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# Fake love is better than no love

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Fake love is better than no love

by

Jacob John Wegman

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)

Program of Study Committee:  
Barbara Haas, Major Professor  
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Iowa State University  
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2005

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Graduate College  
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the master's thesis of  
Jacob John Wegman  
has met the requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor

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For the Major Program

## DEDICATION

For Lora, who gave sound advice and always put up with me through the thick and the thin.

For Connie and John, who brought me here and kept me going.

For Nicholas, who rode on his bicycle with me to get *Superman* #82 and suffered sunburn and dehydration in the process.

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## A PUNK GIRL

A couple of kids are licking each other, rolling over right by my feet, right here on the filthy tile in front of everyone wandering around after the show. People always assume I have bad hearing because someone says, "Why can't the old pervs find somewhere else to go?" I want to say *I can go to a video store if I want stuff to jerk off to*, but I let it slide. This couple at my feet, these aren't kids in the sense that they're children, although I'm probably old enough to be their father. I'm guessing they're in their mid-20s, but I don't examine them closely enough to know for sure. I only look down long enough to see that I don't step on either of their backs.

This isn't exactly backstage, as there is no stage I've seen so far, just what used to be a school cafeteria, with bands playing next to what was once a kitchen but is now storage space for guitars and amps. The hallway on the top floor, up two flights of stairs, this is where the post-show partying takes place. In my day, we'd get into fights in the crowd and get high backstage on whatever we could find. We'd make love to someone or several someones after a gig, and it was a lot more fun than this seems. In this place, this abandoned schoolhouse in the part of New York City that guidebooks tell you to ignore, I look around and see people I don't recognize, people that are so unfamiliar to me. Why is she here when she should be better than all of this?

Above the hallway doors are names of teachers who once patrolled this school. Sister Rosemary. Sister Mary Margaret. Most of these old classrooms still have desks in them, pushed up against the wall or splintered and scattered across

the slick-varnished wooden floors. Inside Sister Madeline's room, a sign reading *Band #3: The Procrastinators* sticks to the wall. A group sits in a circle, crammed in seats designed for grade-schoolers, their guts pinched and spilling over, their knees knocking against the desks' underside. They're tying off their arms and I hear the *slap-slap* of fingers raising stubborn veins.

A sign at the end of the hallway says *Band #6: The Heat* is inside. The squeak of the door announces my arrival, but nobody notices me. They ignore my pleated khaki pants and red-checkered shirt, and no one snickers at my graying ponytail. A bearded kid with a shaved head has passed out on the floor next to empty bottles of vodka. Some guys are flirting with a pair of blonds dressed identically in tight black pants and tighter pink shirts. Others adjust a set of hi-hat cymbals. And in the corner sits a woman with a foot-tall, jet-black Mohawk, the tips a menacing red with drips of dye trailing like blood down each spike. She was the oldest person in the room until I entered, and she strums an acoustic guitar and listens to headphones wrapped around the buzzed fuzz on the back of her head. As I approach, she looks up and sighs and scratches a mole on her neck.

"Hi, Dad," she says.

I was nervous as hell coming into the city, so Angie offers to drive first and lets me fall asleep. She says, "I promise not to wreck this rusted monstrosity," and I crawl to the very back of the van and stretch out on the long bench seat. I fall asleep, and I'm out for I don't know how long because when I wake up we're parked at a

rest area, and Angie is leaning her head back, snoring, the spikes of her hair scratching against the ceiling each time she takes a breath. It's a two-day trip home even if you test the speed limits, so we'll have to find a place to stay. We couldn't even stay over last night because Angie's apartment is "not an option right now, Dad, so please don't ask me about it. Let's just go, okay, go so I don't have to be here and I know you hate this city, so let's leave."

I check my cell phone for messages, and the window informs me the battery is low. The first message is from my wife, saying *You forgot to bring the charger for your cell phone, so be sure to call and tell me where you're staying. Make Angie pay for her own room. You deserve your privacy. It's not like you wanted to spend four days on the road bringing her home for God-knows what reason. How has she been affording rent anyway? There's no way that awful music actually pays for anything. I'm sorry I'm not there, but you know how much of a pain it can be to find a sub who doesn't mess up your entire lesson plan.*

One thing Angie inherited from my side of the family is the ability to sleep late and sleep through everything. Our other kids would always come downstairs to our bedroom during thunderstorms, scared and dragging sleeping bags behind them, but Angie could sleep through bulldozers demolishing the entire house.

The second message is from my wife, saying *Look, I know we argued before you left, but I don't think you're a failure, okay hon? I mean, most small businesses fail across the country. Maybe outdoor clothing just isn't popular right now. It's not just you or*

*anything, I'm certain. We'll be fine, and I'm going to try for the assistant principal's job in the fall, so don't worry so much about it.*

The only thing Angie brought with her was the acoustic guitar and a tiny bag, no bigger than a purse really. She sold everything else for money, and she must have lost the security deposit on her apartment. I'm guessing she only has fifty or sixty bucks left to her name – that's usually how this works with her. What has she been doing to get by all this time?

*The third message is from my wife, saying Nick, seriously, if it's drugs again then don't even bring her home, just drop her off on the curb somewhere. I'm not going through that again. She's thirty now. We let her off easy sometimes because we see her and she looks young and we pretend she's still a child. If she needs help then let her check into a facility or an institution. Getting the locks changed again will be too much of a mess. Jesus, why can't she just be like her brothers? Not a jailbird among them.*

I open the guitar case and take out my old Alvarez, the guitar I taught all my children to play on. I gave it to Angie the last time she was home, years ago, as she was, surprisingly, the only child who ever treated it with respect. I don't know if it's true, but one of my bandmates told me once that the backs of Alvarez guitars are always made from the same piece of wood, split down the middle and divided in two. The grain of the wood is symmetrical, and if you bust the guitar apart and match up the two halves, they fit into each other exactly. Right now, intact, it looks like an inkblot from a Rorschach test.

