hard to find and could get him into a bar, but Champion usually had the pocket money to get something stronger for later. He hoped one of the two materialized.

11. A Generous Evening Begins

Cormac found an obscured spot at the end of the bar. Burton and a blond woman sat to his left and a large beer cooler with a glass window and dull red neon lighting sat on the other side, blocking the length of the bar from sight. He kept his head down, only occasionally looking over at Burton's large form, hovering over the blond. He watched out the corner of his eye as her hand slowly ran over Burton's thigh.

He pushed off a rush of warmth that ran up his neck over his cheeks thinking of Zoe's hands—but then Abbey's hands fumbling clumsily with his belt and zipper in the cab of her truck a year and half ago. She would think nothing of putting her hand down his pants in the bar. She would just look him in the eyes, waiting for him to tell her to behave. It had seemed to be her favorite response.

Cormac forced the rest of his beer down and moved to finish the pitcher.

Burton leaned over and whispered. “Put whatever money you got on the bar. I'll make sure we pay. It just looks like you're paying your round. Ya know?”

Cormac turned his head and smiled, his eyes squinting. “Yeah, good idea. I'll pay my fare share though. Promise.”

“No, that's okay dude, it's your b-day. Me and Melanie agreed we'd show you a night out. Keep your eye out for an open table, we'll move in when there's a chance.” Burton leaned away to cup the woman's elbow in his large hand. She leaned back into his chest as he put his mouth to her ear.

Cormac smiled, nodding to himself. He thought it strange Burton called him dude. He was at least seven or eight years older than Cormac; it always sounded as if he were being talked to as a little brother.

The woman got up and went to the bathroom. Cormac leaned over again.

“Hey, thanks for letting me drink your first pitcher, but seriously. If you want to take off with her go right ahead. I might still catch up with this old high school buddy of mine.”

“No way, man. I'm down for tonight. Melanie's leaving soon, she's got a morning shift tomorrow. But I got all night.”

“Hey, you haven't introduced me to your girl yet, I assume she's the one buying half my beer.”

“Shit, sorry. We're a little preoccupied. It's a long story, I'll tell you later.”

Burton nodded his head at the bartender. “So, your high school buddy, he's not gonna crash our little party is he?”

“Oh, him no. He was supposed to call me yesterday and we were going to go out for the first time since he left for college.” Cormac took a gulp of his beer. “I doubt I'll even see the guy again.”

Burton nodded his head as his eyes drifted across the bar and settled on the bathroom door.

12. A Generous Evening of Stories

“Dude, how you doing over there? I didn't bring you down with all that shit about Melanie did I?” Burton set his mug down.

Cormac slapped his right hand on the table. “Who's this fucker! Why does she still live with this guy?” Cormac had forgotten about his beer and was kneading the corner of his flannel shirt under the table. The action felt good. He knew these lines from somewhere else. He was ready to move. He saw himself pushing out the door of the bar with intention and purpose. It was slow motion, but simple and absolute.

“Hey, the world's not as simple as you think it is, dude. She's got a kid and he's got a house and a regular job. I take care of her outside of all that, but I ain't exactly got what she needs to just split.”

“That's kind of bullshit. Why don't you do something? You know, thanks for the beer but why don't you spend your money on a bigger apartment or something?” Cormac looked around and realized he was speaking loudly. He felt he was more drunk since he had stopped sipping the Miller Lite, but he suddenly felt bigger than Burton.

“Hey man, I want to do something too, it's not like I can just walk in there and say hey I've been banging your wife for a month now and I don't like the bruises I've been finding. I don't want to sound like a coward, but dudes like this buy guns and defend their territory.”

Cormac hissed. “She can fucking steal his car get the fuck out. I know, trust me on this. She can call the cops from Michigan.” Cormac tried to even his voice. “I can't believe I was just looking at her.”

Burton put his hands up. “Hey, I know your history.”

Cormac pulled back from the table, realizing he had steadily been leaning further over it. He opened his mouth to ask if Abbey had talked behind his back. She seemed a much more distant memory at that moment.

“I know you had similar issues or whatever, but you need to understand she needs this guy for some things. She can't just run away or have him thrown in jail.” Burton continued to hold his hands up as if holding the comprehension in front of Cormac. He exhaled loudly and dropped his hands. He stood up and pointed a finger at Cormac to stay put. He went to the bar and came back with two shots of whiskey.

Cormac picked one up immediately, but Burton stopped him.

“You want to do something? Help me. You and I are big enough. We can at least let him know Melanie's not alone. Here,” Burton held up his glass. “Are you trustworthy?”

Cormac drank.

13. A Generous Night's Work

Burton steered Cormac toward the garage door. They quietly moved away from the basement stairs, where they found Christopher sleeping. Cormac didn't recognize the man, but he was older than he was expecting. His head was beginning to throb as the alcohol drained from his system, but he saw the man clearly. The blue shirt snug against his raised chest. He was a strong man of maybe forty-five. For a moment he thought he saw David's father, the bearded lumber-jack vision of a man he'd seen standing over them in the Champion's house. Tall and thick, but this man didn't appear to be as tall. He had also seen black hairs on the legs splaying out on the couch from boxer shorts. A surge of terror went through him as Mr. Champion's image held tighter to his mind.

The fear turned after a moment. He thought of Abbey, Zoe, his Mother, and even Melanie, the woman he'd seen for the first time only hours previously. His heart pumped and he felt a surge of energy, the floor suddenly had a texture and he could feel its subtle vibrations. His movements became clean, controlled by some other resource he had packed away. In the garage he effortlessly and silently shut the door. Burton made his way along the garage wall before grabbing two aluminum baseball bats that stood behind the door.

“That's him. You ready?”

Cormac looked at the bat and nodded.

“Don't worry, we're just going scare him. Make sure he knows there's always a bigger fish, you know what I mean man?”

Cormac nodded, concentrating his eyes on the tip of the bat. “What about the gun? Is he going to pull it on us?”

“What gun? There's no gun. Don't worry, he won't have a chance to get to it.”

Cormac motioned impatiently for Cormac to open the door.

They moved back into the kitchen, down the stairs. Cormac, almost instinctively moved to left side of the couch, near the man's legs. He held the bat up in the air, as if he were about to take a pitch.

Burton kicked the man across the chest with the bottom of his boot.

Cormac prepared to start screaming at the guy. “You like to hit women! You like to beat your old lady!” But he didn't.

Burton, in absolute silence, hit the man in the forehead as his eyes opened.

14. A Generous Night's Conclusion

A large Spring moon illuminated the street of the town David used to live in. Cormac had often wished he had lived there too. He recognized the neighborhood. Listening closely he could hear the Yahara river running under the bridge just on the other side of Christopher Nolan's house. He walked around the back of the house, bat still in hand.

Under the blanket of the trees he found the dark bank that ran along the edge of the backyard. He tossed the bat into the darkness. It landed with a sound that made him vomit in the finely cut grass. He heard a car door slam and the whine of a loose belt; Burton's van. He tried to look at his hands, but the shade of trees against the moonlight did not allow him to see if there was blood.

He walked toward the bank and saw a brook that could not even submerge the bat or carry it away. It then occurred to him that he could follow the stream into the woods that the town was built around. Through the green he remembered a wooden railroad bridge. The tracks which passed the bar on Main Street also passed an abandoned train depot and eventually reached toward Fireman's park. There lay the old police station where he watched Star Wars in its cool basement one hot summer afternoon when he was eleven.

15. Enshrined

David talked slowly on the phone and Cormac was forced to try to put a little pep into him. He gave him a silent finger through the reinforced glass.

“Fuck you too, buddy.” David laughed.

“Hey, I can actually hear you now. So you were saying I should do what now? A lawyer or something like that.” Cormac chewed at his finger nail.

“That's what my parents told me anyway.” David shrugged his shoulders under a large gray coat. He ran a knuckle over the stainless steel counter. “I guess that's old news at this point.”

“Yeah, I've become very familiar with the judicial process. They gave me a lawyer, and he's alright, kind of new to the whole thing, but I like him. He needs a boost in confidence every now and again. So, you know, I can give him that much.” Cormac pursed his lips and looked past David to the hallway where other visitors entered.

“So what does he have to say about your situation?” David's voice dropped again.

“Oh not much.” Cormac twirled his index finger at the ceiling. “He told me all I need to know, which I should tell you too.”

“What's that?”

“Don't ever trust cops. They pretty much soaked me for everything they could get before I ever talked to a lawyer. Evidently, confessions are not in your best interest. So remember that when you get caught spray painting P.E.T.A. slogans on university buildings or whatever it is you college students do for fun.” Cormac smiled and tilted his face, waiting for David to respond.

“I see.”

“Hey, cheer up, I can still cut a deal in testifying against Burton. Evidently they just caught him in Florida. Funny, he and the missus had a vacation planned the following day.”

“Yeah, I read the paper. Have they got her?”

“Yes and no. I'm not supposed to talk about it so don't repeat this to any official looking people. This guy Christopher knew his girlfriend was no good and wrote her out of his estate so no motive and she's probably free to go. She's also pregnant.”

“Wow,” David said without emotion.

Cormac clapped his hands together and grinned, “Let's just say I wish I was pregnant.” They both laughed briefly. “We have all of five minutes left so thanks for stopping by bud, I appreciate it. Do me a favor. Try to call Zoe. I'll mail you her number. Remind her to visit. I'm easy to find now.”

“You got it.” David's face looked white.

Cormac nodded and hung up the phone. He gave David a thumbs up and then tapped the glass before turning around to an officer who tucked his fingers under his arm and led him through a steel door.

The Factory

This was *real* life. He sensed it when he got on the bus, he felt it in the pavement leading up to the double doors of the tin-sided building and he knew it when he passed through a membrane of sound. Building #2 was hot and the machines deafening. A hot and bitter smell woke him up at last and said, "I've been waiting for you to grow up." Burning chemicals, he thought.

A preemptive sweat broke over his body and the drone of the vibrating press coiled around his eardrum and constricted. The complex was vast. He stood at the foot of only one of five warehouse rooms looking over what he assumed to be printers, sorters, binders and assemblers arranged in aisles over tens of thousands of square feet of concrete.

That morning he had to wake earlier than ever before. Only one bus went to the factory and it was on the other side of the city. The alarm sounded at 4:30 a.m. The excitement of something new drove him out of bed without any residual effect. He noticed it was still more dark than light outside when his bare feet hit the chilly wood floor. He quickly picked through the pile of clothes beneath the window under the only light in the room, a lamp shining against a pale yellow wall. A fondness for the stillness of morning passed over him for a moment. In the kitchen he found toast and eggs for a full breakfast. Tomorrow, he promised himself, he would sleep until there was no time.

Even more pleasant than the morning inside was the morning outside. It was early summer. He had not realized the winter had ended until that morning. And finals had not been more than a week before. The skies were empty and the air mild. The

sun hung low behind his building and he could see everything. A beer bottle collecting dew in the grass and an ant mound intact and dormant on the sidewalk. He quickly decided what he liked the most about the morning. He could feel the dormancy of the city under a dopey blue sky.

He walked down his street to the larger, busier road which crossed the bridge. Even the river looked more brilliant. He could hear it. Walking quickly along the empty bridge, he did not pause to listen. The stop for the bus that would take him to the specialty transport was several blocks ahead. He looked south to where the city center lay. A wire of energy found its way through his chest then down his legs. He began to jog.

The dull light falling down from the steel sky of the warehouse had already exhausted him when he found the assignment center. Huge fluorescent lights hung from the steelwork of the ceiling. The only evidence of the light's existence was shown on concrete and machinery. His bones vibrated with the floor and his eyes yearned to shut away the intense complexity of metal, wire and paper. This is what it really looks like, he thought.

He found the man who was looking for him in a small break area with soda and snack machines. He immediately identified the one in charge. The man's throat had been cut. Instead of the normal fleshy progression of a neck into a chin, the supervisor's throat hung from brownish scar tissue that defined his jaw-line. The man's throat hung directly below the tip of the man's small chin. He went up to the Cut-man and gave his name.

“You’re who?” he yelled, inviting David to look at his clipboard. David pointed to D. Champion, which lay in a column labeled “Temps”.

“Champion?” the man yelled.

David nodded his head.

“Are you a Champion?” the Cut-man asked. His eyes on the clipboard.

Champion heard his name but had not quite made out the individual words. He tilted his head and smiled signaling the Cut-man to go on.

“Only on the weekends, hey?”

Again the words died in the space between the Cut-man and David. He smiled and nodded.

The Cut-man’s eyes narrowed as they concentrated on the documentation.

“You were supposed to start yesterday.”

David heard “yesterday,” cleared his throat and tried to put more force into his voice. “I missed the bus.”

The Cut-man raised his lower lip and nodded in agreement. The bag of flesh that was his throat rippled a little. “Don’t let it happen again,” the Cut-man said in a solid, loud voice.

David nodded his head once. A quick and concise response he had developed for formal situations.

The Cut-man took him on a short tour, pointing at several machines and explaining their basic functions. David could only hear the highest points of his speech when his voice reached a high note. He nodded when the Cut-man looked for his comprehension.

The tour took him directly to the spot where he would remain for the

following five hours. The Cut-man yelled some directions into the noise and then told him his name and where he could find him. David heard nothing, but waited for the Cut-man to stop. Nodding several times, he feigned consideration of everything that had been lost in the small space between them. Champion wiped the sweat off his hand and shook the Cut-man's hand with the other. The Cut-man turned and left. Champion walked to the next machine and observed the process.

It was simple. Bundles of magazines came off the conveyor belt and he was there to stack them on a pallet. He looked around at his new surroundings. A waving hand caught his attention. He looked down the arm to a still face. He waved back. The man nodded twice then returned his attention to some machinery. David dropped his hand and stared at the figure. He realized the man was working on the mid-section of the same machine that he was tending. There was a ringing, like a school bell and the machine started. A bundle of *Office Solutions* approached Champion.

He knew he was approaching reality when he saw his fellow passengers on the bus. The bus pulled off a large commercial street, deep in the northwestern part of the city. When he boarded the bus he found eyes running their fingers over his body and face. The entire front of the bus was filled with black men and women. Champion looked them over as they had him. Most wore emotionless faces that seemed immersed, analyzing some event that had befallen the bus on a previous stop. Aside from the disruption that he was, they stared forward and spoke little among themselves. He walked farther into the bus and found an equal portion of white people in the back. Ignoring him, they chose instead to study the floor or stare out the window.

He hung from the overhead bar and looked for an empty seat. One black lady looked up at him with a particular interest. David smiled, allowing his eyes to linger where her smooth skin met short curly hair. She smiled at his attention. “Would you like seat?” Her voice was light and in a very thick African accent. He smiled and nodded. She rearranged her bags to give him leg space. He sat and found her bright eyes and wide smile on him.

“You are new, yes?” He noticed her individual words had a distinct British touch.

He nodded. “Is it that obvious?”

Her smile widened and she shook her head. “Everyone here work same place. You never ride this bus before.”

“Ahh.” He nodded and looked away for something to ask her about. When his eyes returned he found her gaze forward. Her head turned once to smile then returned her gaze elsewhere.

The bus was dominated by the roar of the engine in back, the grinding of gears and the squeal of the brakes. Nobody talked, hummed, tapped their foot or coughed. He stared forward as well, in an attempt to gain some sort of unison with the passengers. The bus rolled over a bump and all the heads swayed to one side then back. His head did as well. He began to relax into the plastic seat. The morning sun warmed his lap.

Champion discovered rigor almost immediately. The heat as much as the noise pressed against him—isolated him from his surroundings. Transparent panels in the roof allowed in dull light. When he passed under it his sweat glands activated.

Trickles of sweat seemed to run across his skin in search of shade like ants. They tickled and tapped his sides and back. Ants crawled out of his hair and tumbled down to the tip of his nose before jumping off. He quickly found the inside of his collar soaked and dirty.

Exhaustion came to him as back pain and throbbing in his feet—both aggravated by the heat. He grabbed a bundle, flipped and set it on another, then stacked them on a pallet. The noise and the heat receded in small repetitive wisps. He fought to balance his attention between the bundles and the ants until he began to return to the foggy atmosphere of his flat and idle days with his roommates. The place he had left that morning seemed distant and bore a new sheen of welcoming.

Champion's friends had plans. He turned Brian's paternalistic and cajoling voice over in his head slowly so it lasted one trip between table and pallet: "Time to become social." Friends of his roommate's girlfriend were throwing another smoky, humid affair where every one would silently watch the social ones. He realized his roommates could make a lot of demands now that they knew his schedule. It was unusual, he thought. Three days, twelve hours each, then four days off. The schedule then inverted. He imagined a wall calender with X's and empty spaces. Too many empty spaces. And there was an air of excitement in the idea of a party, but it belonged entirely to his roommates.

His mind wandered even further until he was dreaming about what he was already doing. The stacking had become a surreal task, it wasn't happening, but he had to keep pushing his body further to do it. There was no building, the ceilings were too high and out of his peripheral sight. He gazed past the machines skewed up and down the floor as he would trees on the road.

David quickly snapped back to reality when the Cut-man tapped him on the shoulder. He turned and gave him a very dazed look. The man yelled at him, “Can’t you hear me? Take your break.” He then put a small blue box in David’s face, waving it back and forth. He knew the Cut-Man was saying something else, but he was trying to concentrate on the box. The man set the box on the table and left. He picked up the box and read the label—ear plugs.