The fourth message is, of course, from my wife, saying *Find out why she's so insistent on coming home right away. Is she in trouble? Don't let her talk you into any money. You're too much of a pushover – let her talk to me. Don't waste all night in your room watching those dirty movies. And, call me before you go to bed. I miss you.*

Angie stirs, and we switch places so I can drive us closer to home. I find a nice oldies station that plays songs my bands used to cover, songs driven by acoustic guitars and soaring harmonies. You would think that, as good hippies, my wife and I would have named our daughter Moonbeam or Prudence, but we named her Angie after the only Rolling Stones song I ever liked, the first song my wife and I danced to on the night we met. My wife wanted to go with Starla, but I talked her out of it. Our other children like to thank us for ending our hippie phase by the time they were born.

Angie sits the guitar in her lap and starts messing around, moving the fingers of her left hand deftly over the frets, picking at the strings with her fingers. What starts out as gibberish eventually becomes the melody line that matches "Heart of Gold" as it warbles through the radio.

"You like Neil Young?" I say.

"Of course not," she says as she uses a finger to cover all the strings of the first fret, making a bar chord that matches Neil's guitar exactly. "This is an easy one."

She plays along with all of the songs we hear. Some are more complex and take her a while to get started, but most of the songs she can master within seconds.

"Why don't you play like this more often?"

"I like things that are loud," she says. "I don't like melody. I like thrashing. New York Dolls. The Sex Pistols."

"Yes, I'm sure you were a Pistols fan from the beginning, back when you were in grade school," I say, but she ignores me and concentrates on matching the lead part to a Doobie Brothers song, just to show me that she can, that she's better than I ever was.

When the sun has almost dipped below the horizon, I exit to an area that looks like dozens I saw on my drive up to New York through the Midwest – a strip with six or seven hotels, several fast food places, a few chain restaurants, a Sam's Club and a small, decaying mall area. I pull into a Super 8 and carry my suitcase and Angie's bag to the front desk. Her bag is so light, I look back at her, and she says, "Yeah, it's empty. We'll have to go shopping so I can get some clean clothes."

There's a kid working at the front desk who can't be a year older than eighteen. He checks us in, and says, "Dude, you're in luck. I can get you adjoining rooms for no extra charge." He winks at my daughter and says, "Hey," while he hands us our keys. "Your rooms are," and he looks at a diagram of the motel and waves his arms around, "over there."

We both go to our rooms and shower, and when I meet Angie back in the lobby, her hair is hanging down haphazardly in her face, as she's washed out most of whatever was keeping the spikes from falling down. "I guess it's time to start

over on the hair," she says. We drive to the mall, and Angie says, "Maybe you should buy some new clothes, too."

"I don't think so. I think my wardrobe is just fine."

I ask how much money she has on her, and she says \$150 but a guy owes her payment from a "a job, a gig." I assume she's lying, so I give her all the cash I have in my wallet. I find a bookstore and read a few magazines in the 45 minutes or so it takes for her to return. When she finds me, she's wearing a flowery dress that "I got for super-cheap at one of those stores for old ladies." Her hair is buzzed down to the length that she was wearing on the sides and back, and she says, "Stylists at mall salons aren't very friendly, but they're pretty cheap, too." She shows me a bathing suit, a couple of t-shirts, and a pair of jeans in another bag, so we leave the mall less than an hour after we arrived, and I wish my wife could be here to take notes on how to shop.

Angie wants to check out the pool, so I head back to my room. I nap for about twenty minutes before waking with pain. Ointment doesn't help, and neither does placing a pillow underneath my lower back. Driving long distances always screws up my posture. There's a Bible in the nightstand drawer that I flip through for a few minutes. There are no travel guides or magazines, and I don't want to lower myself to reading the phone book, although that would tell me what city we're in since I can't recall what was on the exit sign. Nothing interesting is on TV, so I think, *What the hell* and I put the "Do Not Disturb" hanger on the knob outside. I check the door that joins our rooms to make sure Angie can't just barge in, as this

might scar her for life. I switch off the lights and hit the big green menu button on the remote control.

Titles are the best part of any adult movie. I can't figure out computers, so I have to get my fix from the dirty video store when my wife goes out with her teacher friends, or the rare times we travel and she goes sightseeing while I nap. This motel, this type of chain, has some great ones, but I can't pass up anything called *Naughty Nymphos #19*, and I'm confident that, while I've missed the first 18 installments, I won't have any difficulty following the action. There's so much porn out there, you can go into any video store and never get through it all. You'll always find a series or a girl you've never seen before. I let the movie play for a bit while I re-check that the door to the hallway is locked and deadbolted. I strip off my pants and lower myself into the bed.

I can't lie – at my age it takes a while to get going, so I don't pay much attention to the first scene. But the second scene grabs my attention right away, and it makes me jump out of bed and cough. The girl is sitting on a stool, being interviewed before her upcoming performance, and she's smiling at the camera and batting her eyes, and they're a familiar blue. There's a mole on her neck that she absent-mindedly scratches, and she has the same long, jet-black hair that my wife used to comb before the two of them would head off for school together. This girl is asked all sorts of nasty questions about what kind of a naughty nymphomaniac she is, and before I can hit the red button that reads power, I hear some of her answers. She says her name is "Alison" but, unfortunately, I know that's not her real name.

I go to the bathroom and vomit up everything in my stomach, my knees aching against the hard tile floor. She'd worn the mohawk for a few years, so what I saw must have been old. How long has this been going on for? Maybe she quit, maybe it was a one-time thing, or maybe she made a film this month. Maybe she made seven films last week, one for each day on the calendar. My head rests on the toilet seat. I think I taste the urine of a hundred former motel guests in my mouth, but I know that can't be true, as I've seen the maids pushing their carts up and down the hallway.