“Aha,” he said aloud without hearing it. He popped two of the clean yellow plugs in. The world suddenly became a little dimmer. He felt an immediate release as his head quieted and suffered only the lower hiss of the noise via the foam filter. David walked slowly in the direction the signs for the cafeteria directed. He could hear his breathing, it was calming— a breath per step. Next, his foot-falls came into range as they landed on the concrete. His right foot seemed to land twice as if he had a defective step. Several possibilities crept across his mind until he reached the cafeteria.

The cafeteria was silent. Somehow, the long narrow room managed to mute out the rest of the factory. There were numerous people eating and waiting in the line for hot food. The silence was sacred. Only the slight clicks and dings from the cooks filling bowls with stew reached an audible pitch. Men and women ate and waited in silence. David guessed they knew how to get the most out of their twenty minutes. He passed through the assortment of tables and booths to find the bathroom where he saw a haggard wet face. The bridge of his nose was red. He touched the red on his face. It stung. His hair was wet and sprouting messily outwards. He tried to straighten it with his fingers. Champion turned on the cold tap and stuck his hands underneath it until the pleasure turned to numbness. Leaning forward he put his head between his arms

and closed his eyes. Five hours down, seven more to go, he said to himself. He was not sure if he could believe that.

David prepared himself for another marathon. Lunch cost him one hour's wage—a chicken sandwich and the largest cup of soda. When his break ended he filled the huge cup with ice and water. He returned to his station feeling energized and clean. It lasted until the hoard of ants angrily burrowed out of his pores. He carefully wiped his forehead with a clean portion of his sleeve. The ache in his feet returned quickly, but he was better able to ignore it. The magazines had piled up and fallen to the floor. The machine had run for some time after he left. He looked for the man who had started him off in the morning. He did not see the same pale white face of a middle-aged man, but a subtly tanned girl of his own age. David thought she could have been fresh out of high school, but he could not see the finer definitions. She was preoccupied with some aspect of the binding machine. He filled a pallet with the excess bundles on the floor, moved it aside for the roaming forklift and prepared the next.

There was time to study the girl. She wore a white T-shirt and over-shirt with blond hair pulled back into a small tail. He sat on the completed pallet and looked for more peers so as not to seem interested. He could see a head here and an arm there, but there was no direct interaction with anybody. Each person was surrounded by the immense binders spinning at unforgiving speeds. He realized for the first time how many dangers surrounded him. There were guards on the machines, and each person had a safety area marked by striped tape on the floor.

The girl approached him. She climbed over a safety platform that straddled a conveyor belt and wound between two binding machines. She did not smile, only stated as if to notify him of a mutual disadvantage, “We're having problems switching

covers.” He was surprised to hear her. The earplugs seemed to selectively let her voice through.

He shrugged in response.

“So, you can either take your second break now or move to another station.”

Her words came into his ears softly, though he could see she was shouting. She was young indeed, perhaps younger than himself. He saw that her arms and legs still possessed a childlike thinness. Eighteen, he thought.

“I guess I’ll go somewhere else.” He yelled. He heard himself for the first time since his jubilant walk to the bus stop.

She nodded and headed back to her previous position. He got up and headed for the coffee room as it was called, the room lined with vending machines. He was looking for the Cut-man, but was in no hurry to find him. He walked with enough speed to hide his stroll. He looked down each aisle, its inhabitants and its encompassing machine. Each was slightly different, some had sections that were obviously more modern than the preceding or proceeding piece. He felt elated, with a pleasant light headedness from the absence of work. He looked at the brightly colored safety protocols riveted to the machines or posted on signs. Each displayed graphics of symbolic bodily destruction. The machines roared on and the little blue-clad people that surrounded each toiled away. They either fed the machines' grinding gears or they received the compacted and packaged output. He looked at the caretakers' faces. Champion saw silence, weariness or anger, whichever was most productive he supposed. They went through their routines mechanically, mimicking the machines. He saw their minds working, grinding out plots and plans. Memories were being relived, movies reenacted, innovations explored. Each left the reality of the factory

before they arrived. He wondered if they built up a store on the bus or in their car of interesting or emotionally relevant information to sort during their day. He tried to put the process down to a system. They rented their bodies to the printing company and merely put them in motion and then left for more important things. This idea worked well for him. It explained a few finger-less hands and perhaps the Cut-man.

He was assigned a new task, but his body quickly protested it even more than the first. Picking up a stack of papers to become pages in one hand and depositing them in a metal guide quickly ruined his fingers and wrists. David did not stop. A new machine and set of movements differentiated the morning from the afternoon. He could feel the evening coming. He thought about the bus ride home. Perhaps he would fall asleep and let the bus take him all the way downtown. He imagined himself walking the avenues and staring upwards until he found the top of the buildings. He giggled at the thought of wasting his time away from home. If he could drag his exhaustion through the neatly laid streets and grimy old brick buildings, then he could return to his empty bedroom and simply pass out until the next day came. He would wake up the following day and there would be people everywhere. In the streets, in the bars, in the parks, they would come out and bring their bodies with them. He already had his plans for the day following the next. Sleep, food, and then exploration. His mind worked as hard as his hands on the possible arrangements of idle wandering.

Champion had become comfortable in his sweaty clothes. They molded to a perfect form and he repeatedly imagined peeling them off and stepping into the shower. A quiver of ecstasy ran through his body each time the image surfaced. He used it often in the last hours. He had not seen a living thing since returning from his

second twenty-minute break. He felt content in his exhaustion and creeping fear of stopping. The halt, it would come soon. He could feel it. It breathed over his shoulder. He swore he felt a brush of cool wind at his back several times. Then it came.

A replacement came for him. The night shift. He looked in horror and amazement at the person who came to relieve him. He was tall, lanky and his eyes were half shut. He stabbed his thumb over his shoulder. David looked the man over and could not separate himself from his replacement. Another twelve hours, the thought spiked at his innards and filled him with dread. The moment had come. He stopped, put down the stack of pages he was aerating and started to walk. He moved slowly. Disorientation swooped back and forth behind his eyes. He had grown accustomed to the constant back and forth motions of picking a stack, flipping through it and setting it in the feeder. Forward motion was foreign to his system.

The bus waited. He got on it and wandered to the back without looking at anyone else. He saw a vacant seat. His eyes slowly focused on a bird in the parking lot of the factory picking at the remains of someone's lunch-sack. It was a seagull. It had a piece of bread in its beak. Champion closed his eyes as the bird walked away triumphant.

Sunday

A man walks through a wasteland of snow and earth. He navigates the gravel and ice troughs in the driveway that winds from the house to Highway VV. A late 60's ranch house, a large central barn with peeling red paint, a smaller replica for tractors, and an abandoned chicken building huddle together along the slope of the valley. All the buildings are below the grade of the county highway that lines the crest of the ridge. The only two markers of occupation at the road are a metal post with an embossed fire code sign and the mailbox.

The oversized mail box bulges with the Sunday edition of the *State Journal*. The man's tall top-heavy form emerges onto a small plateau composed of dull bluffs rolled with corn and alfalfa fields. The borders of each field are defined by the thick dead weeds that grew uncut all summer long. They are square plots of land draping the contours of the hills, mostly snow covered.

The man's footfalls are sure and well placed on islands of gravel where the ice has been ground through. Settling a large work boot on the edge of the highway he looks right toward the Meyer's, then left toward the Pattow's. The driveway is on a banked curve of the highway. Small steps move him across the road until he is forced to pull his hands out of his pockets for balance. The road is covered with brownish gray mush, thoroughly pulverized by tractor and truck traffic.

With his boots securely in the snow-bank, the man begins to tug at the mailbox's door from an odd angle. Having given it one solid tug his thick fingers slip off the metal latch. He grunts at the pain left in his bare fingers. He bites his lower lip and rips at the door again. The door pops open with a short squeal of whining steel. The force pushes the door below its stopping point and the sheet-metal hinge twists as

the door hyper-extends. In rage, he brings his fist up knocking the door back into position for brief moment, but the twisted hinge snaps and the door is left hanging from one corner.

Breathing deeply the man looks at the box. Rust had reemerged around the edges where a layer of metallic paint has been scraped away by the constant grind of opening and closing. The man mumbles profanities. He shakes his head, reaches into his pocket and produces a jackknife. His large fingers make several attempts to flip out the screwdriver. Bent over, he clears accumulated dirt by tapping the screw heads with the jackknife before trying to work them out of the mounting bracket. The screws collect in his palm, except the last one, which falls into the snow. He stands up straight with a groan and looks both ways along the sharp curve. Dumping the screws into his jacket pocket, he pulls the mailbox off the wooden post. Shifting from side to side, he tries to free his boots from the suction of the snow-bank. He frees one and sets it on the road. In one jerking action, he pulls the other free. The man looks both ways again. Squinting tightly against the mild morning light he carefully makes his way up to the driveway.

The man shifts the mailbox under his arm and takes a moment to look over his own smothered land. It stretches a little ways before dipping and rolling into the upper rim of the valley. In the far distance the land rebounds upward into a small hill. Beyond that hill stood the treetops that fill the deepest part of the valley. At the bottom there is a deep ravine containing the tiny stream from which the valley originated. It is the deepest point in the entire county. He stares at the empty land for some time before he continues. With caution, he descends the hill with the metal box under his arm, the paper inside.

He leaves the mailbox on the floor of his garage in front of his workbench. The bench top is too cluttered with other projects to make space for it. He wades through buckets of mud-caked tools from Fall, open toolboxes with rusted bolts and nuts, stacks of old barbed-wire coiled into loops, and piles of scrap lumber. Several garbage cans are lined up along the wall next to the door. He wrinkles his nose and shakes his head when he walks past the over-loaded cans. He quickly opens and closes the door and slipping through quickly to minimize the heat loss. At first glimpse of his favorite reading chair he turns around and goes back into the garage. He shuts the door and makes his way through the clutter again to the mailbox. The box opens with the same screeching metal sound. As he is about to take the paper out he hears the phone ring. He snatches the paper and turns quickly toward the door. He moves quickly and hears the heavy shrub-shears slide off the trashcan they have been left on. He ignores the clatter and pushes through the door with a smooth motion.

His boots stand side by side on an old rug atop an even older brown carpet. Small tufts of snow surround his boots. The phone sits on a small table next to the garage door for easy access from outside. An older answering machine with full sized cassette tapes is next to it. The room is an anomaly. It is lower than the rest of the house, with a low ceiling. It was an addition fit between the original house and the garage. The south side of the room is dark—there is only one window, shadowed by the empty chicken building farther up the hill. The other side of the room is bright. There are large bay windows that look over the small field and the woods below, but the windows are filled with overgrown potted plants; jade plants, rosemary, and many thinning cacti. A large green reclining-chair sits with its back to it all.

He drops the paper on an old wooden chair with a pair of tennis shoes under it next to the door and picks up the phone on its fourth ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Dad!” A soft, high-pitched voice.

“Hello, Darling. How are you?”

“Oh, fine, I guess,” the voice says.

“What time do you plan to come today, Sweetie?”

“Well that’s what I called about.” There is a pause. “I got called in to work.”

“Well, did you tell them you were busy this afternoon?”

“I’m sorry!” the voice pleads immediately. “Two people called in sick.”

“Jenny.” He pauses for a moment. His eyes try to follow a bird bouncing from one branch to another just outside the bay windows. He has to squint to pick out its defining colors. He bites his lip in concentration. His head moves back and forth as his eyes trail the bird. Then he stops. It has been a long time since he or his daughter have said anything. “I don’t know, Jenny.”

“Dad, I’m sorry, there was nothing I could do. I promise I will make it on Saturday next weekend.”

“Jenny. I am your father. I expect to see you once in a while.”

“I said I promise to be there next Saturday.”

“That’s not the point. You made plans here and you should honor them.”

“Sorry.” Her voice is flat.

“You seem to be working a lot lately. You’re leaving enough time for your studies, aren’t you?”

“Well, I work a lot on the weekends and not more than twenty-five hours during the week.”

He is silent a moment, then clears his throat. “How many hours a week are you working?”

“I don't know, it depends.” The voice is tight.

“It sounds like too many. You’re going to school full-time and working all these hours?” The volume of his voice elevates.

“Dad, I don’t really work that much. I work, like, maybe 30 hours and help out a little after my shift.”

“Well, those hours could be better spent on school, don’t you think? The purpose of living at home is so you don’t have to work while you attend the university. Does your mother know how much you’re working?”

“Yes, I live with her you know. She doesn’t care.”

He clears his throat again. “That’s not good, Sweetie, you should cut down on those hours, they’ll drag you down when you have your exams.”

“No, I handled it fine last year.”

“Were you working as many hours last year?”

Her voice drops back to a flat tone. “Yes.”

There is a long pause. “Well....”

“Ok, Dad, I said I was sorry. I can’t make it today. I will come out next Saturday. I promise. I have to go.” The voice comes over the line in a flat tone.

His voice lifts. “All right. I’ll see you next Saturday then. Try to get here before noon. All right?”

“OK.” He hears the click of his ex-wife's imitation candle-stick phone.

He looks around the room for something to rest his eyes on. The morning light has intensified. He looks at the beams of dust floating above the old brown carpet. He sets the cordless receiver on its carriage. He thinks the dust is thick in this room. It seems to pour upwards from the carpet. After several moments of idle consideration he walks to the hallway where there is a closet. He takes off the boots and puts on a thick pair of woolen socks. He then steps into and zips up a large insulated jumpsuit splattered with red paint, grease, and mud. He silently put his boots back on and returns to the garage.

The snow is heavy and wet. The man pulls a garbage barrel through the snow. The small plastic wheels drag and hinder movement. The barrel stops abruptly and he loses his grip. The barrel teeters close to spilling the garbage on to the snow, but he catches it with both hands and pulls with the vigor of frustration. The barrel skids and hops over the packed surface.

He drags the green barrel toward a pile of brush, small logs, and tree branches randomly tossed into a five-foot pile below the buildings, on the edge of the field that leads to the wooded valley bottom. He inspects the pile. There is a good amount of snow on the branches. He kicks different parts of the pile to knock the snow off.

Icicles have formed at the bottom of the pile. They cling to branches that are still green after months of sitting in the pile. He shatters all the icicles and tries to brush the remnants away from the base of the pile with the side of his boot.

The man has to tip the barrel over to empty its rotten insides. A few compacted brown paper bags filled with paper scraps and junk mail roll out first. He grabs the back of the barrel and lifts. The garbage comes out in moist chunks. Deteriorated paper bags with eggshells, meat cartons and black grapefruit halves fall against the pile of brush. The man grimaces, drops the barrel and moves away. He takes several deep breaths before lifting the bottom of the barrel upright and hitting it. Black slop that has collected inside falls onto the pile of garbage, with dark juices funneling out the corner of the barrel. The man backs away, pulling the empty barrel with him. He spits and grimaces again. He looks up to see the sun is approaching its February noon mark. The man shakes his head and hisses. "The whole morning's gone."

He repeats the process four more times for his other barrels of trash in the garage. The last two are dry and light. After he returns the last barrel back to the garage he searches out stick matches from the glove compartment of his truck. The gas for the weed trimmer is under the workbench. It is behind paint cans and a dead alternator. He empties half the shelf to get at the small two-gallon plastic jug. He does not need to shake it. It is full. He looks for a moment at a few blades of dry grass still stuck around the cap.

Generous amounts of gasoline are poured over the medium-sized branches and larger logs. His head feels light and his stomach ill as he accidentally catches inhalations of the fumes. His heart pumps hard and his lungs are sore. Shaking the spout, he sprays the pile with droplets of the pink liquid. He lets a few drops of

gasoline fall into a brown paper bag of tissue and toilet paper rolls from the bathroom. He tosses the can behind him and strikes two matches against each other. They flare the first time and drop into the bag. A flame pops out. He tosses it onto the pile. The dark brown leaves, needles and heaps of paper and rot suddenly erupt. The flame seeks out every droplet of gasoline. The sound is like a flag violently flapping in the wind.

The man moves backward as the heat licks at his face. He watches as the trash he spent all morning bringing down from the house is consumed in the first few minutes. The dead leaves, hanging like brown cocoons from severed limbs, evaporate at the first whip of the flame. The pine needles pop then glow like minute Christmas lights. There are hisses in the flame as snow melts and drips down on the coals. He watches for a long time. The sun moves through its course as the flames eat the branches and blacken the stumps. The snow slowly recedes from the perimeter of the fire.

The man watches the fire for almost an hour. His trance does not break until he looks up at the sun's downward arc. He retrieves the gas can from the high standing grass stalks, unbent by winter's snow. The man walks carefully up the incline toward his house. As if moving through water, he takes short strides.

He drops the can next to the mailbox. Straightening his posture, he looks at the box with hesitation. Several moments of deep consideration pass; he waves his hand at it in defeat. "Later".

Looking over the thickly crowded garage, he mutters about the lack of space for his truck. A thick orange power cord runs from the workbench's power outlet

across the garage door itself, and then under to the truck parked just outside. He shifts his body to the right in an effort to look out one of the garage door windows. Outside, the orange cord disappears under the truck's hood. He nods in approval, sighs and goes inside.

The wrinkled, leathery flesh that is his forehead and cheeks is tanned a dark red color from the winter sun. He slowly strips the old work jumpsuit down to his knees and sits. Leaning back, he closes his eyes and enjoys the hot blood rushing into his face. Shortly, he snaps forward, rejecting the comfort of sitting. The boots are tossed amongst other shoes piled together on a small rug.