I grab my cell phone to call my wife, but I hang up before she answers on the other end. This isn't something you tell a mother over the phone or leave on an answering machine. I want to go down to the pool and find my daughter and shake her and say *What are you doing with your life? Why have we been putting up with your shit?*

I walk out of the bathroom but now I don't know what to do with myself. I can't turn the TV back on because something horrible will greet me if I do. I can't face Angie tonight. I can't even leave the room. In the nightstand drawer is a pen and a pad of paper, so I write a note that says *I feel sick. You're on your own for food.* But before I can slip the note under her door, the phone rings and it's Angie calling from the pool.

"I'm starving," she says. "I'm coming up. Let's get dinner."

I suggest finding a quaint local restaurant in whatever town we're in, but Angie wants to drive down the strip to find a chain restaurant, saying, "I'm so tired of eating ethnic at Thai and Greek places, I want something bland to remind me of home." We stop at an Applebee's and are seated at an annoyingly tall table. It's clear that I'm buying, so Angie orders a martini and I order a beer. Our food comes quickly but I can't stand to look at the sandwich on my plate. I glance up at her, and she's more relaxed than right after the concert. She looks healthier than I've seen her in ages.

"I'm thinking about what I want to do next," Angie says. "I mean, I can always get a minimum wage job to get some quick money, but I'm already thinking beyond that. Maybe I can save up and go to cosmetology school. Or, I still like entertaining people. Maybe I can be a clown. Do people still hire clowns?"

"You like entertaining people," I say, pushing around the fries on my plate. "That's good. That's a good type of job to have. Where you can please people, stuff like that. That's wonderful."

"Yeah," she says, and smiles. She scratches her fuzzy head. "I mean, I know I just called you up out of the blue to come and get me, but I can tell this music thing just isn't going to happen."

"Oh, I don't know," I say. "You've only been trying for twelve years. Maybe you should give it four or five more, wait until you're thirty-five before you give up."

She's not listening to my tone too closely, because she says, "I thought about that, but you know when you make up your mind how you sometimes need to do something about it right away. That's what this was like. I needed to get out of New York last night, no matter what. Plus, I was evicted since I haven't had enough to cover my last three months rent."

I feign shock. "But, you're in such a lucrative business."

She hesitates for a half-second, her nose twitches, and she pauses long enough so I can tell that what I saw earlier was real, was in fact my daughter on the screen. But the moment passes and she turns on the smile, so white and bright and I'm glad that at least she hasn't neglected dental hygiene. "Dad, I don't know how much you got paid when you and your buddies drove around and played in the 70s, but we made next to nothing. None of the bands I was in ever went anywhere."

I don't say much the rest of the meal – I listen to her plans about the future. How she wants to meet a nice guy instead of the gutter trash she's been dating, how "I never want to date a co-worker ever again. Too much to handle." How, "It's time for me and Mom to finally start getting along." How, "I know I said I never wanted a family, but maybe I've grown as a person." Just when I can tell she's beginning to approach the subject of finances, I excuse myself for the bathroom.

I check my cell phone for messages. The only message is from my wife, saying *Nick, call me before you go to bed tonight. I had a rough day at school, and I'm so tired of these goddamn kids and teachers and just everything. Just for a few minutes, I know you're probably tired, but please.*

When I'm back at the table, the bill is waiting for me.

At the motel, I say goodnight to my daughter and go to bed early, but having slept all day I can't turn off my brain. I figure it's safe now, so I turn on the TV and thankfully it's switched back to the CBS affiliate. I try ESPN and the Weather Channel and Fox News and CNN but all the scrolling on the bottom of the screen hurts my eyes. The guitar case is propped up against the wall, staring at me, but I don't much feel like playing. I really want to confront Angie about this whole moving home thing, how it's a little too late in the game for her to run back to Mommy and Daddy, how I'm too old to take care of anyone anymore. Her brothers are almost a decade younger than her and none of them have a rap sheet. I don't want to talk about what I saw on the TV earlier, but if it comes up then fine. She needs to be confronted at some point. I unlatch the door that divides our rooms and open it, and I face a second door that opens out into her room. I knock once but feel sick and have to run to the toilet for more vomit. She must not have heard my knock or the noises coming from my throat, because she never opens her door. I'm too sick and disgusted to turn off the TV or do anything other than crawl into bed and put a pillow over my face.

The next morning I wake up early, not from the buzzing of my cell phone but from sunlight shining through my room's thin, maroon curtains. It's not even 9 a.m. yet, and I can't believe it, but I actually feel like getting out of bed. I reach for the remote to turn off the TV, but I hit a different button, and the local public access channel flashes community information across the screen. I finally find out where

we are – some town called Earth City, Missouri – and I learn that city council is tonight at 6:30 p.m. at city hall. Alcoholics Anonymous at 7 p.m. at First Baptist; Al-Anon at 7:30 at Second Baptist. I had forgotten we were even in Missouri. I reach to the nightstand for my wallet, but my fingers can't find it. I lean over and check inside the drawer, thinking I might have stuck it in there. Then I check the back pocket of my khaki pants, then the bathroom. My keys are also nowhere to be found. I walk over to the doorway connecting my room to Angie's room, and both are wide open.

I forgot to close and latch my door before I went to bed.

Angie isn't in her room, and her bag and her new clothes have vanished. Pulling on the same pants and shirt I wore yesterday, I run through the hallway as fast as I can, barefoot and hobbling with my sore knees. By the time the same kid from yesterday says, "Dude," I'm already out the front door and staring at the empty parking space right outside the lobby where the van had spent the night. The cold concrete makes it difficult to stand in one place for long.