After a short hot shower, he moves into the kitchen. The sun has retreated quickly. He has to turn on the lights. The dirty linoleum reflects a dull glow around the old knit rug placed in the center of the kitchen. Traces of black deterioration show in the corners and under the U of cupboards. A plant hangs in the window at the end of the kitchen, just above the U's peak. It is a rainfall of dead vines and leaves hanging over a towel laid out for dishes to dry. The top of the plant is green, but where the extensions of the plant breach the confines of the pot, they quickly turn brown.

The kitchen is otherwise clean and concise. The man pulls a toaster-oven out from under the cupboard and plugs it in. A stainless steel frying pan is produced from the bottom cupboard and set on the stove-top. He rummages through the refrigerator, densely packed with foods and drinks. From the bottom crisper he pulls a sandwich bag of diced green pepper and onions; the door next to it holds a paper package labeled "ground" and stamped "not for resale". The lazy susan provides a potato and a can of corn. He begins.

He flips on the front-right burner of the electric stove; the left burner is covered with a white corrosion. He washes the potato, wraps it in foil and puts it in the toaster oven. He mixes the vegetables with the ground meat and makes patties. The man washes his hands thoroughly. The noise of the sink startles him. He drops a pat of butter in the pan then walks into the living room and switches on the television.

The woman on the news talks about the basketball team from Milwaukee. They have won an afternoon game against the team in Dallas. On the way back to the kitchen, the man picks the cordless phone off the wall and takes it to the stove. He sets it on the counter and puts one patty of meat in the pan. He leaves the kitchen and returns with a small brown book. He pages through it, finds a number, then sets it down. At the stove he scrapes around the corners of the meat with a spatula and dials with his right hand, ten digits altogether. He puts the phone to his ear and waits.

The voice is male. "Hello."

"Hi, David?"

"Ahhh, no. One moment." There is a pause, several dashes of static and high-pitched snaps. "Yeah."

"David?"

"Yeah."

"It's your father."

"Yes."

"Just thought I would call and say hello."

"Oh."

“Well, how is everything going in the big city? I see your basketball team won.”

“Yeah. I was just watching.”

“Oh, you get that on the T.V. do you? I don’t get much out here.”

“Yeah.”

There is a pause for several seconds. The man can hear several male voices jumping up in down in the background. “Well, I was just in the middle of making dinner.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Yeah, I have been pretty busy recently, haven’t had time to check up on you.”

“That’s all right.”

“How is school?”

“Fine.”

The man flips the meat.

“That’s good.” He walks over to the other side of the kitchen. He pulls out a small glass bowl with a lid. After opening the can of corn, he dumps the contents into the bowl and retrieves the phone from the crook of his neck. “Tahh... I hope you are getting by all right over there. With all your rent and food money and the like.”

“Yeah, I am fine.”

“If you need any money just let me or your mother know. You have enough to get out every once and awhile, don’t you? See a movie or something?”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay you know where to call if there is an emergency.”

“Yep.”

“Damn!” he pulls the pan off the stove. “I forgot, my potato won’t be done for a while.” He sits at the table and scans the slope down toward the forest in the remnants of the light. His head jerks in one direction and he leans forward, peering through the window. He growls. “Oh! I see a cat.”

“Uh oh.”

“I may have to take care of that little pot-licker. That’s probably the one that’s been eating all my Bluebirds.”

“Oh yeah.”

“Maybe I will leave him for now. It’s getting to be dark.” He relaxes against the wooden chair. “So. Taken any interesting pictures recently.”

“Not really. Just the regular homework.”

“Well you should take some in your spare time, don’t you think? Have a portfolio. A portfolio, that’s what they call it right?”

“I guess.”

“Well, if you’re gonna take this photography thing somewhere, you should practice.”

“That’s what the homework is.”

“You have to be more self-motivated than that.”

“I create what I like. It takes all my time.” David lowers his voice.

“Well, you know. I am just saying it takes commitment to these types of things. What do the professors think of your work?”

“I have to go.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Thanks for calling.”

“You bet. You bet. One last thing. When do you suppose you will be able to come back for a visit? I’m sure your mother misses you quite a bit by now.”

“I don’t know. I have a lot of work right up to the end of the semester.”

“Well, keep us in touch.”

“Bye.”

“Goodnight. Keep your nose to grindstone.”

He pushes his chair out and puts the telephone back on its mount. At the sink he runs the water until it's hot and puts a wash bucket under the flow. He moves the dishes from breakfast into the filling bucket and squirts the water with dish soap. As he waits for the water temperature to rise he looks out the window above the sink. He looks at the land. The fire is still smoldering. There appears to be a slight breeze pushing the smoke into small spirals and tickling the smallest bare branches of the sole tree at the edge of his property. He shuts off the water.

The cat, a gray one with white paws, walks down the center of the driveway.

“Bold,” he says to himself.

He backs away from the window slowly. Once out of sight, he moves swiftly to the hallway connecting the room between the garage and the house. He notices his limp is exaggerated by his quickness. He grabs a double barrel shotgun from a small broom closet that smells of cleaning chemicals. He quietly opens the door to the front yard, next to the bay windows. The cat swaggers across the bottom of the drive. He kneels on the porch and takes aim. Two consecutive cracks of buckshot stir up the late evening birds. The cat jumps out of sight just as he fires. Quickly, he moves back indoors and steps into his work boots. He grabs two more shells from a margarine tub in the closet and goes out.

The man walks through the snow slowly, reloading the shotgun. He pauses a moment to listen. The crushing of the snow mutes out the whining. It comes from around the large barn. He walks up the small incline that leads to the upper level of the barn. The cat is there.

It seems to scream, then pauses to see if anything has heard it, and then screams again. Its hind legs drag behind it. Its front paws claw at the air and the ground trying to move. He walks next to it, his feet inches away from its dead legs. He can make out the small holes in its hindquarter. It continues to squeal.

The man's face contorts. He flips the cat over with his boot. It screams in pain and outrage, batting at his boot with its front paws. The light lingers on, but darkness and a deeper chill is returning to the valley. The cat's contorted body twitches in a seemingly blue light. He can make out the cat's eyes peering back up at him in fear and hatred. The white paws appear as bluish dandelion puffs lying on the frozen grass.

The man breathes deep as an icy wind brings fresh air. Grabbing the cat by the

neck, he picks it off the ground. The screaming stops as the animal waits. Placing his thumb under the side of the cat's head he breaks its neck with one hand. There is no scream of pain or fear; the cat just goes limp. The man's own shoulders seem to loosen and droop. He breaks open the gun and walks down the incline toward the driveway. Descending the valley, he approaches the fire. Flames live on calmly in the in the bright coals and the large stump. He tosses the body on the coals. The burning fur gives off a short but intense glow. The tiny body is shortly a solid silhouette curled up on the bright orange coals.

The man watches for only a short while. The light from coals glows warmly on his forehead and cheeks. He strokes his chin once and then turns to go finish his dinner.

In the New House

It was hardly a visit to his mother. She wanted David to see her new condo and the end of all things stressful. The stress was mostly those things involved with the owning of and three-year process of selling a 100 year old house. She was fleeing constant leaks, drafts, damp-rot and centipede-infestation, things David identified as home. The small condo was on the outskirts of Madison. She was ten miles closer to work and the maintenance fee for the condo were less than what she had been paying for heat alone in the house.

David found his way to his mother's new home via the city bus from the bus depot of the coach service that traveled between cities. His mother was tied up at work, but had mailed a set of keys to him weeks earlier, trying to entice a first week visit. David had less than an hour to examine the new residence. Tanya, Cormac's stray fiancé was waiting for him to call. The plan was to join or, rather, escort her on a visit to the prison. Cormac had pleaded with David over the course of five or six collect calls from prison to remind her and pressure her to return to regular visits. Cormac had just completed a six month procedure to be moved to a prison located closer to Tanya, and his family. Once Tanya had developed cold feet, what David assumed to be inevitable, she stopped visiting or even returning Cormac's letters. David usually rented a car and drove directly to the prison from Milwaukee for visits. He convinced himself that it would be more practical to merge obligations.

Walking into his mother's condo was like coming home to a large hotel room usurped by his mother. Everything David knew about the house he grew up in was there, but displaced and put back into some kind of mutated harmony. The

exaggerated feelings of displacement had carried on from the moment he stepped off the bus. Once he connected the building's number to the one on his paper-scrap he thought of the fourplexes huddled together at the end of his old street by the train-tracks. Squat, barely utilitarian units from which David had seen too many enemies, baby-sitters and enemies-turned-friend-turned-enemy come. But what he found inside his mother's condo contended with his ideas of wealth. It made him think the building dishonest, the nature of place was turned inward.

A dining and living area rose up at David—a dizzying expanse made deeper by a vaulted ceiling. He was immediately struck by the place's crafting toward convenience. He had similar impressions of his one-rich-friend's house in high school. A place built with too much space and forethought. Though the condo was a fourth of that house, he thought it had the same padded stillness and unbridgeable gaps.

He was still standing at the door, one hand on the knob, the other tightening around his luggage handle staring at the small familiar objects and furniture that occupied the cotton-whiteness of the rooms. He wandered just inside the entrance and cautiously let the door shut, as he would in any strange place.

He found that it was all there, in some form. The wooden bureau with glass doors that must be shut gently, the round, varnished kitchen table that always required place mats, the creaky rocking chair that was not to be "plopped" on, and the antique wooden chest used as a coffee table in front of the couch. They occupied the space, but could not measure up to it. His mother's style—early twentieth century American all-wood furniture—was undone and replaced by an impromptu design of comfort.

His mind was busy repositioning each item in the condo to a memory of a

house dismissed just a few weeks earlier. When he tossed his bag onto the couch a feeling of familiarity rose in him. The staples of his childhood came with it: the sheer delight in procrastination and a feeling of freedom to abuse the place like any relatives' house. He flipped on the television and made for the kitchen.

He held the phone in one hand and the remote in the other. The refrigerator was still bare due to the move or his mother's design of having nothing tempting within reach. There was nothing on television. Sitting on his mother's coffee table he positioned himself directly across from the T.V. and stared forward, trying to prepare an introduction to his phone call. But he didn't want to talk. He felt a pang of responsibility to pay further attention to the new house so that he might respond to his mother later that night. But it was too much to consider all at once. He slowly tapped the dial pad.

"Hello?" Tanya answered.

David thought she sounded busy. "Hello, this is David."

"OH, Hi! How are you?"

"No different." Frustration flashed briefly. He decided to drop the introduction. "So I heard you were coming up to see Cormac this weekend." He flipped the phone from one ear to the other.

"Yeah," only briefly hushed, her voice raised back to a higher pitch. "I guess he still wants to see me, if you can believe that," a nervous chuckle. "Is that okay with you?"

"Yeah... yeah, sure. That's just it. He's always wants to see you." David shook his head. "I don't really know how we should get up there, though."

“I can drive,” David noticed her voice become more confident then, more business-like. “I’ve got a new car!”

“New?”

“Well not new-new. But newer than that piece of crap I had before. I just got it. If I’d had it sooner I probably could’ve been seeing Cormac this whole time.” He heard a pot clang in the background and she swore. “Sorry, trying to make Devin’s lunch.”

“What’s for lunch?”

“Oh, just mac and cheese. I’ve got to get him fed, before his dad comes over to pick him up. I told him I got called into work.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” she paused for a moment. “You know today is the only time I can go see him right. I thought he called you.”

David let his focus drop from the blank television and realized he was feeling dizzy. The lack of his mother’s things holding him in, filling in his peripheral vision was disturbing his notion of location. He had always complained that her house was too cluttered. Suddenly the room’s fault was a lack of contrasting objects continually surrounding him. What should have been walls carved up with pictures and shelves of darkly tinted vases and candles, was instead a deep blur that gave no sense of proximity.

Tanya’s voice suddenly boomed into his ear. “Hey, are you still there?”

“Yeah, sorry.”

“I can pick you up in a say half an hour.”

“Yeah, OK.”

She waited a few moments before responding. "OK. So where is your mom's new place?"

The number of things confusing David increased when a green Pontiac pulled to the curb in front of the condo. Any number of cars had passed, but he was for some reason expecting a somewhat rusted beater from the 80's. He peered in the window to see Tanya waving him in impatiently.

"Wow, I thought you said this wasn't new-new." The interior of the car was clean and well organized. The vehicle as a whole was a far cry from the last thing he'd seen her with seven months ago.

"Well, it's not that new. It's only a '94." She turned on the air and cracked her window. "Besides, I've only had it four month now and I've already ruined it with smoke." She pushed in the lighter and gave a high pitched cackle that he recognized as a dismissal of the subject.

"Did the other one die on you?"

"Well, you remember," she raised her voice in defense, "I told you about it. It was the main reason I couldn't go see Cormac."

"Oh right, I forgot."

"So is that where your mom lives?" She nodded her head toward the condo.

He looked at it for a moment. "Yeah, it's kind of crazy. Big and a lot nicer than I was expecting."

"Sure, there are a lot of really nice places down this way. Funny how I ended up just down the street in almost the same span of time. This is the rich part of Cherokee though, I live down where there are more apartments."

“Well, it wasn’t expensive to buy. She actually got more for the house, but yeah it’s a little deceptive.” He pointed across the street where there were several towering bright blue vinyl-sided buildings surrounding a small pond. “Those are definitely the rich ones.” He wanted to go on about the carpeting and underground parking, the strangeness of the whole place.

She lit her cigarette and remarked flatly, “This is the nice end of the street.”

David nodded and looked at the interior of the car.

“And now I’ve got a CD player, so we don’t have to listen to ourselves breathe on the way up.” She put in a mix CD and pulled into the street.

“How’s everything else?” David asked.

“Ha,” she laughed loudly, “Oh, you know, my life is just as fucked up as usual. But I did get a job, and I do still have that job and I did move out of town just like Cormac said I never would. So at least I can say that much.” She gave the windshield the finger and cackled again.

David forced a smile. “Well, I’m glad my mother moved out of town. I know you kind of liked it, but I am perfectly happy to never read the sign again.”

Tanya became silent, seemingly concentrating on the four-way stop she was approaching.

David stared out the window, trying to watch the roads as well. He was not familiar with this part of the city.

They got to the end of town on the first CD after she skipped each song halfway through. She expertly pulled out and replaced the CD while maneuvering the car onto the highway heading north.

“How’s your job?” He felt obligated to initiate one more bout of personal exchange before they both gave into the music and the road to the prison.

“Can’t complain. I have to work weekends a lot, which is why I have to go today. But I made enough to, you know, pay off the phone bills from Cormac’s calls, and buy this truck off my new roommate and I’ve just been trying to get my shit together. I know Cormac will never believe it.” She changed lanes and pressed play, but turned the volume down. “So what did he say about me, for real. I know you know I fucked up, but I want you to tell me what he said.”

David had been planning his response to this question for a while. He had thought of something on the bus, but as soon as he saw his mother’s house it got pushed aside. What he had really been hoping for was a no-show. Cormac had suggested she might “flake out” again and decide to not show up for another few months. The road was moving faster and David sensed he could wing it.

“Well, you know he was kind of depressed when he couldn’t call you and didn’t get letters.”

She forcefully nodded while gesturing toward herself, “Yeah, Yeah, what else?”

“Well, I don’t know. Let’s just say he was upset for a while and wanted to talk about you and...”

“What, man! Just say it. I can take it. He said I was a bitch, or slut or whatever.” She pushed her hand through her hair and gave David a side-glancing stare.

From previous conversations with her, in cars, on the way to visit Cormac, he had often seen this look in her. It was angry and terrified. She would work her dark

sandy hair once or twice, like she was swatting it over her shoulder, her mouth agape and her tongue pressed against or perhaps running over her front teeth.

She wouldn't keep anything he said secret. He knew that they would get to the visiting room, Cormac and Tanya would hold hands, hug and even kiss for an allotted time—one minute at the beginning and end of each visit. When they had to sit they would stare at one another while Cormac pretended to have a conversation with David. A pause in general conversation would follow, with Cormac putting his hands on the table looking down until she took them. The rest of the visit for David would be fetching drinks and junk food from the vending area while they argued or stared at each other in silence.

“Well, you know, he might have used a word or two to express his frustration. I wouldn't worry too much about that. If you could just write him a little more.” His voice trailed off as he considered where it was best to end.

“Oh, I know, but doesn't he understand I have a shit-load on my mind all the time. It's so hard to sit down and write. What is there to write about? Went to work, it sucked. Came home, fed Devin, I mean come on.” She relented. The features of her face relaxed as she became involved with road, passing cars driving the limit, changing lanes, and plotting her movements across the three lanes. “Hey, I think we should go through Elmhurst again, it's just a shorter distance.”

“Sure.” David started to wash his mind of the situation, preparing to sit for three hours, listening, and fetching bagged sandwiches and bottles of soda. He thought his responsibility should be to keep Cormac busy, not happy.

“Oh, remember this one.” There was a half-burst of her laughter before she turned the radio up, “This one goes way back.”

David recognized the song as “Dead Skin Mask” by Slayer. He wondered if she was really ever the object of Cormac's affections in high school or just available now.

They sat in the parking lot waiting. Between visiting hours there were mandatory head-counts and visitors who were not already in the visiting room were required to wait outside the premises. Through the open car door Tanya stretched her thick legs into the sun running one hand over them, as if dusting off ashes from the cigarette she held in the other. David began feeling comfortable in the car seat, listening to the few moments of silence tucked between Tanya’s stereo and the drumming chatter he anticipated in the visiting room. She hadn’t said a thing since seeing the first sign for the prison ten miles out telling or warning drivers which unassuming farm access road to turn down.

David leaned his head against his hand and stared out the passenger window. There was a sprawl of razor-wire extending along one side of the complex. In an unusual spring haze, the wire shimmered in a seemingly endless coil, stretching into the nearby horizon. A slight breeze dashed along his skin as it did the razor-wire. An impression developed that he was in unison with the fluid blinks and twinkles of light. It was a moment of feeling in his body that then transferred to feeling of clear thought. He wanted to file it away and tell Cormac about it during one of the long silences where neither could start an exchange. Cormac had an excuse—he didn’t have anything to talk about except his routine in prison and Tanya. David simply had no command of his memory. Thoughts just happened, usually following the tails of somebody else's words.

Looking beyond the fence he could see some prisoners filing out of the barracks. He decided he was ready for the routine. "It's five. Should we go in?"

Turning her head, a mouth full of smoke she looked at the radio's clock and slowly nodded her head. "Yep." She flicked her cigarette onto the pavement.

Tanya had to go into a utility closet on the other side of the metal detectors to put her bra back on. David had seen this procedure before and always wondered why she didn't bring the one without the support wire. She had known the visiting procedures better than him at one point. At the beginning when she first started corresponding with Cormac, she visited three times a week, every week. She was swept away by Cormac, so much so that she, not quite out of a divorce with the father of her child, proposed to him. Cormac didn't have a chance of getting out earlier than seven years from that point and even that was unlikely, but she pushed as far as the last prison-mandated pre-marriage counseling session.

He pulled on his shoes and re-threaded his belt. With hands stamped with invisible ink they were let out into the courtyard. It was a medium-security prison, a composition of buildings all contained or connected by the fences and razor wire. The campus, built in the early '60's was characterized by a lot of brick boxes occasionally adorned with superfluous squiggles or diamond mesh designs. David had once joked to Cormac at a visit free of Tanya that the place reminded him of their high school. Cormac hadn't forgiven him for introducing that idea.

They walked a familiar path to the visitation building, cutting across the lines pasted on the pavement, like cross-walks that tried to prevent stray explorations. Inside was quiet, but it would fill quickly on a Friday evening. After giving the guard

Cormac's visitor slip they selected a four person table in the back corner, near a collection a large plastic blocks, books and other inexpensive devices to preoccupy toddlers who took no interest in dad.

The formica tables were surrounded by plastic chairs that David thought of as Wal-Mart patio chairs—semi-sturdy, green plastic things molded into the shape of a chair. Tanya and he had to sit next to each other while waiting for Cormac as inmates must sit opposite of women. Tanya scowled, cross-legged, while violently bouncing her foot in the air. David surveyed the other people coming in behind them. The visitors were broken up into two distinct kinds of groups. There were either families or single women. The families varied widely, but the couples were always interesting to David. Some were clingers-on—women who appeared to have been girlfriends or wives that remained faithful to the inmate through either pure patience or duty.

The other couples often included older white ladies, who followed some system of letters and phone calls to provide isolated inmates with pen-pals. Cormac had told of how the lifers were always on the lookout for these women. These frail, but neat and calm women often adopted an inmate, sent money and visited three times a week—the maximum allowed. Cormac was disdainful of prisoners who took advantage of them, but David found it fascinating to peek at the older ladies holding hands with the often young black inmates. On multiple occasions he had seen couples gazing into each others' eyes in silence. Once, when Cormac had been at a different prison with different visit room rules he had seen a small wizened old lady close her eyes and lean her head against a large black inmate's chest for almost an hour. The man seemed to respond to her like he would a child, cupping his hands on her shoulder, all the while checking to make sure the guards weren't disapproving. The

woman would spend twenty dollars a visit on the vending machines and then watch quietly as the man ate. David would watch and compare them to Cormac and Tanya.

David saw Cormac come in. Cormac had lost all his flab in the five years he had been imprisoned. He was a tall and rigid man now, with a bulging chest and striking, but familiar face. David had noted the incremental changes over the years, but could never replace the image he had of him at seventeen. Cormac's face was stiff as he approached, but lightened into a grin once he closed in on the table. He gave David a gruff hug, slapping him on the back and then turned his attention to Tanya.

David sat down and watched. It was always a show, a soap opera of sorts as they embraced and whispered in each other's ear before sitting down and then exchange loaded questions like interrogators. They were high school flirts and the setting of the situation and highly regimented time allowed them to interact as if they were on the movie screen. It always came down to words and phrases like "love", "you are my true love", and other aspects of "dedication" and "we have a destiny". But it only existed in that moment, around that table. Until her eyes were no longer on him.

Making a Basement

David got on the bus after a long walk in downtown Milwaukee. He carried in his mind an image of the ancient-looking man who appeared in a narrow space between two of the older office buildings on the main avenue. Dressed in a uniform, the man swept an old-world brick alley. His form was clear, but much of the background was hidden in the shadows the buildings threw at 3:00 p.m. in September. It was familiar. David's father had taken black and white photographs in his youth with a similar contrast. David's head was full of images that he expected to see in a city. That was one.

The bus was about half full. David liked to ride the bus so as to feel a participant in the normal activity of the day. The silent faces of the passengers often sparked in him moments of contentedness. He sat in the middle of the bus so he could look out the window or watch the people who sat in the front of the bus. He thought it easy to watch people when they were entwined in routine.

On the other side of the aisle was a large woman of maybe fifty in pink sweat pants, well-worn tennis shoes and a Green Bay Packer's sweatshirt. She was sitting in a seat that faced the front of the bus, but was twisted around with her legs hanging in the aisle over the side of the seat. She talked continuously to a slightly older man who was seated just behind her. She spoke in a high-pitched tone. The man, perpendicular to the woman, looked straight ahead towards the right side of the bus, receiving each sentence in his left ear. David did not feel intrusive. Though the man could have been staring right at David, his gaze seemed too far-off as if he were looking out a window

and not *at* anything at all. Each of the woman's sentences was immediately followed by a simple and prompt answer from the man.

“You know it was passed down from my mother?” she said.

“Yes.”

“My mother had loved that table.”

“Yes.” His voice was low and did not vary.

“You didn’t even see it, did you? You didn’t even stop, did you? You just ran into it with your vacuum didn’t you?”

“Yes.”

David missed the following transactions; he assumed them to be similar to the previous. After a few minutes all he could hear was the fuzzy tones of their conversation. A string of high ones and a short low one. He smiled. The man's disposition reminded David of his friend's father. For a moment, the scene resembled one of the few performances he had seen at Rove's house. He focused again on the woman's words.

“The finest black marble from Italy. Hand crafted. I don’t know how it was just split down the middle.”

On the plane to Las Vegas David and Rove's conversation was quick paced and fluid. They had not seen each other in over a year. It was Rove’s first flight. David had been on only a few recently. A short time after the elation of take off, Rove began the conversation with his mother’s bizarre mission to leave his father.

Rove's father was a wiry man with big eyes and a saggy face. David had always been intrigued by the father’s hobbies, which involved electronics repair and

consumer goods salvage. Rove's house was always filled with televisions, microwaves, VCR's, and other medium-sized appliances. All of which were found on the streets of Madison after the students' move-out.

Rove had explained the whole situation to David in the car outside his house one night after work. They both worked at an Office Depot on the east side of Madison. David had been dependent on him for rides after crashing his car into the back of a parked station wagon the previous winter. Over a can of pizza-flavored Pringles, Rove explained that there is one huge day of moving, September 15th, the day all student housing leases begin and end in Madison. That was the day that David needed to stay away from his house or else he would be coerced into digging through piles of garbage. David had been mildly tempted to join when told of all the strange and valuable things found.

The conversation had paused as David asked in a sarcastic aside, "Does your father have a metal detector?"

Rove pointed at him and said "exactly" then went on to describe the money left in books and unopened envelopes, the drugs and medications stuffed in teddy bears and pillows, nude Polaroids, and all kinds of video tapes.

"We even get Blockbuster cards that were used as book marks."

David remembered being confused at the value of a stranger's rental card and Rove had said right away "Rent movies and video games. For keeps."

"Oh!" David had paused a moment, he, partially embarrassed for sounding naive and partially taken aback. "Your father doesn't seem that interested in movies."

"Oh no, not at all. My mom loves that and of course my mother gave the games to us for Christmas. My parents don't buy us anything!"

To David, Rove's mother was a different entity altogether. She was short and round, with longish gray hair and sleepy eyes. He had always thought of her as an old hippie, but she didn't seem particularly kind or virtuous as others under that label. She had a nasally voice that immediately conjured her and only her in David's mind. Her voice was attached to all the awkward moments David had ever experienced at Rove's house. His mother skulked around the house and like a lonely boy on a play-ground, wandered to each of her three sons' bedrooms telling dirty jokes in an attempt to be invited to play. Each time David had seen it, Rove or his younger brother would shoo her away in an almost exasperated manner. David had only seen Rove's older brother once, but he too in his more mature way rolled his eyes at his mother. In each of these occasions she seemed to recognize her rejection as a play-mate and assume the role of intruder and needle them with questions about their activities. Were they playing nice? Were they playing clean? Were they going to come home at the right time? She would often target Rove's friends. David would be accused in an ambiguous seriousness of distracting Rove from homework or family activities. David would always blush and make a quick movement toward reparation, but Rove would step in quickly.

Rove's response was always satirical, but blunt. "We're playing with dirty needles we found in the garbage. We're probably going to get infected with AIDS and die."

She would show mild interest and say, "Oh really?" in a particularly nasally voice then follow it with, "That doesn't sound very nice."

It was this voice that David heard in his mind as Rove described in broad strokes how she ended up trying to divorce and sue his father. Rove began in the same

tone as he would when responding to his mother, “Oh did you hear about my mother? That's a good one.”

“She's on probation for that computer thing?” David recalled some vague outlines of their family trouble.

“Where did we last leave off with the great craziness?”

“The last thing I heard involved her not being allowed to use computers as a part of her probation because she was defrauding some guy on the internet.” David recited the information carefully. He had learned to never underestimate the thickness of blood.

“You heard about my brother's wife?”

“No.”

“Okay. So. My mother was actually pretending to be a young blond woman in these Titanic chat rooms.”

David smiled and closed his eyes to reset his attention. “Yes. I remember her being very excited that movie was being made. I still don't understand how one is a fan of a disaster.”

“Yes. Exactly. There's a fan site for everything, and she found the one for the Titanic. She got two different twits on there to fall in love with her and send her money. The kicker and the illegal thing is when they wanted to see what she looked like she sent pictures of Dori, my brother's wife.”

“Holy crap! What did they think about that?”

Rove did what David called his goblin snicker. When he got very excited or frustrated he would smile with his teeth clenched, his eyes would become very wide.

He made a high-pitched whine. David thought it sounded like laughter at a very fast meter, but it could easily be taken as a screech.

“They reported her.” Rove made a tense chopping motion with his hand. “But that's old news. These are the new developments: She had to find a way to pay back the twits on the message board and fines from court, so she started working at the Day's Inn they just built out on the interstate. So, my dad's not around much because he works second shift then goes out when everybody's sleeping. But my little brother is still in high school and he doesn't pay attention to much, but he notices when he doesn't see his mother for weeks. It turns out she was sleeping at the hotel. And not alone, but with some woman. She started smoking weed and other things with the teenagers that worked with her and just decided to stay.” Rove ticked each detail with his index finger.

David had a hard time mounting it all in his mind. It seemed like a movie. A comedy too ridiculous to take seriously and too slapstick to make one laugh. There were gaps in the story that he knew he shouldn't ask about. “So did anybody see her again?”

“Yeah.” The confirmation was half laugh and half cough. “My little brother freaked. He thought she'd been killed or something. He called the cops and they found her at work. Later, my brother heard through people at school about my mother partying with kids from the high school. She pretty much just told my dad that she was in love with this chick when she came back to officially move out.” Rove exaggerated the final words as he had when the mother was standing in the doorway looking like a pouting child.

David wanted to know more. He could listen to this tale for the nearly four-

hour plane ride, but he saw Rove was jumping through the story to get it out and over with. David suddenly liked Rove's mother a lot more. The point of most interest was running off with the lover. He immediately saw the cast away family as the lesser half. The mother was about to embark on some sort of quest that seemed a hundred times more interesting than the atmosphere David had encountered in that house. Rove and David were not friends who enjoyed each others' character so much as they were—like most young people—just waiting out adolescence together. They simply played games and shared interests while the apparitions of rigor in the lives of the adults around them breezed past. Their houses were just pressure chambers they were forced to pass the time in.

The background noise of the engines exaggerated the silence that had fallen between them. David took advantage to get his camera from the overhead. Rove had said in the terminal he wanted to take a picture of the wing from his window. The flight attendant saw the camera and offered to take a picture of the two, but they both declined. As he set the camera for a long exposure, David thought he might take a picture of the brunette flight attendant for Rove as well.

He was attracted to the attendant because she looked like a forty year-old version of his first girlfriend. Her seat, which folded out from the wall for landings and take-offs, was in front of him, facing the rear of the plane. He was close enough to see the line along the side of her face where her foundation ended; he stared at it for most of take-off as she directed her attention everywhere but at the passengers right under her. When the plane was in a near forty-five degree ascent she was almost above David and Rove. David felt the casualness of travel, similar to that of riding buses. He thought he should be crazy and ask her to join him in Las Vegas for the

weekend. That was how things happened. It was a Las Vegas kind of thing to do. But, he reasoned, this woman was accustomed to twenty-something males getting over-excited on their way to Vegas for the first time. He scolded himself for the celluloid fantasy he was indulging in. He knew he wasn't really going to gamble or act out in Vegas. The primary objective was to visit Gord.

And Gord would provide his own wildness, while adding Rove was an unknown variable. David had never drank with him before. He'd had not learned how to drink until recently. There wasn't much expectation for the days being more than a subdued tourism commercial. None of them really knew how to push beyond the thin membrane of their own experiences. It would certainly not include gambling. Living in Las Vegas, Gord despised gambling. David held some Mid-western view that it was wasteful and therefore not enjoyable. Rove felt the same as David and that is probably why he asked to join David on the trip.

Rove's father was the regular gambler. Rove told David how his dad had to leave retirement three times on account of all the money he was leaving at Ho-Chunk, the Native-American casino forty minutes north of their home town. David remembered him coming home from the plastic factory at midnight, when they were two hours into a card or video game marathon. He grabbed a doughnut and a coke then heading out again.

David often thought of him as the friendly visitor during Rove and his all-night card sessions on summer nights. The atmosphere was quiet; maybe one of the televisions set to MTV just above mute and the occasional tapping of empty Mountain Dew cans on the kitchen table. Then the sound of the door opening. David thought of the silent way Rove's father moved through the house. He would appear in the

kitchen, tell them a three-line joke then head back out into the night. David and Rove, sticking to the chairs and exhausted from concentration stared at him with partially blood-shot eyes and just smile and nod their heads to humor him. They knew he would not interrupt for long.

Rove was two years older, and for David carried the air being further along in life. He still engaged in all the past-time activities of video games, cards and movies that kept him within the spheres of David and his other friends. He even had endeavored to draw comic books. But he had also advanced, as the trailblazer, into the worlds of girlfriends, ex-girlfriends, jobs, college and moving away from town. He was also the first to have a child, marry and buy a house. David still felt as if he deferred to Rove and the mystique of his experiences.

Rove snapped his attention toward David.

“Did you bring shorts? It's hot there all the time. Do you still not wear shorts?”

David shook his head sternly.

“I remember that about you. You told me in high school,” he started to count his fingers, “never wears shorts and prefers long-sleeved shirts. Never wears T-shirts with logos or words on them. You don't advertise for free and the idea of wearing something that other people might want to read or look at makes you panic.”

He didn't like hearing himself talked about in absolutes, though Rove seemed amused by the recounting of something David had probably said when he was fourteen. “I like T-shirts with vulgar humor or offensive statements,” David said more to amuse than answer, “but I would never consider wearing one.”

Rove laughed as if that were a punch-line he was waiting for.

“That's my Grimace.” Rove used the nickname David had been endowed with

upon wearing a billowing purple shirt that likened him to the purple character from McDonald's commercials.

David realized after a few minutes pondering himself that he was no longer happy on the plane. The thin air and noise of the engines exhausted him and a cold sweat was coming on. He looked at Rove nervously, but he had returned to staring out the window. The conversation had paused again and David took the moment to lean his head back and close his eyes in hope of ending the talk.

Rove let him sleep.

After a short time David opened his eyes to find Rove asleep, his head against the window.

At the airport they rented a car. David had never done this before. He got in line with the mind-set that all activities on this trip were mandatory and he would accomplish everything without being stopped. The initial engagement with the airport and plane in Milwaukee were exciting, they seemed the gateway to something new. But the unfamiliarity he found at the Las Vegas airport left him in a survival-like mode. He did not step out of himself to enjoy the whole motion of it.

They needed a car because Gord had to work and they could not distract him with logistics. David flinched when he saw the rental would be upwards of a hundred dollars a day. He had taken the insurance. It was more money than he made in a paycheck, but it was all going on a credit card. He simply saw a chasm of space and time he had to push forward through. He saw all the money flowing out into the chasm and dispersing. Rove offered to help, but David said no. "You have a kid now. I got this, you get the drinks."

Rove added, "And the strippers."