Back inside, I ask the clerk, "Did you see anyone come by this morning? A punk girl maybe. A woman, about 30, really short hair?"

The kid stares at me, looks at his shoes, then smiles and says, "I did see someone. A woman about 30 with really short hair. Few minutes ago. An hour ago, I dunno. She was in a hurry. I tried to hit on her but she didn't stop walking. Is she your girlfriend? Dude, don't you think tattoos are hot?"

I go back to my room. Thankfully, she left my bag and my cell phone untouched. She even left behind the old guitar, as it was probably too sentimental of an object for her to have around. I should shower but I'm too angry to do anything where I might have to spend time thinking. I close the doors between our rooms, take my bag in my left hand and the guitar case in my right, and head back to the lobby to check out.

The clerk scanned my credit card yesterday, so paying for the room is no problem, unless Angie has already maxed out all my cards on a Bentley or a kilo of cocaine. The kid says, "Dude, your receipt?" but I'm not interested. I walk through the glass doors and sit down outside on the front step of the motel. I dial the number of my wife's school. I tell the secretary, "We're having a family emergency, Barb. Can you page my wife?" Three minutes later my wife picks up the line and says, "What did she do?"

"I left the doors open between our rooms," I say. "We had adjoining rooms. I was going to talk to her last night, but I didn't and I forgot to close mine."

"What did she take?"

"The van. My wallet. I think that's it."

"Okay," my wife says. "Okay. What do you want me to do?"

"I want to call the cops and have her arrested. I can do that, but I need you to get the numbers of the credit card companies so I can call them. And the bank."

"I'll get someone to cover my class right now," she says. This is why I love my wife – when I screw up, she omits the lecture and gets down to business. "I'll

run home and get what I can. Why don't I just call and cancel the credit cards? That should take care of it immediately."

My phone starts beeping. "My battery is almost dead. Let me give you the number of the motel."

"Wait," she says. "I need to know something. Are these cards lost or stolen?"

"What? What do you mean? Your daughter broke into my room and took them."

"I know," my wife says. "But, I mean, this is our Angie. What should I tell Visa when I call them?"

"Tell them a criminal stole them from me in cold blood," I yell into the phone. "Tell them –" but I can't finish because my phone clicks off.

I should head right back inside the motel and ask the clerk if I can use the desk phone. I should tell him, "Dude, my daughter stole my stuff," but I don't. Instead, I try to smooth out the wrinkles from my pants. My shirt isn't buttoned all the way, and my hairy gut hangs out over my lap. I don't even want to know what my ponytail looks like flailing around in the wind.

I take out my guitar from its case. My hands are shaking in anger and the cold air, so I take a deep breath to calm myself, but the air hurts my lungs and I start a coughing fit. I need to relax if I'm going to be able to handle this. I place the body on my lap and grip the neck with my left hand. I try to do a few warm-up chords – G, A minor, C7 – and run through a few vocal exercises. I should be talking to the cops right now, describing my daughter's appearance, and filing a report. But, for

some reason, I feel like *not* talking to cops and staying away from reports and official business, at least until I'm calm enough to be coherent.

This is exactly what happened with the Toyota when Angie was eighteen. We left the keys lying around, and one day both she and our car were gone, and we were scared out of our minds until we got a call from her two days later, asking us if we could come get her and saying, "You'll need to take back all my Christmas presents 'cause I think I totaled the car."

People walk by me as I run through "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" and they don't even bother to whisper. They say quite loudly, "I thought there were ordinances against homeless people in this state," and "I know Crosby and Stills, but what was the other guy's name?" One middle-aged lady drops a quarter in the open guitar case. She's overpaying me – I'm not singing in key at all, and when I get to the line *And you make it hard*, to my ears, because of the situation it sounds dirty instead of sentimental. My eyes start to water and I begin to make up all sorts of horrible lyrics about my daughter, words that no father should say, lyrics that don't make sense because my memory can't find anything to rhyme with "whore" other than "spore" and "tore." I'm strumming violently at the strings, causing the chords to rattle instead of soar, and by now people have gathered around me in a semi-circle.

"Should we call somebody?" I hear murmured among the watchers, along with, "I pay \$49.95 for a room and I shouldn't have to put up with these jerks outside the building," but I keep strumming and singing, no longer following the song I've played a hundred times. I'm ad-libbing lines that don't even rhyme like

*You're a dirty slut but it's not my fault/Aunt Vicky once banged your head on the wall* that don't make any sort of sense to the crowd, couldn't make sense unless they knew my family.

Everything in my impromptu concert unravels when I try to play the F bar chord. When I strum, the guitar almost lurches out of my grasp and makes this awful clanging sound that would force a beginning player to put the instrument away forever. I try again and again, but my fingers are no longer strong enough to stretch across the frets and hold down all six strings at once.

I can't play the F bar chord, and you can't play the bridge variations in "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" without the F bar chord. Apparently, this song was not written for old men.

I toss the guitar to the ground, and it hits the concrete in the empty parking space. The crowd gasps and takes a step back. At my daughter's last concert, one of the bands smashed all their instruments like The Who used to, but I don't think I can bend down and pick the guitar back up with my aching back.

If Angie does, for some reason, figure out that the pin number for my bank account is 0419 – Angie was born on April 19<sup>th</sup> – then she could wipe out our meager savings and leave my wife and me in a lot of trouble.

I stand slowly and stare at the guitar lying alone on the ground. The pavement caused two of its strings to snap. I take two steps backward in order to get a running start, and the onlookers back away further to ensure their safety. By

now, there must be at least twenty people standing around me, enclosing me and watching me break down.

Taking a running start, I plan to leap in the air and stomp the guitar out of existence with my bare feet. Instead, my right foot catches on the curb, and I dive face-first into the concrete. I crack my chin the hardest, and when I reach my hand to it, I can feel warm blood gushing over my fingers. My hip hurts, and I hear someone say, "Look at his leg. Look at it!"

Nobody from the crowd reaches down to help me or shows any concern about my safety. I try to prop myself up, chunks of gravel imbedding further into the palms of my hands, and I see fear on their faces. They're scared of me. Appalled by me. My actions make no sense to them, so they stay a safe distance from me and let me flail around on the ground, like a child, like a senile old man. All it would take is for one person to call an ambulance. I see the clerk and I want him to at least reach out to me and say, "Dude, are you okay?" but he just looks at me.

Suddenly, someone pushes through the crowd, a punk girl, a woman about 30 with really short hair. She's holding a box of donuts in one hand and my car keys in the other. She drops everything and leans down to me.

"Oh, my God," she says. "I thought I'd be back before you woke up. Did you fall? I wanted to surprise you. How did you fall?"

She tears off a strip of fabric from the sleeve of her t-shirt, revealing more of a flaming dragon tattoo, and she puts pressure on the blood gushing from my chin.

My daughter, she tells the kid clerk to call for help, and he stops gawking and obeys without even thinking about it.

“I would have been back sooner,” she says, “but you’re out of cash and your credit cards are all messed up. They worked when I bought gas, but they wouldn’t work at the donut shop. The guy at the counter said they’re canceled, like *just* canceled is what he said. I waited for forever, but I ended up having to use the last of my cash.”

My daughter, this woman I barely know anymore, checks for other injuries, starting with my leg, and I wince in pain at even her light touch. She tries to cheer me up and says, “I’m all packed and ready to go. First time I’m ever ready before you.” And she smiles.

I want to apologize to her, for ending up like this, but she tells me to be quiet and says, “I’m going to call mom. Let me use your phone,” and all I can think of is how young and healthy she looks, probably even more so to a senile, stupid old man.

## CURT SWAN'S MIRACLE

All these people come to our house bearing gifts. Wicker baskets filled with organically grown, all-natural apples and zucchini. Maybe shopping bags stuffed with homemade quilts and sweaters. A few rare collectibles – original vinyl recordings of Elvis with the Sun Records label, or the recalled Beatles album with the butcher meat and baby doll parts. You learn a lot about the world of antiques and collectables doing what we're doing. The more cynical visitors ring the doorbell with their right hands and grasp brand-new, leather briefcases in their left. Maybe \$100 bills creep out from the briefcase edges, or maybe they don't. A few people arrive empty-handed, guessing that the idea of having to bring a gift is a test or a trick. Everyone smiles, and everyone opens their eyelids wide, hoping to appear humble and not desperate, wanting me to see the kindness and love in their irises.

Sammy greets each visitor at the front door. This summer night she's wearing her least favorite disguise – an Amish-style, baby blue dress to her knees and a dirt-brown wig that brushes the middle of her back. Very, very conservative – most rural Missourians are uncomfortable with her regular appearance, so she goes overboard not to threaten them. The visitors see this and, if they come back, next time the old women will bring long, khaki skirts and heavy homemade cotton blouses. Sammy wants the gifts, their treasure, the really valuable stuff, and only tolerates the clothing because she has to. Whatever they've brought to try and be chosen, she'd dress up like a nun to get it. We're on the road again after tonight, and this is her last chance to see what these folks have to offer.

The door opens and an elderly woman drags a large cardboard box behind her. "Am I late?" the woman asks. She hunches over and picks up a hardbound book, brushes a light coating of dust off the leather cover. "First edition Sherlock Holmes books. Some Kipling and Poe, too. My husband, bless his soul, wanted them to find a good home, and the darn box takes up too much space in my attic."

Sammy takes the book, flips slowly through the pages. Most appraisers would agree the old lady's books are in mint condition – no visible wear on the pages or binding. My wife reaches down and squeezes the old woman's shoulder. "Aren't you a dear," she says. "Thank you so much. My name is Samantha. What's your name?"

But the old woman isn't listening. She shuffles on through the entryway and into our house. At least two dozen people have packed themselves into the living room, most sitting Indian-style on the floor, but a few of the older guests are squeezed on the checkered love seat and the striped couch that sit perpendicular in the room's center. I'm walking around to make sure everyone is comfortable, and even if they aren't, they certainly pretend to be. All I get are gritted-teeth smiles from the women and girls and outstretched hands from the men and boys. Even more than the offerings, this is my favorite part – the fake love before the evening gets underway. I know it's false, that the majority of our guests will hate me if they aren't picked, but that's okay. Even fake love is better than no love.

Nobody makes room for the latest arrival, the Book Lady, so she eases her way down to the hardwood floor, knees and elbows cracking as she situates herself as ladylike as she can.

People always come to our home on Saturday night because that's what the rumor says – you show up by seven p.m. on Saturday night at our house off County Road J-23, you bring an offering of one of your most valuable possessions, and, if chosen, you have the most amazing experience of your life. At least, that's what Larry Muldoon told a few of his friends. And they told their friends and family, and so on.

Larry Muldoon is a paraplegic ex-cop who likes to tell stories, but only ones that are believable. He's what most people in Missouri would call *a character*, what the nursing home workers call *a showoff*, but I've talked to him privately and can tell that he's basically honest. You do this long enough, you'll find a Larry Muldoon in every town in every county in every state. You need a Larry Muldoon to start the rumors. It's not enough to find the most pitiful person – you can't use cancer kids because, as sympathetic as they are, people don't generally believe the words of children. And you can't use terminally ill adults because, at the edge of their lives, they're not bound to the same rules of truth and lies that we are. They're almost dead and buried anyway, so we chalk it up to dementia if they spout fantastic stories out of their mouths.