David smiled. He didn't really take him seriously, but he saw all details as dispersed in the chasm to which he would make himself available.

They met Gord at his house around 5:00 p.m. They had followed a MapQuest print-out that led them on a tour of what to David and Rove was a strange suburban land of very wide streets and a counter-intuitive mix of desert landscape and manicured lawns. Gord's house was on a cul-du-sac. A palm tree set in the middle of a sea of black gravel accounted for his whole front yard. Both his neighbors had grass lawns, making Gord's house look run down and abandoned or just unfinished.

Gord worked as a line-cook at *Alex*, one of the five star restaurants in the city. He had bought a house with another guy, Mike, who he had lived with in his brief attempt to live in San Francisco. They originally met in the kitchen of a steak-house that was once on the main avenue of Milwaukee. The only thing David knew about Mike was he and Gord stole a frozen tenderloin and P.A. equipment from the steak-house's basement when it abruptly went out of business and defaulted on their last pay checks.

David had met Mike only once before. A year earlier, Gord packed his green Grand-Am to capacity save the passenger seat—which David took—and drove to San Francisco to pursue a career as a chef. They split time driving and the cost of a hotel in Nebraska. It was both Gord's and David's sole claim to traveling in America. David had of course envisioned small dusty towns throughout the plains and desert. That's what they saw when they got off the interstate, but it was mostly dull until they reached the Sierra-Nevada mountains. They had canceled a reservation at a motel in Salt Lake City when they realized that there were no bars per se in the city—the motel clerk said there would be a pamphlet in their room describing the club system which

required being invited to a private club. David and Gord, after weighting the ten or so hours of driving they had until San Francisco and the cost of the motel decided to push on to the coast. They got to San Francisco around 4:00 a.m. Mike and his roommate, another guy from Milwaukee lived in a fifth floor walk-up in the Tenderloin district. The whole tail end of that trip was magical and dreamlike to David. It started with pushing the exhaustion of continuous focus—driving up the Mountains for so many hours—before coasting for an hour down the other side and watching the mountains literally part to eventually reveal the lighted metropolitan areas of Sacramento and a while later the Bay Area. He was never sure where the cities began or ended. It had been nearly two days of driving through dry grassland and desert then descending into a field of light. He felt they were actually flying out of the mountains.

The second half of the dream involved wandering around the Tenderloin looking for a working payphone to call Mike. A black guy came up to them and asked what he could get them. David had said as if he had known the man all his life, “We need a phone and I’ll give you all the money in my wallet if you can find us one.” He put his hand on the man’s shoulder and said, “but it’s only like two bucks.” He spread his wallet open and the guy laughed at the sky.

“I like your style,” the man said, then paraded David and Gord from broken payphone to broken phone down a street telling them he could do well by them. The third was intact and David slapped the two bucks in his hand. The man embraced their fists and said, “You have a nice trip.” Gord, who had looked increasingly frustrated with their search, exhaled a laugh and said, “That was pretty cool.”

It had been a relief for the both of them that Mike was still up at 4:00 a.m.

They didn't think they could afford a hotel in San Francisco. Mike was medium build and height and had a blond short cut. He invited them in with a beer. "That's how we do it in Milwaukee," he said. The apartment was a single room lined with couches draped in blankets and pillows. There was a small alcove supporting a kitchen and a long closet that had enough space for a bed. The only decoration was a pegboard with pictures from all the people who lived there. Mike said there were four living there, and Gord would be number five.

They went out to get more beer and when they arrived back they found another roommate, some taller blond guy from Milwaukee and two women. One was a red head who Mike wrapped his arms around and led to the closet-room. The other woman sported long sandy hair hanging down from a cowboy hat. David remembered Mike saying, "Hey, let these guys sleep, they just got here from Milwaukee." Gord and David finished a single beer and took two of the empty couches. They both awoke an hour or two later to moaning and skin friction. They moved uneasily in and out of a tense sleep listening to and watching the tall blond and cowgirl have sex on an adjacent couch. They rose about thirty minutes after a session had finished when Mike emerged from the closet-room. David and Gord conferred at lunch in Chinatown that it must have been three times the couple had repeated. David left on the 5:00 p.m. Greyhound, not wanting to return to the apartment. It was the last time he had seen Gord. Rove had not seen Gord since he moved to Green Bay with his fiancée.

Gord was exhausted from work when he arrived home in the early evening. The house on the cul-de-sac in Las Vegas was a bi-level, the same as the one Gord lived in when he first moved to David and Rove's town in the mid-eighties. They lounged in the mid-level which featured the kitchen and living room. Gord and Mike

dominated the conversation with details about cooks and experimental foods. They passed around a picture book of such food before finally agreeing to go out and pick up Mexican food which Gord described as “greasy down-home love.” They came back and with beers proceeded to unpack their foil wrapped burritos when a straight-haired blond woman in her early twenties emerged from the lower level.

“Hey Gord, can I talk to you for minute?” She spoke in high girlish voice.

“Hey, sure.” Gord's voice accommodated her tone. They went down the stairs.

Gord came back up after only a few minutes.

“Let me guess. No rent again,” Mike said sternly.

“Yeah, but I told her it's okay. It's not like we can throw her out.”

“Dude! We should. Maybe she'd stop being so fucking juvenile.” Mike took his burrito into the kitchen.

After a moment Rove asked Gord if that was his girlfriend.

Gord sighed, staring suddenly into space and said “No.” A common gesture for him. “She's from Utah and we're just trying to make payments on the house.”

“So you're not getting like a blowjob for rent are you?” Rove said with a snicker.

Gord shook his head seriously and made a “shish” sound. “She has to deal with a lot of shit at work. She doesn't need it here too.”

“Where does she work?” David asked.

Gord's eyes got big and he tried to hide behind his burrito. After a pause he said in a small voice, “Topless bar.”

David was silent, but Rove snickered again. He often sounded like he had absorbed the verbal mannerisms of Beavis. “Whoa. Have you been there?”

Gord shook his head. “Vegas man. It sucks your soul dry. So many people come here thinking they can make money, but they get trapped. Everybody in this town is trying to take you. We bought this house and we're gonna flip it in a few years and get the fuck out. Maybe open a restaurant in Chicago. Somewhere decent.”

“Well I'm sure it sucks to live here, but I came here for whores! Whores! Whores!” Rove pumped both his fists in the hair directly alluding to Beavis.

David gave him a side glance. “You actually want to go to prostitutes?”

“Well, no. But strip clubs are nice. And I want to see a show.”

Gord smiled. “Oh, we can do that.”

“Gord. Don't go blowing your house payment on strippers,” Mike said from the kitchen.

“Seriously?” David was starting to worry.

“Dude! You'll love it. We just need to get this guy drunk so he can breathe air. Like a human being,” Rove said sneering at David.

David returned a glare.

Rove pulled back and looked to Gord for a moment then back at David, “Hey man, we can just hang too. You don't have to do anything you don't want to.”

“No, no. I will do whatever you fags are doing.”

“Cheers to that.” Rove initiated a toast with his High-life bottle. Gord and David met his.

“Cheers to Milwaukee!” roared Mike from the kitchen and he stomped his foot on the floor.

They laughed at Mike.

Rove turned his head as if confused and said “OK.” He wrapped the remaining

half of his burrito in its foil and tapped it with his hand. "I'm saving the rest of this bad boy for later. When are we going out anyway? Is everything going to be closed on Sunday?"

"It'll be quiet, but everything will be open. And it's Vegas, so there's a lot of 24-hour places. We can hang here, drink a few beers and watch a movie. Then hit the one non-tourist bar I know and go from there."

They did those things. David drove the rental to the bar. He was reputed to be, and had been observed as, the best drunk driver. David was shocked to find the bar Gord identified as non-tourist in what looked like a strip-mall. On the sidewalk in front of shaded glass windows stood some slightly younger men. David thought they might not even be twenty-one. One wore a sleeveless undershirt over his slender tanned skin and he faced two medium sized men who David thought to be Latino.

"Oh, hey that's Sonny. He's cool, but don't mind him if he's mouthy. He's from New York and thinks he's got to represent all the time," Gord said. He got out of the car and waved at the guy he had named.

The young man did not take notice. His gaze was on the other young men. It appeared to David as if they were taunting each other. Gord recognized the situation. And waved them out. "Hey Sonny, is there a problem?"

David sighed and got out of the car reluctantly. Both the Latino men looked directly at David and backed off looking worried. They said something in Spanish and walked around the corner of the strip.

David and Rove looked at each other in concern.

"Ahhhh, are those guys gonna come back with guns. Maybe we should get the fuck out of here," Rove said.

The slender kid who Gord had identified as Sonny waved his hand. "Nahh. They just a bunch of punks. They ain't no hard gangsters." He looked at David. "Hey, Gordo. You brought a big guy. They split cause they figured this guy was serious." He leaned forward and swatted David's arm. "Hey man, you want a smoke."

David said, "No thank you." He was momentarily flattered. But he found an immediate dislike for Sonny. It simultaneously occurred to him that this disapproval might be as much Sonny's accent as the casual association he had with Gord. "Good they thought that, because I don't fight."

Sonny looked unimpressed. "Alright, I guess you can just carry that intimidation. I don't back down from shit. I'd taken them if they wanted to dance." He smiled which suddenly made him look very young. "Yo Gordo, your shop hiring yet? I need to skate this other kitchen they're all assholes over there."

"Aw, no sorry man. Let me buy you a beer. These are my friends from Wisconsin," Gord said. He made the gesture to put his arm around Sonny's shoulders, but stopped short.

"You from Wisconsin Gordo? I remember that. I'm from New York." He turned toward Rove and David and pointed at himself with his thumb. "Yeah, I'll take a beer."

Gord and Sonny went in the bar's glass door which looked more like a barbershop's door to David. He looked at Rove and rolled his eyes. Rove shrugged. They followed.

Gord warned David and Rove before they came, but they weren't prepared to see video slot machines embedded *into* the bar. The interior was a converted diner and every two feet of the counter's length older video screens flickered with the images of

spinning reels. They had been slightly amused by the slot machines in the airport, but the awkward integration offended them. Rove laughed with a tone of contempt and ordered a whiskey sour. David looked at the bar somewhat dumbfounded and said “High Life” without looking at the bartender. The bartender shook his head. When David looked up he found another version of Rove's father behind the bar, but dressed in a T-shirt that had the image of a tux. David generalized and said “Miller.” The bartender said “MGD or Lite?”

“Oh, MGD is fine.” David didn't really think about his choice. He wanted the cheapest and weakest they had, but realized his error when the man asked for five dollars.

They sat at the bar in a line. Sonny drank his beer in two swigs and left. At which point David moved to the space he vacated. The three of them sat and sipped their beers in silence—David and Rove mostly scanning the new environment.

David had started to feel the nuances of Gord's blanket moral disapproval of Vegas. He didn't usually mind old-fashioned notions of vice, though he had no familiarity with any of them. A wandering unpleasantness started somewhere in his insides. He thought of the burrito and the different beers he'd drunk since the early evening. He wanted to be on vacation and follow the whims of his friends—their notions of what it was to be carefree—but some tension was ratcheting up inside of him. He didn't entirely know what to expect or how he really fit inside their scene. He thought of the image of them sitting at the bar with the video slot machines in it, inside the strip-mall shop. He couldn't really fit it into anything experienced or imagined. David leaned in close to Gord.

“Hey man, what was that shit outside?”

Gord immediately began shaking his head as if subtly brushing off David's concern.

“Oh, you know. I'm just trying to back a friend up. I didn't really think anything would happen.”

“Yeah, but it seemed like something was gonna happen and your *friend*—who you just bought a drink for and left without returning the favor—seemed like he was the source of the trouble. If you know what I mean.”

“Ah, nah. Sonny's a solid guy,” Gord said.

“Yeah, but Cormac was a solid guy too and look where he is now. That whole got-your-back-thing snowballs into shit, you know. It can be fucking stupid.” David pulled away from Gord after nearly spitting the final words.

“Yeah, yeah. I suppose.” Gord bowed his head in a familiar way.

“How is Cormac? Do you talk to him?”

“He's as good as he can be, really,” David said. He instinctively looked away, to half-consciously scan the bar only to find the annoying lights making him want to look down.

Rove leaned in. “Are you talking about Volk?”

David and Gord nodded.

“And how's he enjoying the showers?” Rove laughed.

“It's not really like that as far as he says,” David said in a low voice.

“Well, whatever. I'm not surprised he's in there. The last time I saw him he was hanging out with that piece of shit Trevor Wallaby. They fucking broke into my car and stole my speakers. Punched the lock out with a screwdriver,” Rove said. He reveled in his anger for a second before seeing the look on David's and Gord's faces.

“Really?” Rove frowned. “Didn't he intentionally get you into a fight after school with some guy twice your size just for the fun of it?” Rove said pointing at Gord.

Gord waved his head back and forth as the memory turned him a little red. “Yeah,” he said in a defeated voice.

“Well, my point was that Gord should be careful around guys who get into fights,” David said trying to end the escalation.

“Oh yeah. Totally. What a douche bag.” Rove thumbed the direction Sonny had left. He looked at Gord incredulously. “What the fuck dude?”

Gord threw his hands up and held them there. There was a pause as David and Rove watched Gord's face turn down toward the bar as he dropped his hands back to his bottle of Guinness.

Rove stirred his drink.

David returned to his analysis of the bar's interior. He imagined the bartender to be the owner. He looked annoyed and impatient. David imagined him to have thought it would be a great idea to open a bar away from the main centers of gambling, but then through a series of poor decisions settled on the strip-mall location. It appeared he had identified the basic components of a bar. There was a U-shaped counter with high chairs, a few tables to fill out the empty space, neon bar signs facing out the windows and a cluster of corporate sponsored posters and framed plaques on the walls. The spirits were stacked in three tiers at the head of the bar, as he'd seen any place else. But David saw through the details and could only see what was once a diner. He'd seen a lot of signs as they drove from the airport for very cheap

diners' that advertised steak and eggs at varying low prices. The cheapest he'd seen was \$2.99.

The bartender stood in the middle of it all with his arms crossed. Again David thought of Rove's father. One of the last times he had been in Rove's house was during a Thanksgiving or Christmas, he couldn't remember. They had returned from their respective cities. They were going to play cards and Rove offered him a soda, but it was in the basement. David had said, "Where's that" at which point Rove, his mother and father all looked at David with glimmer in their eye.

"You haven't seen our basement?" Rove asked in character—David couldn't always identify who he was conjuring. He had only shaken his head and slapped down the deck he was scanning. "Well then! Dad, do you want to do the honors?"

Rove's mother snickered which made David think he was about to become the butt of a gag. They went to a door in the hallway which David had ignored as a closet. Behind the door was blackness and the hollow sound of open space. Rove's father went down into the darkness carefully then a pull-chain light shone over narrow and unusually steep wooden stairs. Rove and his mother stood on either side of David and waved him down.

The steps were more solid than his house's and at the bottom he found a wide open space that was much higher than his own basement, perhaps nine feet. The walls were concrete block and looked new. He noticed some parts of the floor were still dirt while other sections were concrete slabs, independent from the walls.

Rove came down after him and asked again, "you've never seen this?"

David didn't understand. It was bigger than usual, but he didn't see anything that would suggest surprise. He was half-shocked to see it so empty. He was expecting a horde of televisions and microwaves.

Rove's father started to wander around and turn other lights, but stayed close enough to listen as Rove began telling David that their house did not come with a basement, only a crawl-space. He told how his father had dug out the basemen over the course of twenty years. One five-gallon bucket at a time. Rove then pointed out the walls and told how his father had gotten to a certain depth at the back of the house and dirt started to fall in so he had to jack up the house, dig out the old footings and then build these block walls underneath the house. "He's not done, in another ten years he may get to the front of the house. They pointed behind the stairs to a small area where the clay protruded into the basement. It looked like the earth was falling into his basement. "Oh and by the way, you're welcome to come over and help anytime."

David had responded exuberantly with questions and exclamation in earnest and in respect for the old man who he saw in a different light.

With new inspiration amongst the video screens, David tried conversation again. "How did you get your house? Did you have a pot of cash from working in San Francisco?" he asked Gord.

"No. We got a zero down-payment loan," Gord said in partial triumph. "We couldn't save any money in Frisco. That's why we came here. We're gonna flip it. It had a high interest rate, but we refinanced a few years later and got more money to fix it up and a reduced rate. Mike's mom is in realty in Milwaukee. She got us all set up."

"Oh yeah, I saw your bathroom. Is that close to being finished or did you just start tearing it up?" David said.

Gord let out a long sigh. "Yeah, it's kinda in-between. We ran out of money and I'm just tired of working on that mess." His voice picked up. "But we're gonna

finish fixing it this summer and hopefully put it on the market in the next year or two. We'll check with his mother to see where sales are then.”

“That's cool.” David fantasized about Rove's basement and Gord's front yard. He thought of the freedom to sculpt anything. It was right there and all you had to do was fixate on it.

“Yeah, Gord, good job on the house. I can't sell mine, but it's still better than renting.” Rove said in straight voice.

“Why are you trying to sell?” David asked.

“Sandy doesn't like the neighborhood and really it's too small for kids,” Rove said again in what David was identifying as his professional voice. Rove continued in the same voice. “Why am I talking about houses instead of strippers in Las Vegas?”

Gord said, “Check please,” for affect.

David felt all his visions of practical freedom evaporate. He decided to be silent and try to be excited, but the phantom pain in him became apparent again.