What you do is you volunteer at a nursing home. Spend a few weeks hearing about the boring lives of the residents' children and grandchildren, vacuuming

spilled meals off the carpet, changing soiled too-big diapers. It doesn't necessarily have to be a nursing home – rehab centers also do the trick. You can never underestimate the chattiness of the elderly and the addicted.

You do this because you need to find one person that everybody feels sorry for but also respects. Someone inherently trustworthy. And then you choose him or her. That's how the rumors here got started. The account that Larry shared of his experience took place on a Saturday night, and people around the Midwest are so literal that they began showing up on Saturday nights, as if that's the only time and day it could happen. In the beginning, it was just a few and only the aged. Now, we get at least twenty on a good night, and all ages, too. Thanks to Old Larry, grandparents living at the nursing home have shared the tale with sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters.

Tonight, we have a boy sitting alone in the corner, maybe twelve or thirteen years old, but he could be even younger. He clutches a cardboard box so tightly his hands are flushed white. Box Boy's not showing me what he's keeping inside, but after he rang the doorbell and Sammy inspected the box's contents, she gave me the look that said *pick him*. The few times I've gone against Sammy's recommendation, I've regretted it. So, tonight, Box Boy's the one.

Sammy walks to the center of the room. "Dinner's ready," she says, and curtsies. When she does, the guests can almost see the edge of the flaming dragon tattoo on her right leg. Everyone stands up – except Book Lady, who makes a

production of the fact that she's older and more deserving than anyone else in the room. I reach down and pull her to her feet.

"Oh, thank you, Mark. Thank you," she says. "I'm all right now. Just need to get my bearings."

"Help yourself to some food," Sammy says, smiling. "We've got fried chicken, best in town if I do say so myself." Book Lady smiles back. They're both such bad actresses, I want to gag.

In the kitchen, guests help themselves to chicken, scoops of steaming mashed potatoes, corn still on the cob, green beans, homemade bread. This is our usual Midwest menu. Other places, other regions, she might serve matzo ball soup and fish in garlic and coriander sauce. She might make a giant pot of bowtie pasta and mix it with sausage and red peppers, complemented with focaccia bread and her own perfect mix of olive oil and ground pepper. But tonight we're in Missouri, and even with all the chicken dinners on the community calendar, this meal is still a favorite.

All day long on Saturdays, Sammy spends her time in the kitchen. This is before she puts on the wig, before she tapes thick gauze inside her bra to hide the nipple rings –too painful to remove and put back in, but she doesn't want them to show through the baby-blue dress. She draws the kitchen blinds and gets to work, cutting the fat off the chicken, smashing the potatoes down to a mushy almost-liquid. Sammy's arms, colored with red and orange and purple inks, carry trays from counter to oven. Her arms are muscular from nautilus gym machines, from a

lifetime of athletics and street fights. She was the Larry Muldoon that I found in a California town outside San Francisco – a suicidal, bisexual chef coming off an abusive relationship trying to get clean in rehab. A chatty one who told all her friends what I did for her. As she works, her biceps flex more impressively than my skinny arms are capable of.

“They’d better fucking eat a lot tonight,” she says during the preparations. “Last week we had all those leftovers, nobody took any food home. Just ‘cause they weren’t picked doesn’t mean they don’t need to eat. Sore losers.”

The first time I did this, the first time I chose somebody in exchange for gifts, I was living alone in an apartment and didn’t have any food for the visitors except left-over pizza, some bananas, and warm cans of soda. I don’t remember who it was, but someone, one of the dozens of Larry Muldoons I’ve used to spread my story, told me I needed to offer some sort of meal to the guests, invited or not. “It’s custom,” this Muldoon said, chomping away on a banana. “You should give them something, Mark. At least a small meal for the ones who aren’t chosen.” I started catering in until I met Sammy, and then the meals grew larger and larger.

I wasn’t planning on a relationship, especially not with someone that I’d chosen. How could I know if that person truly loved me, or just loved what I’d done for them? But Sammy kept showing up week after week, even after I told her I wasn’t going to choose her again. “Doesn’t matter,” she said back then. “I’m with you for the long haul.” She followed me, married me, and eventually became my business partner. And she loves the opportunity to use her cooking skills, to prepare

all types of meals, ethnic foods, desserts. It's the way she lives to help people, too, and she is always offended if our visitors don't overwhelm her with compliments.

Tonight's guests make their way back to the living room with their plates heaping full. Sammy's being such a proper hostess, she makes sure everyone has a water or iced tea or coffee. I take a break from basking in the smiles to grab a cold can of Pepsi from the fridge for Box Boy, and he looks up at me and says, "Thanks," his eyes full of hope and terror.

Normally we let the guests eat first, but Book Lady's not having any of that tonight.

"Can we get started already?" she says, dropping her sweet smile. She's the only guest without a pile of chicken on her plate. She picks at a couple of stray green beans with her fork. "If I'm not going to be chosen tonight, I don't see any reason in staying around. I've a hard enough time driving at night as it is. I don't want to be out any later than I have to."

"We would prefer to wait until everyone has finished eating," I say. Even so, I glance at Sammy, who sneaks out the front door to begin preparations for my selection.

Book Lady chews and talks at the same time, morsels of beans piling on her lap. "You don't remember me, do you? No, I guess you wouldn't," she says. "I was here last month with my wedding china, and the month before that with the glass angels, and before that. Your woman asks me my name each time. I certainly

remember your name, Mister Mark Pepper. This is the sixth time I've been here. I want to know – do I get to go tonight?

“No.”

She sighs and spits out more bits of food. “Have I offended you in some way? Is there a reason you're so unkind? I watched you ignore that poor old man in the wheelchair last month. Do you remember him?”

All other guests go silent, eyes shifting from me to Book Lady and back again. I nod.