There were two kinds of places they could go to explained Gord. Topless bars, which were straight up bars with topless waitresses. Or strip clubs which were full nudity and served no alcohol. David voted for the full bar. Gord and Rove reluctantly agreed to ease him into it, but the first bar was empty and there was only one woman. David avoided looking at her while he and Gord drank six dollar cans of Budweiser. A group of loud men entered who seemed to know the woman. She went to their side of the bar and talked with them. She didn't turn around for a long time.

“Alright time for the club Gord,” said Rove.

Outside a Lamborghini was parked next to David's rental Ford Taurus.

“Wow. Never really seen one of those in real life,” David said as he unlocked his driver's door.

“Fuck those assholes. Only assholes drive shit like this. These rich fucks are everywhere.” Gord seethed with intensifying menace. He got into the rental's rear passenger seat and paused a second. “Did you get insurance on this?”

David nodded casually and was about to explain his thinking on the cost when Gord rammed the car door into the side of the Lamborghini. David screamed “What the fuck!” but instinctively started the car and sped away as Gord yelled “Drive! Drive!” and Rove breathed the words “Holy” and “Shit” individually.

David's mind froze. He was able to drive fast acutely well, but he was not able to do anything else. The blob of tension in his chest split into two. A new painless blob formed in his head. It seemed to congeal into sharp edges when he saw the gash in the Lamborghini's white skin. He drove fast, but not so fast as to make screeching noises. Gord gave him directions and he was able to follow them, but he wanted to turn to him in the back seat and scream. He wanted to attack Gord and saw him briefly as an intruder but all that action was paralyzed inside the blobs. David felt paralyzed to do anything but drive. They crossed the city, passing the downtown strip which was lit up in a way that David could only ascribe to Christmas-time. Rove seemed to dismiss Gord's violent outburst quickly as they talked about the club.

They decided on a place. David refused to hear the details. They parked and Gord asked if they wanted to stop to buy beer. Rove shrugged and was about to say something when David said “Yes” with no emotion.

“That's cool. I can drive later,” Rove said.

They walked to a gas station and each bought a six-pack of bottles. At the club

entrance a Latino man greeted them courteously and called them “gentlemen.” David and Rove instinctively moved their six-packs behind their back, but the door man said he could take them.

“These will be available for you at the side door,” he said as he stacked all three in a black plastic tub. “It's twenty-five dollars for admission.”

David flinched. He did not remember hearing about a cover charge. He wanted to calculate its impact on his budget, but the blob had become a permanent obstacle which pressed up against and distorted all his thinking. The numbers seemed to slip over its amorphous shape and melt. He could only move his eyes and feet. He looked at his wallet open and the nods and grins of the doorman.

He walked further into the narrow hall that made up the front of the building to find a larger more intentionally intimidating guy. He wore a suit, but had a shaved head and looked as if he should be dressed as a biker. He said “Enjoy yourselves as gentlemen, but never touch any of the girls.” He then waved the three of them into a large open area with a stage and numerous tables.

David looked across the width of the room. His eyes moved automatically over numerous young women sitting idly with each other. They looked at the three men coming in and began to stir and stand up. David saw with some relief that they were not nude, but scantily dressed in lingerie-like wear. One even looked like a nurse, with a short thin white dress. There were only two other groups of men who sat at the stage's side—they looked like customers who were accustomed to their place and focused on their surroundings only occasionally. The stage was empty and David walked wide of it.

They were guided to a side door where two more young Latino men sat outside, the plastic tub containing the beer collected at the front door between them. The men were very friendly, but insisted they had to open and pour the beer into a plastic cup. The stage occupied the entire back wall of the wide room and Gord led the three of them to a table set back from the right side of it. The walls behind it were speckled mirror and the stage's edge had contours that rolled in and out of the seating area. There were two peninsulas that featured poles. They sat to the right of the right pole, which was also as far away from the other customers as the seating area allowed.

After ten minutes of inactivity the music changed and a dancer stepped onto the stage on the far side and began to perform. She danced with the pole for a bit before proceeding to remove her clothing. The three watched. When the girl finished she went to the other customers. David watched as she talked to them, sat on their laps and was eventually turned away. When she made the turn toward their table, David stood up and walked toward the door where the young men kept the beer. He gulped his cup down as he went, not looking back to see what Gord or Rove did. He stayed outside longer than he thought would be ignored then went in to find Gord and Rove sitting at the table alone.

“You OK?” Rove asked through the volume of the music. Another girl was on stage, at the pole closer to their table.

David nodded quickly.

The women made routines, going up on stage, then making their way around to the sparse groups. The second dancer made her way to the their table first. David watched as Rove and Gord said “hi” and “how are you” and held out dollar bills. She

pushed her breasts together and they took turns pushing the money into the cleavage.

David quickly produced his wallet and handed the dancer a dollar.

She laughed, “Shy, are we?” She released her breasts and took David's money with one hand while caressing his cheek with the other. “That's cute sweetheart.”

David forced a smile and nodded his head. Rove laughed and slapped David's shoulder. Gord continued to stare at the woman. She left them to visit the other side of the stage. During the following dance a few of the girls who were sitting around when they entered came over to their table. They asked if anyone wanted a personal dance. Gord held his hand up smiling. One of the girls took his hand and pulled him from the chair. David watched alarmed as she led him to a hallway directly behind their table. He looked toward the entrance for the big white guy, but it occurred to him as quickly that *she* had touched him. The remaining two women stood by looking down at Rove and David.

“I'm staying here for now ladies,” Rove said.

The two girls then moved to David, touching his shoulder and leaning down to whisper in his ear. He sat upright with a jilt and glared at Rove.

“Hey ladies, he doesn't want a dance either. Just come back later.” Rove looked at David with concern. The two ladies put their hands up in defense and rolled their eyes before walking away. “Hey man, you okay?”

David nodded.

“Do you know how to enjoy yourself? Seriously?”

“I'm not really into this. But I can tough it out for awhile.” David clenched his jaw as he considered the possible periods of time that might entail.

“Dude. We are not leaving here until you get a lap dance. We didn't come all

this way to sit around and drink.” When Rove saw David hesitate and shake his head he grabbed him by the shoulder. “Hey, you don't need to worry about insulting these girls. Don't even think of them as people. They're just working. None of it matters.”

David looked at him for a moment and then shrugged his shoulders.

Fifteen minutes later as they both sat in the silence of loud energetic music another, different woman came over and put her hands on Rove's shoulders. The gesture was one that David associated with long married couples who simply touched each other out of habit. Rove turned, stood, and let the woman lead him to the same hallway Gord had gone through. David tried to re-secure himself and look at the women as was expected of him. They seemed to be everywhere. The club only had seven customers and seemed to have fifteen women walking around. There was one on stage completely naked who gyrated on the pole. He looked at the actions as he would a television when he was not really watching. But his mind was not able to wander as it did when he was not participating.

Gord came back and sat down. He had a full cup of beer and sipped at it watching the stage performance. He did not look at David. Two more girls came close to the table, but they seemed to be watching the dance as well. For the first time David looked at them closely. He found one to be quite pretty in some familiar way. She seemed slightly tanned with longish facial features. She wore another variation of the white and dark lingerie-maid outfit. She turned her head twice to find David examining her. The third time she went to sit next to him.

“Do you want company?” she asked in a straight tone.

“Sure, but I'm not interested in a personal dance. Sorry.” David looked at her only while he spoke then returned his gaze to the stage. He thought she looked like a

woman in a Halloween costume that did not fit. She nodded her head and followed his gaze.

Gord looked away from the stage to find David sitting next to the woman. He looked twice before reluctantly looking back at the stage. They sat there for about five minutes before she leaned in toward David and spoke through the noise.

“You don't want to be the boring guy, do you?”

“I am the boring guy. I just drive.” He said quickly and more to himself. She had given him something to imagine.

She leaned back in her chair. She sat there for a while, looking across the room towards her co-workers who sat away from the customers. She eventually said “later” without trying to speak it directly into David's ear and left. Gord saw her go and mouthed “What was that?” David shrugged and shook his head. He shifted to a chair next to Gord.

“So what was the personal dance like?” David asked.

Gord's face shriveled and his shoulder went forward in identical fashion. “They get naked on your lap in a small room for twenty bucks. It's supposed to last one song, but that girl started in the middle of a song and then wanted another twenty to keep going. I decided to just save my money for a different girl.”

David nodded to every four or five words that Gord managed to get out across the thump of the speakers' bass. He heard most of it and tried to imagine the scene, but could not.

Rove returned with a plop in his chair. He was grinning. “That was pretty cool.”

David leaned over the table and waved them both in close. “I'm sorry I'm not

going to do any of this with you guys. But I do feel like a cheapskate.” David took out his wallet and slapped a twenty on the table in front of each of them. He tried to do it very demonstratively. “I’m gonna buy you each a dance. Call it a Christmas present. But I’m not going to stay here for the whole time. Maybe I’ll go get more beer.”

Rove and Gord both looked concerned, but they picked up the bills and asked for reassurance that was what he wanted to do. David did not give them time to protest. He stood up and said “enjoy!” then walked toward the front door. He felt his whole body loosening and moved with more power as he felt air on his face from just his stride. Walking through the loud music and small couples of women suddenly reminded him of dances that he had tried to attend in middle school. They were eerily the same. He had continuously walked around the dance floor in the auditorium then to the joining cafeteria seating area, feeling that only with movement could he justify his presence there. Everybody would simply see him passing and assume that he had somewhere to go.

He asked the large white guy if he could leave and come back. The man nodded his head and turned his large torso toward a table of papers and office supplies. He picked up a stamp and pad and carefully applied a wet mark on David's right hand.

Outside was warm, but David just moved as fast as he could to feel the air against his face as his legs pumped him effortlessly along the path they had taken on arrival. Once at the gas station he considered what kind of six pack might appeal to all three. Rove only drank sweet things like coolers and mixed drinks. Gord was a beer snob and would want something bitter. He looked up and down the cooler avoiding a decision until he felt he was taking too long. He settled on more MGD, something

nobody would like or comment on. Paying for it he was amazed at all the bills in his wallet. He'd taken out two hundred in Milwaukee and was surprised so much was still left. He felt secure in tossing the money at his friends. He hoped the women saw him doing it so they would not think he was just cheap.

He walked as slow as he could back. He stopped outside the front of the building dreading his next step. He walked to the entrance, then stopped and retraced his steps to walk around the building to find the two Latino men with the beer. One was there.

“Hey, I bought more beer can I just leave it here with you?”

The man looked at him with distrust, but nodded.

“Can I get another beer as long as I'm here?”

The young man shook his head. “No. You need to go through the front door and come get it from inside.”

David nodded and slowly made his way to the front again. Inside he found Rove sitting by himself. David sat down briskly.

“Did you enjoy my gift yet?”

“No, but thanks a lot. I will totally use it sometime tonight. Gord and I are thinking we can't call it a night until we find an Asian chick. There's none here, we asked.”

David was silent. He did not know how to respond. He drank his beer and nodded.

David watched Rove walk to a group of women sitting around a table. He watched as he talked and laughed. The women did not laugh, but all turned their heads toward him. David wondered why so many women were here on a Sunday night.

A woman came and sat next to David. She had long dark hair and was wearing a long white fur scarf over a blue gown. She leaned toward him, but did not touch him.

“Hi, do you want to talk? You look lonely over here.” She spoke in a high child-like voice that seemed intent on arousing sympathy.

“Oh, I'm fine. I'm just the driver.”

“I think you've been drinking a lot. Do you not want to talk to me?” Her voice was syrupy in a way that made David think she was teasing him.

“No. Thank you. I'm just waiting.”

“Is there something wrong with me? I just want to talk.”

Another woman sat by her side and put her arm around the woman in blue.

“Who's your friend Sweetie?” Her voice was deeper and paternal.

“I don't know he won't talk to me. I think he doesn't like me.”

David stared forward and slightly shaking his head.

“Maybe he can talk to both of us Sweetheart,” the woman with the deeper voice said.

David said, “No thank you,” as quietly as he could and still be heard.

“Why? We're both nice,” the woman in blue said. She then turned to the other woman and made a small sound of pain.

“It's okay Sweetheart, you're beautiful and we'll find someone nicer to talk to.”

The woman with the deeper voice paused. She rubbed the woman in blue's shoulder then turned her attention to David, “It's terrible when assholes come to strip clubs.”

David smiled and nodded with his eyes closed. He got up after a pause and said in his most silent voice, “Sorry.” He went out to get another beer and stayed out

there until the Latino man asked him if he was “okay.” He went back inside without responding. The women were gone from the table, but he saw Rove walking with them toward the private dance rooms. He felt momentarily relieved.

David was alone to consider what the length of the night could be. Whenever he detected any of the remaining women inspecting him from afar he got up and went to the side door for more drink. Eventually Gord appeared and sat next to him. He looked shaken and rubbed his hands together. David watched him intently without expression, but Gord avoided meeting his gaze. They sat their silently until Rove slapped David on the shoulder.

“Holy crap that was so amazing. Let's get out of here quick.”

Gord got up quickly and followed—mouth agape wanting to hear. David moved robotically. He went to the side door and collected the remains of all the beers in one six pack container, before retracing the full length of the club again. He looked straight ahead toward the door so as not to make eye contact with anyone. Outside he did not see his friends immediately. They were already up the block a way and Rove was wildly motioning with his hand that David hurry up. David walked at a steady pace, defying their excitement.

Gray's goblin-snicker was back. “Oh my god! David, two chicks just fucked on my lap.”

“Why are we running?” David asked. He looked at Gord who was still processing the story Rove had told. He looked bitter as a man who had been cheated, but was accustomed to being cheated.

“Because I paid them the forty, twenty each and that was supposed to last one song, but I think they just forgot I was there.” He exclaimed again, “They just went at

it for like twenty minutes and never asked me for more money. So as soon as they finished and left the room I bolted! Forty bucks for the greatest time of my life!”

“God. Jeez. How does this never happen to me?” Gord said, stuttering through Rove's excitement.

“Don't worry. I got the beer,” David said.

Rove laughed and Gord smiled.

“Now I just need an Asian to make the night complete,” Rove said.

“I think I know a place,” Gord said. His role as guide seemed to relieve him of a bit of his jealousy.

David noticed that Gord now seemed to be forcing himself forward. David was very tired and as he moved realized increasingly that he was very drunk.

Rove drove. David sat in the back seat and thought about Gord's house. It was ugly. He thought he wouldn't buy it. He would not buy any house. He knew he could. Anyone could get one now. He thought it amazing that someone would buy Gord's house when he finished it. The house tumbled in his mind as they stopped in another parking lot. When they got out of the car David had forgotten what they were doing.

“Hey maybe we should take him home,” Gord said.

“No! I'm fine. Do we bring the beer?”

Gord shook his head.

They sat on a high backed, white booth-like couch. There was a table in front of them. When David looked up to a waiter handing him a plastic bottle of Miller-lite he saw an Asian woman in perhaps her later thirties or more. She wore a short skirt and tight tank-top and was sitting on Rove's lap. David took the bottle and held it for a long time. He got up to find the bathroom at some point and passed other booths. In

one he saw a young black woman straddling Gord. He had realized Gord was not with them at the booth. David saw Gord's face was in despair and he looked away hoping he hadn't been seen. He spent a long time in the bathroom. The whiteness of the florescent light reflecting off the tile all over the floors and walls seemed to blind him. He realized after a long time that he'd sat down on the toilet to pee. He wobbled in front of the sink. He took a hard left out of the bathroom to avoid the booth Gord was in. But he saw him in front of the ATM in the corner of the room which looked like a cloth-napkin restaurant. David thought he should shout at him, but just lunged at the spot where he had been sitting hoping to make it look natural.

Rove woke him and told him to move quickly.

“We need to get out of here. That old Asian chick just asked me for a hundred and forty dollars.”

They were met by a blast of light when they left. In the most vivid moment of David's life, he was astonished to find a hot ordinary Monday morning outside. He saw people walking the side walk—some with coffee cups, others with Walkmans. In the car he heard Gord say “Fuck that” as Rove said something about the Asian woman trying to scam him.

“Let's get some breakfast,” Gord said.

David thought about the marble-like visions of the women he had seen naked in his life. When he looked over to review the scene of the old couple on the bus he felt relief. The woman in the football sweatshirt was going on about how old the table was and when it had been brought over to the States. He saw that the old man who

had been responding to her non-plussed was now looking at her. The man held one of her chubby hands and was trying to tempt the other. She went on in the same tone.

“I tell ya, things are gonna have to change. That table was just too much to lose.”

“Yes, of course.” He said in the same concise monotone.

The Night-walk Home

I held my hands in wool pockets to my stomach, which did gentle pancake flips. The cold air was thick and calming as I trailed behind her. She had run ahead to avoid an argument; she stopped abruptly a block ahead of me and fell backward into the snow. Giggling and snorting, she made her distinct sounds. I walked at the same pace as I had all the way up Farwell to Maryland and the Triangle Park. Once at her feet I turned and faced her stern and straight, her feet at mine. Cocking my head to one side I looked at her, waiting.

“Aack!” She started harsh and finished soft, “I’m frozen.”

“Oh?” I walked slowly around her, onto the snow. Her eyes seemed to follow my knees. She maintained a wild look of glee, her lips slightly parted in anticipation. I bent over to look straight down into her eyes. She shook her head, then adjusted her focus on my face and smiled.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I said.

The glee was replaced by an exaggerated pout and then nothing. She sat up, groaning. “You won’t play.”

I exhaled and watched the steam as if it were smoke. I looked at the dimensions of the park: a triangle, sidewalks on all sides, ten or so trees and two benches set adjacent to each other in the center. The snow had been swept from their seats. I moved to her side listening to the crunch of snow and looking at the long black hair that spread over her jacket. She added a red dye, but it only gave the black of her hair a slight iridescent quality. I plopped down on the snow next to her and laid back. The contours of the snow became hard and compact under my weight. Looking at the few stars that show in the city, I tried to puff a large billow of steam in the air.

“What am I looking at?”

I heard her child-like cheer then she climbed over me, the cuffs of her coat sleeves warming my ears. I looked at her enigmatic smile through a corridor of hair streaming down from her face. Her hair was tickling my face. She shook it gently, brushing some imaginary dust from me. Her smile was much different. I wasn't sure if I had seen this smile before. It was confidently amused and yet embarrassed in some way. Squinting one eye, or winking as she did when challenging unnecessary stubbornness, she pushed her lower lip up as if already in defeat.

“Do you really want me to talk about That Guy now?” she said.

“No. I guess not.”

She shifted her eyes away. I thought she meant to get up and continue home, but then her whole body was over me, straddling my hips. She let her full weight settle onto my groin. I was soft and shriveled. The heat coming through her pants and into my legs was more than I anticipated. The pulse in my upper thigh became a pounding burst under her weight. The snow and trees suddenly became foremost in my mind as I concentrated on the shapes molded into my back and the orange glow of the sky interlaced with the bare twigs of treetops. I lay still, somewhat uncomfortable as I wished to shift the position of my back but held, fearing I might force my pelvis upward into hers.

She was still smiling. It was more satisfied than amused. She took my hands, which had for some reason ended up crossed against my chest and put them on her thighs. Then she leaned forward burying her hands inside my coat and hovered over me, her small hands pressing against my chest. My numbing hands felt the texture of her jeans then pressed for the soft tone in her leg. She looked wicked then;

gleeful, amused and in adoration, I believed. I looked away feeling criminally calm. I detached from the park, loosened from the city, my functions of my heart and lungs flattened into tinsel rhythm from some distant hallway. I thought my hands would tighten into pincers.

After a few seconds she bent her elbows and leaned down to put her head against my chest. The pressure on my groin was released and in a reaction, to fill the space, I felt myself growing.

The movements were familiar to her as I gently held her upper arm and guided her away from me. She moved instantly, but I could feel the slowness in her movements, as if embarrassed, her confidence sapped. An awkward and practical movement ensued as we separated and stood up. I looked up to find Patty walking her small golden retriever up Maryland. Her pub was not too far from the one Megan and I had just left. She recognized me and smiled turning her attention northward. I had only taken Megan to her pub once.

Once she passed, Megan circled her arms around my waist and looked up at me. "What's wrong?" She had changed her voice yet again. It was small and pleading. She pressed her chin against my chest.

"Nothing. It's cold." I cupped her elbows so she would release me and moved to the sidewalk. I waited for her. She stood looking at me. I waved for her to continue up the street. She came reluctantly. She took my hand as we continued toward her apartment. I squeezed it lightly as we crossed the street.

I could not help but remember a week earlier in her apartment. I was sitting on the couch, watching something horrible on the television. My stomach had been slicked with anxiety as I had caught various words wafting in from her bedroom

where she had made the regular Wednesday call to That Guy. She came out and sat next to me on the couch, saying nothing. She then suddenly leaped for my stomach. She put her head down on it as a pillow, her arms encircling my waist. I had started to run my hands over her hair when she tightened her grip on my already disturbed belly and I suddenly had a full erection. I caressed her ear then face and found my hand around her neck, but it froze there as I felt her arm might pressing against my crotch. She tried to keep hold, but gave in after a minute. We watched the television until it was time for me to go.

We came around the corner of Webster just as Patty's front door was shutting. She lived only a house down from Megan's apartment building. The ritual ensued as I silently followed her through the door of her building and then up the back steps to her floor. Like an instructor I stood straight and towering over her, watching as she hunkered down and fumbled with key and lock. The long narrow hallway felt like an ominously stretched class room. The same corridor provided the first performance of each night. At my arrival she would open the door to her apartment and peek out at me, her face half hidden behind the fake molding and watch me walk the long path.

Inside, we stood uncomfortably until she pleaded with me to sit. I sat. She offered me something to drink: beer, soda, water, juice, crystal light, vodka, rum. Water was fine. The television was off and her cat made rounds inspecting the smoke-soaked jacket she threw on the floor. Nothing was very expensive. Metal coasters on the otherwise empty coffee table, powdered incense, candles, stone and ceramic figurines of frogs and cats line the top of the entertainment stand, there were large leafy plants in one corner and a mostly unused exercise bike in the other. The plastic water fountain next to the couch gurgled; she would turn it on as a matter of course

when returning from the bar. She brought two glasses of water. One she handed to me and carefully emptied the other into the fountain. She started the oven and asked if I liked Chicken Cordon Bleu and garlic mashed potatoes. I did. The mail was on a small table next to the entertainment stand with the answering machine, keys and notepaper. She looked at each piece of mail, for what would probably be the third time that day and then set it back in the same order. She played the messages. A woman's voice squirted out, cracking in the silence.

Megan was startled then waved her hand in the air. "My roommate sleeps like a log. Besides he likes to wake me up at seven in the morning knocking the place down when trying to get ready for work." She wants to go on, but the distorted voice catches her. She listens to the incomprehensible message. "Awww, mom. I love you too." She was very sincere.

Bad kidneys. Same as Megan. Her mother wanted to move out of her boyfriend's house in Wausau and in with Megan; something about making up lost time she had once explained to me. Megan was terrified she might actually do it.

One Sunday, after she had come home from That Guy's house in Sheboygan the first thing she said to me was "I told my mother about you." I hadn't asked what that meant or what had been said. She had not spoken of it since.

I watched her go about her routine. Towels, the cat's water and food, empty bottles left out by Elliot—her roommate—toilet paper from the closet. Her father sent her mis-cuts from the paper mill he worked in Green Bay. She knew I watched her. She looked at me for a moment and then approached me with apprehension, her fingers hanging in space at her hips.

"You can watch TV." She waited for my reaction. She itched to bring me the

remote and preoccupy me as she wished to do herself. When I shook my head she raised her eyes, smiled and said “OK” in a high voice. She returned to the kitchen with a bemused expression. She often did that when departing someone’s attention.

I tried to speak quietly, but my voice was husky after so much silence. “Does your roommate ever have people over, or have a boyfriend.” This brought her out of the kitchen, her fingers in the air pointing away from her body, as if sticky.

“Seriously, no. Eliot is kind of strange. All he does is work in the morning, look at gay porn on my computer during the day when I am gone and then goes to sleep at 10:00 or 11:00. He really freaks me out. I think he’s got a crush on That Guy. He was here one weekend and I swear I heard him jerking off when me and That Guy were having sex.” I nodded slightly, got up and fetched the remote. She returned to the kitchen.

She brought the food to me as she usually did. Back to the kitchen she returned with napkins and forks. I smiled and ate the food sheepishly. She set her plate on her Organic Chemistry book, which she had been reading in between trips to the kitchen. I was watching some sort of all-night news program. The newscasters were very lackadaisical about maintaining the typical air of staunch professionalism. The woman was caught off guard after a commercial eating a candy bar which she finished as her fellow newscaster read her sheets for her.

Megan went on reading through the show until she caught me dozing off. I awoke to her coos and her fingers running through my hair.

“Are you falling asleep Sweetie?”

“No. I’m fine.”

“It’s alright. You can sleep here if you want. I will be studying all night anyway.”

I got up and began to stretch. “You have a test tomorrow?” She nodded. My sudden movement had unsettled her. “Why did you come out with me then? Christ! You’ve failed how many of these tests because of me?” I looked at the VCR, it read 3:53 a.m.

She only shook her head in response.

“I better go.” I put my coat on and found the business card from the dealership where her mother worked in Wausau. I pulled it out and showed it to her. “You want this back?” She had used it earlier that night to draw diagrams of how a woman’s pelvis was tilted forward, seemingly for the sake of intercourse and giving birth, the cause of her chronic back pain. She loved science, any kind of technical explanation of the world. I had realized that she may have initially invited me out for the first time because as her boss I was in the position of explaining how to fix common problems. I managed the computer lab at the library where I met her. We had seen each other almost every night for two months since, except every other weekend when she went to Sheboygan to visit That Guy. The card was a rough drawing with small labels and lines pointing out different membranes and organs. The conversation had spilled into virginity and various mechanics of the bodies to which she supplied further arrows and circles.

“No you can keep it.” She came around the coffee table seeming to hover over the carpet. Her movements often seemed linked to her surroundings. The plates had been neatly stacked, the napkins crumpled on top with the plastic forks. She came at me with her hands out and her face down as if, an offering in a ceremony. “I can give you a ride

home.” Her arms were around me, her palms pushing at different spots on my back.

I shook my head. “Naw.” I moved away from her taking her by the hands. She opened the door and then stopped when she saw me smiling. I moved my face toward hers. “Can I kiss you?” I saw her expression change quickly. Her eyes widening, she pulled away.

“No.” The word stumbled out of her mouth.

I was already there, finding her cheek. I gave it a weak peck. The skin was very smooth and softer than I had expected. An image invaded my head from some earlier evening—her face masked in white bedtime cream and her hair up in a towel. She always said she wanted me to stay, even as she prepared for bed.

She chuckled slightly, a sense of relief, but unmistakably drawn out. I quickly moved out the door and towards the stairway. My cheeks were fiery and my heart became a vibration in its cavity. By the time I was outside I was already shaking my head, as the heat became waves of shame. I mumbled “stupid” over and over again. Swinging my right fist at the bricks of the building I felt little shavings of my skin sprinkle away. I looked at my hand. The scrapes and cuts were pink and had not started to bleed; some still had bits of skin standing above them like opened can lids, hanging from the last sinew of tin. I wasn’t satisfied. I felt nothing in the hand. I let go and brought the fist down on one of the cement pillars along the entrance to the building with all the force I could generate. It made a silly fleshy thud. Like a bell, it simply jiggled, with no pain.

I put the warming fist in my pocket. It was numb and the fingers would not release. I had calmed. I considered the different paths to take home. A mile and half and a large selection of routes presented me plenty of time to wear myself out.

I turned onto Frederick as a new street to walk up. The wind was picking up and finding the crevasses in my ears, burning them. Bringing the zipper to my chin my right hand gave its first cry of pain from the wind. The houses were large, intermixed with apartments. I looked up the street seeking some sort of vision. I found a small dog standing in the sidewalk looking at me. He stayed in his place as I approached, but turned his attention to the houses. His ears were perked and flicking in different directions. I stopped a few feet away from him. He had sharp features with gray and black fur. He looked at me once more.

The huffs and moans drifted down over the snow. A slap and then a mixture of whines. I thought it awfully cold to leave a window open. But I often did the same in my apartment, where the radiators ran all day, hissing and leaking hot steam in my bedroom. The only way to sleep was to open the window and let a thick, heavy slip of air slide over my head and freeze my pillow. I thought the chicken and processed mashed potatoes were starting to turn over the several pints of beer. Always drink from bottles I thought.

The dog was growing comfortable with my presence. He was sitting on the sidewalk, listening. I kicked a piece of ice from the snow bank at him. He gracefully pranced out of the way. His movements reminded me of the red foxes I had seen on television. He pranced away into the street calmly.

“Stupid dog.” I said as I watched him go.

Endless Flat

Outside my home I stopped and listened. There aren't many indigenous sounds in Shorewood at 3:00 a.m., but the wind filling the space between my apartment building and the video rental shop almost obscured the noise. Shutting the car door would have completely hidden the moan. I heard it again and followed the sound to a window of my building. I moved intimately close to the cream-colored bricks with their dirty, coal-smoked faces. A few windows down from my own bedroom, the bottom sill was at the height of my nose, I stood and listened. The room's blinds were down but the window up. The moans were clearer, a woman, young perhaps. They came at regular intervals. I could not hear anything else. I turned around and leaned against the brick wall and listened. I was mostly sober, which was disappointing. I had hoped that the alcohol might take me into sleep quickly. I felt the urge to exhale deeply but bit down and held it. The breath eased slowly from my nose. Then the feeling of dread came over me again. Tomorrow was going to be very long. The moans seemed to have little substance. I looked at the mostly empty video store parking lot. I felt something drop into my stomach. A moment of revulsion.

I couldn't stop the frown from pulling down on the corners my face. I walked toward the front of the building. The frown felt good, as if I were concentrating on something serious. My hands, as if triggered by walking along the grass, pulled the keys out of my pocket and started flipping through them. Apartment door, bedroom door; I tossed my coat on my reading chair, a large bright red recliner given to me by somebody I didn't see too often anymore. *Who was that?* I believe I liked them, but... they were disassociated from me for someone else—a friend of a friend. I had to get to bed. I set the alarm for 7:30 a.m. That was cutting it very close. I changed it to 7:00

a.m. I briskly brushed my teeth and tried to force some urine out, I hated waking with the urge to go, or rather, I hated getting out of bed after I have settled. My head felt slightly dizzy. Those moans were only separated from my own window by a few walls. *Thank God it's not hot out*, I thought, but still turned on the box fan.

I am often struck by a perverse need to stall at moments of urgency. It produces an almost electric arousal in my mind—to the point where I physically *feel* tendrils of sensation in remote parts of my skin. A one-inch tickle where my thigh meets my groin or stir of hairs on my shin, it can be disturbing at times. I have confused similar sensations with insects crawling through the hairs of my arms or legs only to swat viciously at the spot and find nothing. The moment of procrastination is satisfying, even though I feel the stress inching forward. I stared at the red chair for several moments, a sweaty sock still in one hand. My bare legs hung over the edge of the bed, my bare toe worried at the seam in the floorboards. Time was passing, 7:00 a.m. was approaching quickly enough to be threatening. I felt the tingle of the hairs along the side of my right calf. The red chair, with my coat draped over it, I could still not remember who had given me that chair. A sensation of fondness went along with it.

Centipedes! I had seen them from time to time, scurrying from a pile of dirty clothes to the baseboard. I yanked my foot off the floor and, with the same action, brushed my hand down the side of my calf. I lay back and pulled the comforter to my chin. My head on the flat pillow, I tried to find a comfortable position for my hands. If I did what felt natural, crossing them over my belly or breast, a nerve was pinched and I would awake in only an hour with the pain of numbness. I tried laying them parallel with my legs. Concentrating, I moved my mind toward the darkness of the room and

the hum of the fan. I could feel my weight settling and my eyes loosening. I got excited; I felt that I had a power over my body and the ability to move it into sleep easily. The thought of such control began to swirl in my mind. I knew my father had an internal clock, that he could wake himself at a specific hour without the aid of an alarm clock. I wondered if that had been passed to me, but confused by erratic sleep cycles. Perhaps I was rediscovering it. Frustrated, I turned on my side. I let out a huff and squeezed my eyes shut. The position of my tongue in my mouth was unset, I could not find a natural position for it. *Did it have a natural position?* The fan hummed. I listened. I thought I might have heard yet another moan, or bump against the wall, but I could make nothing out of the darkness. Burying my face in the pillow, I tried. I unclenched my jaw and felt my eyes loosen.

The shower helped to wake me at first, but then became too soothing as I lurched side to side, simulating a hot water massage over my shoulders. I shut it off. The thought of driving seemed somewhat dangerous. Visions of the little brown Rabbit—my first car—run into a ditch at full speed seemed realistically repeatable. I planned the first few stops I might make before the interstate to distract me long enough to put my shoes on and pack the bag. Three shirts, three pairs of underwear and socks, and the other pair of jeans were crumpled and stuffed into the bag. The shirts and the jeans constituted the majority of my summer wardrobe. I had destroyed two shirts with spilt bleach just a week earlier, the extra jeans even had a warped and faded blotch just above the left pocket, but it was hidden, therefore they were useable.

I planned to stop for gas and food. The gas was just around the corner, but I couldn't think of any fast-food restaurants that were on the way to the interstate so held off. I relished the idea of some greasy muffin sandwich and a sweet roll. Despite

the lack of memory of ever enjoying these foodstuffs, they sounded good at this time of the morning. This time of the morning was very foreign to me. Although every day of my life before college I woke at 7:00 a.m. throughout high school and summer work, those days were blurred and seemed almost movie-like. The only subsequent excursions into the early a.m.'s had come when trying to finish papers for class.

Leaving the city and going west was an act of violence against myself. I didn't mind going south, because that meant Chicago, which in turn meant escape or adventure. To O'Hare or simply to someplace different than where I was before. The act of exiting the city on its southern corridor conjured memories of leaving for London or San Francisco. Exiting the city north was something over-looked. It meant going deeper into the wild places just about every friend I had made since moving to Milwaukee had come from. Exiting the city west seemed an expression of morbid intention. Thanksgiving and Christmas being the primary occurrences of that dread. Leaving to go west was also a departure from civilization, the imagined possibilities of life.

I did not stop for food. My stomach burned, but it was helping me stay awake. I did not wear a watch or have a clock in my car, but I suspected that I would make it to my father's house on time. He called around 10 p.m. the night before to confirm times and places. He was excited. He told me he had the deeds, land claim papers and miscellaneous other documents that would help us. He reminded me three or four times to be at his house by 9:00 a.m., we would need to make good time to reach the Pope county courthouse before it closed. The ultimate goal: Starbuck, Minnesota, the final settling point of some Norwegian immigrants who would eventually give birth to his mother.