“The hell you do,” she says. “His name was Rodney Fitzsimmons, and he's dead. He died of a heart attack two weeks ago. I bet you didn't know that, either. He told me that he came here eight times. Eight! And you didn't choose him, either. Broke that poor man's heart, you did. The hope you might pick him was the only thing that kept him going.”

Book Lady raises her right hand and shakes a finger at me. “Rodney flew in the war. He had medals. He was a pilot.” She pauses to let her words sink in. “He had forgotten all about that, until Old Larry told him about Mark, about you, told him what you could do. Larry Muldoon is a lot of things, but he isn't a liar. He had Rodney convinced that all he needed was to bring you a gift, and you'd help him. Eight times! Who do you think you are?”

Tonight is the fifth time this summer we've had an unruly guest in our home, and it won't be the last, no matter where we go next. I ignore her, walk over to Box Boy, and give him instructions: “Go out the front door. My wife has put a ladder on

the right side of the house. Just walk around until you see her. She'll help you up the ladder."

Box Boy stands up, still clutching his gift. He's too short for his age – not yet five feet tall. He offers his box to me, places it in my hands.

"Thank you," I say. Everyone stares at him as he walks to the front door.

"Why him?" Book Lady says. She looks around at the other guests, pointing to a man in his late forties with bloodshot eyes and a facial tic. "Why don't you take that guy? What's wrong with him? Why can't you help all of us?"

"Thank you all for coming tonight," I say. "My wife and I have enjoyed your company. Please take some food with you on your way out."

The guests stand. Some take a plate of chicken and bread. Others head straight for the door, but everybody except Box Lady leaves their offerings in the living room. Their boxes and bags, containers and briefcases, all remain behind in the hope that the next time they visit –next week, in a month, a year – their generosity will be remembered and they'll be chosen. It's in vain, as this will definitely be our last night in this part of Missouri. We're making too many people angry, and it's always dangerous to outstay our welcome. Box Lady is easy to handle. A rejected farmer with a shotgun isn't.

After you find your Larry Muldoon, it really doesn't matter who you choose – Sammy tries to select the visitor with the most thoughtful gift, but we end up with everyone's offerings anyway. I've never asked to keep any gift, other than the one from the person I choose. I've never said that leaving the gifts behind will increase

your chances on a future visit. I've even tried to return some of them, the truly rare items – ancient coins, original paintings, artifacts that should be showcased in museums. But the givers always refuse. Sammy couldn't believe this when I first showed her, on our wedding night, some of the gifts I'd received over the years. She calls the storage room "our own Sotheby's," but I always feel guilty until I remind myself that I've never invited these people to my home, nor asked them for anything. If they choose to leave a gift, it would certainly be rude not to accept it.

Box Lady drags her rare books with her to the front door. The last to leave, she glares at me one final time before reaching out to slam the door, but her arms are so weak the door doesn't latch shut. I pull it all the way closed before heading upstairs, carrying Box Boy's offering.

All of the upstairs doors are closed, but only one special door is locked. Sammy had the triple lock installed after we moved here to protect the valuables we've received from Missourians – antique lamps, first edition copies of *Gone With the Wind* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, mint condition Topps baseball cards from the sixties featuring Pete Rose, Mickey Mantle, Lou Brock. The cash usually fits in the safe. Sammy always wants to install an alarm system but I talk her down, as it would be a waste to install one when we're not going to stay longer than a few months at most. At least one person brings money every week, usually around a thousand but sometimes more. The security system itself could have been paid for with the contents of a single briefcase left behind by a middle-aged man in a suit a

couple of weeks ago. Now, she's talking about at least buying a pit bull to travel with us as further deterrent to would-be thieves.

What Sammy doesn't know yet is that I've rented thirty-four storage rooms and lockers across the country, all similarly filled to the ceilings with cash and collectibles and treasures. These hold the stuff I accumulated from before I met her, and as much as I want to tell her all about it, want to trust my wife and my business partner, I'm still scared.

Inside the room, I inhale musty air and breathe smells from different years, different decades, different lifetimes. I clear empty space on one of the tables, and I set down Box Boy's gift. Under the lid, below hundreds of packing peanuts, I dig to find piles of comic books. I pull them out, each one inside a clear, protective plastic bag and backed by a thin sheet of cardboard.

The first comic I pull out is *Fantastic Four* #1. The cover is bent and wrinkled in several spots, slightly yellowed from moisture but not too bad for paper that's forty-three years old. I find *Showcase Comics* #4, the beginning of the Silver Age and first appearance of the new Flash. *Giant-Size X-Men* #1. *Avengers* #1. *Amazing Spider-Man* #129. I pull out nearly all of the key issues in the history of the American comic-book industry. The first appearance of Spider-Man, *Amazing Fantasy* #15, alone would sell for an easy sixty-grand, especially in this condition. The values I know from my experience in receiving rare offerings – the history I know from my youth.

Whoever Box Boy inherited these from, that person kept their collection in excellent shape, especially since protective bags and boards weren't widely available until the early eighties. These are comics published well before I was born, comics I once dreamed of as a child but never imagined I'd see with my own eyes.

The last comic I pull out is *Action Comics* #583, an issue I've never seen before and not nearly as old as the others. I was nine when it was published in 1986, the date on the cover, and while I was collecting back then I must have missed it. I don't know of any historical significance, but it's in the worst shape of the entire lot – there's a long, diagonal tear from the upper right corner to the center of the cover, and the edges have worn away to roundness. Someone has read this comic hundreds of times. But the cover is still striking – Superman swoops out directly toward the reader against a backdrop of skyscrapers and the full Saturn-like image of the Daily Planet's globe.