History had only recently taken any luster for me; my own history was a small part of that. I agreed and decided that the way to do it was simply to forget what I was doing and where I was going and simply analyze the country, physically and mentally.

Crossing the waters of the Mississippi calmed my nerves. My father had said very little. He was concentrated on finding a place for lunch. I was still slightly enamored with La Crosse. I had never seen the little river city before. We had already passed over the steel bridge into Minnesota, but I was still creating visions of the large old water tower and old brick buildings seen along the river side of the city. I thought it to be similar to Milwaukee in some respects, another German town. My father nodded.

“Very German. In fact they have that big beer drinking festival every year. It draws every idiot from a hundred miles round. There’s been a riot the last couple of years. Of course, that’s what happens when you get thousands of people together with nothing better to do than drink.” I nodded, the movement of my head barely noticeable. He then added, “We will look for someplace to eat in the next town, Winona.”

I leaned back in the pilot chair of the '89 Dodge van. It was a comfortable chair, arm and head rests and a lot of space compared to the vehicles of my parent's past. The van, although rusting underneath, was a handsome blue and gray gas-guzzling thing. We pulled off the interstate and the blue-gray box of a vehicle chugged toward the Mississippi bank. According to the map, this oft-ignored highway followed the river to Minneapolis. We reached an area of the highway where the river could be seen for long straights between patches of trees and high shrubs. I looked at

the water. The land was dramatic along this border river. I thought back to the first time I saw Lake Michigan. The closest moment I had ever come to seeing something like the ocean, something that makes you realize that there is an end to the land. It was the first time that I wondered, without consulting conventional knowledge, what was beyond. The moment made me more aware of my lack of sleep the night before. I saw romanticized images of the lake from that night I walked to the water with a group of people I had only loosely met in the public area on my dorm's floor. It was a clear night. I was shocked at what we found. I knew there was a lake; I had driven up Lake Drive when first arriving at the campus a year earlier. I was not prepared for the full sensual contact. A full moon hung just above the water creating a reflection of a moonbeam stretching from the horizon to the shore. The wind coming off the lake was cool but forceful enough to create a noise in my ear. The noise separated me, if not everyone, from the group. Some tried to holler through it but their words were carried up the bluffs overlooking the shore. I found a rock to sit on, just out of reach of the spray. I sat somewhat comfortably and stared out to the sea I created for a long time. I didn't realize when it happened, but at some point, one of the young women had separated herself from the group to sit next to me. I was slightly startled by her presence. I turned to find her studying my face with a grave sort of interest. I smiled and looked back out to the moon over the water, assuming her to do the same. She stayed for quite some time. I remember, most distinctly the noise of the wind in my ears and the reflection of the moon in the rippled surface. The young woman, Amy I believe, waited for me to recognize that the group was slowly moving away from the shore and back up the hill. We walked after them in silence.

The Mississippi waters were something different, but waters nonetheless. The

bluffs and plateau-like rock structures looking over the waters on each side skirted the two states for a hundred miles. I watched the water until it painfully pulled away as we approached the metro area. We had not talked much since leaving Wisconsin. The conversation had dwindled from current events and personal news to the discussion of church steeples, German Catholic versus the more Scandinavian Lutheran steeples. No words had been exchanged since deciding on a lunch location. With the loss of the river, some of the initial dread returned in the form of sadness. I had not returned to the lakefront or seen the young woman since. I looked at the river, its swamp waters trapped in high flood plains just down the slope from the highway and the Wisconsin shore beyond. I hoped I would be able to fall to sleep soon as we were still several hours away from Starbuck. I tried to relax my eyes when my father asked me to figure out how to avoid the city; I pulled out the map and looked.

I cannot objectify what, in particular, affected me. I cannot identify the moment at which I realized I was alone. It was the land that bothered me, I think. There was something unsettling about the road. It was flanked on each side. On the left by a railroad perfectly parallel with the highway, on the right telephone poles. When I looked ahead I could see a very long distance. I couldn't remember the landscape change, but at some point we must have left the Mississippi river valley, it was flatter than anything I'd seen save the water. The road was as long and straight as the land was flat and that was disturbing. No off roads, cattle fences, or even trees, the road felt desolate. The triad of road, wires and tracks was just as unsettling. It had a child's logic—too simple and too clean. It was almost maddening. As if every highway was required to have telephone posts along it, even though they were

carrying no voices. These wires went nowhere! They didn't end at a house or terminal, they were just a childish decoration of the road. The train tracks were even worse. Why would a train want to follow cars across this wasteland? Although it wasn't really a wasteland, it was cropland. Cropland U.S.A. Flat, straight, homogenous, endless. There were no hills to bend around, which meant there was no need for strip cropping.

“What is this?” I asked.

My father grumbled and said, “Soy. They don't diversify much out here do they?”

I shrugged.

The soy was brown. It blanketed everything. It was all we saw going into the evening except telephone wires and empty train tracks. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stand looking at dry, brown soy either. I had exhausted the atlas, which my father had been using as a road map. I had looked up every major city in the country, its population, location in the state and its suburbs. *Ulysses* was sitting at my feet. I chose to leave it there. I was vaguely tired, which was excuse enough to avoid it. Having never been introduced to either literature or religion, I chose Joyce. Perhaps I was paying for it now. Long, panic driven sessions in the red chair were my only hope of reading it. I still associate the static-like hiss of my radiator with the crowded words and ideas of that book. I wanted to remember it more than read it. *Ulysses* stayed at my feet.

There were buildings on the horizon, low block-like shadows with the orange-shifting-to-red sun behind them. Pop. 2,347 the sign said. We cruised through quickly. There was a long set of structures between the railroad track and the road. A gap – I

could see several sets of tracks with train cars on them. It was some sort of maintenance depot. The gap ended and I looked around wildly trying to find other evidence of the structure's use. The town ended as did the buildings and only one set of tracks appeared. They were empty.

Either I was tired or the way time passed changed. The mileage signs between towns indicated ten miles. At sixty miles an hour we should have reached the town a good twenty minutes earlier. I wondered how much brown, shin-high roughage can one pass to equal ten miles? I didn't know what I was waiting for. Starbuck is a long way ahead on the pencil line I had drawn on the map. An X marks the spot. The mark expanded half way across the town and into the county to the south. Every other town had a huge grain silo that towered three times as high over all other structures. One after another on this straight road with its telephone poles and its railroad tracks, the towns piled up into a neat row.

I would see the grain silo from miles away and smiled. The town comes and goes as if it were the one before the last and no difference. About a mile out of town I noticed something on the tracks. A line of cars, all the same, dark brown steel things. They weren't moving, but there seemed to be a long line of them disappearing into the dusk ahead. We became perpendicular with them and I saw the writing on their sides: Milwaukee SOO Line. I couldn't help but smile and point them out to my father. He nodded his head disinterested. I could remember the Milwaukee SOO trains going through my childhood town. They were often parked just past the old downtown, by Fireman's park. Usually not more than four or five, but in two columns. I used to throw rocks at their hulls and listen to the sound they made. The lower the pitch the

fuller they were. I don't believe I ever knew what it was they carried. I remembered picking up pieces of coal in the summer and crushing them into powder, an attempt at making gunpowder. It burned well, but I had lit the little pile of coal dust on my bedroom desk. It was the last such attempt. The powder had scared me. It reminded me of the science kit my father had got me one Christmas. The kit came with test tubes, tweezers, slides, sample dishes and twenty-five little plastic containers containing different solutions, minerals, and powders. They were marked only with their elemental letters and whether they were poisonous or not. Once my mother discovered what my father had given me she made a desperate plea to me. "Never play with this unless your father or I are helping." That had frightened me as well. Those little plastic bottles frightened me. Once, I dug the kit out, years later. The box was musty and warped by humidity. I tried mixing a couple of powders and one liquid together in a test tube. It was not one of the formulas listed. The white powders and the liquid turned orange. I wasn't impressed until I picked the small vial up to find it burning hot. I panicked and dumped it in the sink.

My eyes were closed for a while and I could actually feel myself loosening and rolling toward some version of sleep when my father started to talk.

"Do you see that? Do you *see* that! That's an awfully big operation out here."

I opened my eyes to find four gigantic cylindrical holding tanks sitting in a complex of sorts. We were still in the flat, brown, dry soy-lands, but this place changed the whole atmosphere. It seemed ominous the way my father was talking about it. There were several smaller tanks sitting along the train tracks with filling or maybe extracting stations. Each tank looked like a ten story, white margarine dish turned upside-down. Each had the same label. It was the most massive thing I had

ever seen of its kind outside of Gary, Indiana and this was probably twice that size.

“What is it, L.P.?” I asked.

“Maybe, I don’t know what it would be doing up here.” He was only half driving and half gawking at the monstrous metal cauldrons in the middle of a soy field. He then made a sound, a kind of grumbling of fearful recognition. “I bet I know what that is. I’ll bet that’s nitrogen.” He shook his head. “That’s what that is.”

“What for?”

“Well, you know how plants grow right?” I nodded my head. “They require oxygen, water and nitrogen. Well, when a farmer harvests a crop, he in affect, is taking the nitrogen away. The plants have taken it out of the soil and unless the plant dies and decomposes there or the farmer fertilizes the nitrogen doesn’t regenerate.”

I nodded my head. “So this is the fertilizer?”

“Well, yes. Except I don’t really agree with that. Most of the farmers don’t do it around us. Of course they have cows who produce the fertilizer for them.”

“Why?”

“Well, when you use pure nitrogen, it comes as a liquid and the farmers have attachments for their tractors that spray it into the soil. Except when the nitrogen hits the air it immediately turns to gas, thereby killing everything in the soil.”

“Everything?”

“Everything.” He waved his hand downward and frowned. “Everything, other plants, insects, microbes, just everything. It’s just dead soil, dead earth, which will grow what ever they plant. Of course any other weed can just move in so all these guys gotta use herbicides and eventually insecticides. It’s just a big waste of money and time. They could just leave it and let nature do the work for them, but they don’t

see the big picture.”

I looked back at the complex, even more elated than before. I was amazed at the size.

We stopped in the town just before Starbuck called Edison. It was the county seat and my father was hoping to pick up some plot records from the town hall. I couldn't see much of the town in the darkness but I could see that it was built on the side of a hill gently sloping toward a lake, a drastic difference from the plain-like soy fields. My father suddenly pulled over and parked on the side of the road.

“Wanna go to a Church dinner?”

I looked at him, unable to control the look on my face. He went on without a reply.

“They're having a Norwegian fish fry in the church we just passed.” He chuckled to himself. “Meaning lutefisk.”

I continued to frown.

“My mother made me eat it when I was a kid, so now it's your turn.” He rubbed his hands together mischievously and made his best impression of a cackle. He got out. I, still feigning confusion, was more bewildered by his sudden animation. I wondered if he was happy or just exhausted.

I got out and followed him to the church. There was nothing striking about its appearance, only the sign on wheels parked in the strip of lawn between the sidewalk and street. In block, slightly crooked letters it proclaimed “DINNER TONIGHT: LUTEFISK 5 TO 9.” It seemed to have a sort of frank excitement about it, but then lost some to the flashing arrow.

The first thing that I noticed in the church was the smell. There was a stagnant body-odor smell hovering in the lobby, something similar to a locker room. My father explained to me that lutefisk is fish cooked with lye. It is a notorious Norwegian dish and most everyone hates it. Vikings, I thought. A group of men tossing about on the ocean, laying down their swords and axes and eating this yet unseen fish which required no fire to cook. My father added, "I remember my mother making it once, it stunk up the whole house. It is just the most horrible smell you can imagine." I wondered if he meant the locker room smell, I could think of worse.

A woman led us downstairs where my father bought two tickets. We were seated at a table with two middle-aged couples. It sounded as if they were discussing why the freeway had been built forty miles to the north. There was a large assortment of food on the table. I recognized a vegetable plate, carrots, celery and sliced beets. There was a bowl of meatballs and another with mashed potatoes. I also saw a gravy boat with brown gravy and a smaller pouring dish with a yellow liquid in it. My father looked up at the hostess with a wide smile, "Is there any lutefisk left?" The woman laughed out loud and puts her hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, there's plenty of that left." She pours two glasses of water and moves to another table.

My father looked over the food and then at me. "I think we can dig in." He is smiling again, "be sure to leave some space." He motioned for me to pass the meatballs. The hostess comes back with a white plate with what looked like boiled half-potatoes. She set it down and asked if we would like milk. We both nod. My father grabbed the plate and put it in front of me. "Here you go."

It slid off the plate with a gelatinous slap; it looked more like a piece of

striated, partially translucent jell-o. I realized that one of the guys across the table watching the entire transaction was holding out one of the smaller boats of yellow liquid.

“Here ya go. It’s best if you drown it in melted butter, until you can’t taste it.”

My dad watched as I took a bite. I couldn't taste much, but there was a certain discomfort about its texture. It was similar to what could be fish-jelly, only stiffer. It squirted between teeth and tongue before finally sliding down the back of my throat. I tried another piece with a healthy serving of liquid butter. Butter-Fish-Jelly, squirt, squirt, slick. I set my fork in the jell-o once more before my father stopped me.

“Alright, alright, that’s enough of that, eat some real food.” He handed me the mashed potatoes.

Sitting on the hotel bed in Starbuck, I felt truly odd. There was a familiar feeling of being in a cheap motel with my father on some business trip, but at the same time, I felt completely displaced. Starbuck is small. That’s all I could discern from the number of lights and signs. It’s on a lake, which we spent twenty minutes driving around from Edison. And it was quiet. Getting out of the van felt more like committing myself to camping than a motel room. I didn’t even hear crickets. The bed was too comfortable. I sat there, on the comforter, cross-legged and barefoot. *Ulysses* cradled in my arms like a forgotten baby, I stared at the inactive television. The covers felt bizarre against my skin, the air was altogether too light and there was that unmistakable smell of a motel room, a clean, chemically filthy odor that was supposed to reassure you. My father was showering. I felt dizzy. Perhaps it was only sleep deprivation, but I thought it more an initial rejection of this place to me. A new

body in an already existing body and the existing body was retracting from my own. I lay back, still clutching the book. It had already occurred to me that this should be a stress-free night. There would be little chance of any bumps or groans coming through the wall here. Perhaps the most paralyzing thing about staying in the same motel room with my father was the painful possibility of what the neighbor was doing. The sleepy, or maybe, zombie-like quality of this town was suddenly reassuring.

My father woke me. He told me to at least get under the covers. I nodded. I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth, watched Jay Leno's opening jokes, then closed my eyes in Starbuck, Minnesota.

We ate breakfast in the local diner. At first I was surprised that this bit of 1950's America had survived, but then realized the town was only a 1,000 people and couldn't draw the familiar franchises. Two-dollar pancakes, one-dollar sausage and an eighty cent glass of orange juice. My father confused the waitress with a request for a receipt; she made a total on a napkin and handed it over with a big smile. She was young, maybe twenty years old, and I couldn't imagine her life. I also knew that was conceited since I had grown up in a small town, too, just not this small.

We only drove a little way out of town before my father saw a snake on the road. "Look, there! Did you see that, a snake of some sort. Oh, there's another one." I looked up from the map. "There's another one, geez, they're everywhere. What's going on here? Must be sunning their bellies. They're not going to last too long out here." He pointed again and again. I saw a curl of a shape and then another with a knob of a head, but we were moving too fast. After the twelfth or thirteenth he stopped pointing and concentrated on driving. The number of snakes seemed to lessen

the farther we got away from the town and the lake.

The trip to the farmstead was short. Starbuck was the name my father had often heard growing up because it was the center of his grandparents' life. Squares of land, with the perimeter of county roads. For some reason the land looked like something new. I had the plot map and was navigating my father through the county roads of Pope County. It was strange seeing the faceless brown roughage as pieces of land with property lines and divisions. Each was slightly different, though not that different. We passed the lot twice before turning the map around three times and deciding it was the one. A rolling hill of soy and a small bunching of trees which hid a trailer home of the current occupants. The road was gravel and dirt. My father took pictures of soybeans and the little enclave of trees where the farmhouse once stood. I looked at it and tried to imagine an immigrant standing in the same spot and looking at his future. I then moved back inside the shaded van to wait as my father finished a roll of film.

Ulysses was at my feet again. My mother once said I might have been a priest if I had been born in the old days. She was, of course, wrong. I would have been a Norwegian farmer or a Scottish manservant or what, an English soldier? I favor the Scottish, probably because it is more exotic. My father's great grand-father was from Whitehall, Scotland. I remember the day I looked it up and found it in the Orkney Islands, halfway to Norway. I liked the idea of all that water. Both sides of his heritage provided a maritime attraction, but I could visualize the Orkney's better. I read Edwin Muir's autobiography, his early years on those islands. He said the people were often desperate, praying to Saint Magnus to sink a Norwegian ship off the coast so that they might scavenge its hold. They used to take torches on horseback along the

beaches to lure the ships to the rocks. I imagined being a little boy with a torch, driving the ships into the rocks myself, or handing a torch up to my father. I also imagined being older and going out with the men, from isle to isle in the cold, windy, Orkney night, drunk and trying the women on each island. With a bit of whiskey taken, the oars would have flown through the water like life itself was at stake.

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