I carefully remove the comic from its plastic bag. It smells like a newspaper left in the rain while you've been on vacation. The cover almost detaches from the spine, so I gently grab the edges with my fingers to slowly turn the pages. This isn't a comic that could make you rich, but it's obviously had great value to somebody. The back feels rough, so I turn it over and find brown splotches, and I wonder where they came from. I close my eyes and imagine setting this comic on a shelf, freshly varnished and still sticky, then realizing my mistake and carefully prying the paper free from the varnish. The splotches could have come from a thousand different places, but my hypothesis is as good as any.

When I view the interior art, the drawings of Superman fighting his enemies outside the Fortress of Solitude, I recognize the artist by the natural figures that still seem fantastic when flying through the air, punching holes in rocky cliffs, or recoiling in the presence of Kryptonite. It's Curt Swan, who isn't as famous as Jack Kirby or Will Eisner or as mythic as Jim Steranko or Steve Ditko. But, when I was doing chores for whomever I was staying with when I was growing up, desperately trying to save enough money to buy new comics from the grocery store, Curt Swan was my favorite. He made me believe that a comic book was real, could in fact come to life. He made magic.

Only one window was built in the storage room. I pull it open and crawl outside onto the small patio that sits just below the roof. These few months we've been here since April when the weather turned warm, Sammy and I like to sit on lawn chairs out on the patio, watching the sun go up and down, enjoying the privacy. The closest neighbors are almost a half-mile away and are blocked by the giant trees in the front yard. Box Boy is standing on the patio, looking down over the edge, his arms shaking the hands in his pockets. The silver ladder rests against the ledge, reflecting the nighttime light.

"Where did you get those comics?" I ask.

"My mom," he says, then looks down off the ledge again.

Sammy stands watch in the yard below, massaging her arms and rolling up the sleeves to show off her tattoos, trying to stay cool in the breeze. She told me that

the next place we go needs to be somewhere she can dress more fashionably, maybe even an international city.

"Grandpa bought them for Mom and my aunts and uncles when they were kids," Box Boy says, "but they didn't want them when they got old. They had a bunch more but Mom threw most of them out when I was a kid. That's what Mom said. Said these are the valuable ones I should keep. I put them in bags and boards to keep them safe."

"Do you know how much they're worth?"

"Yeah," he says. "Couple hundred at least. Not enough to buy me a cool bike or anything. You can have 'em. They just sit around anyway."

"Does your mom know you're here?"

"She's dead," Box Boy says without hesitation. "Grandpa knows. Dad and I stay with him now. Grandpa sent me here. He gets coffee with Mr. Muldoon. Sometimes I go, too."

"Ah," I say.

"You like comics?" Box Boy asks.

"I did when I was your age," I say. "I lived in a lot of different homes, foster homes, moved a bunch of times and lost most of them. I never had anything as good as yours. Mine were all ripped up. I must have read them a thousand times a piece."

"I like to look at the covers," Box Boy says. "I like the Spider-Man ones the best, especially since I saw the movie. The cover where he's grabbing the bad guy, swinging along? The one that looks really, really old? That's my favorite."

"I like the Superman cover where he's looking and flying right at you," I say. "The one that's all racked up. If I had to choose a favorite, that's the one I'd pick."

Box Boy grins. "I made sure to show that one to the lady who answered the door. Mr. Muldoon said to. He said you'd pick me for sure if I did that."

I kick some leaves off the ledge. Some fall to the ground, others fall inside the gutter. "Mr. Muldoon should be more careful with his mouth," I say sternly but trying not to laugh.

Down on the ground, Sammy walks over and says, "Hey, Mark. They're all gone. I'm heading in."

"All right," I say, and watch her remove her wig to reveal her bright-blue crop. She fishes her nose ring out of her pocket and turns to walk back inside. I turn to Box Boy. "Ready?"

"Who's all gone?"

"The people who were here earlier," I say. "Sometimes they don't drive away. They hide their cars off the side of the road, or in a ditch. They want to catch a glimpse, but they never wait very long."

"Ok," he says. "Don't worry. I'm not going to tell anybody about this 'cept Grandpa."

"I'm not going to ask you not to tell people," I say. "I've asked before, made people promise before, but everybody tells. You just do what you need to."

"I promise."

"If I have a hundred people show up next week, I'll probably know who ratted us out," I say, thinking about how the house will be vacant tomorrow morning when all our belongings are packed and loaded and on the highway. No reason to make the kid feel exceptionally guilty, but he should be aware of how to keep a secret. It's a good skill to have. "I think you know the kind of attention I'd get on TV."

"I said I promise," Box Boy says, with the most serious expression I've ever seen on a kid's face.

"All right then."

I walk to the ledge, and he steps up to my side. Sometimes I carry people in my arms, cradling them, especially old people who are too fragile to go flopping around. Sometimes I have special requests – "Can I hold onto your feet?" or "I'd feel more comfortable if you carried me in a chair," was Larry Muldoon's request – but Box Boy says nothing. I bend down, and he climbs on for a piggyback ride. He's so light I barely notice that I'm carrying any extra weight when I stand up again.

"You're tall," he says.

"Lock your arms around my neck, but don't grab my throat," I say. "I'll need to breathe."

At the edge, I take a deep breath, and I hear Box Boy's teeth chattering. When I step off the ledge, he says, "Oh shit," right in my ear.

But we don't fall. We rise up in the sky, away from the patio, the house, the world. Box Boy screams, laughs, yells, "Higher! Higher!" And I go higher. He yells, "Faster!" and I go as fast as is safe.

I look down at the ground, at the plots of land divided by roads and rivers, and it reminds me of a model-train world. Tiny buildings, tiny cars and tiny trees. Right about now is when most people truly realize what's happening, and they close their eyes.

"Don't do that," I say. "Blink and you'll miss it."

On the road below us, two moving trucks head in the direction of our house. We have enough money to hire people to help us move in the middle of the night. We have so much that we'll just leave the house vacant and not worry about selling it and getting a return on our investment.

Box Boy briefly grabs at my throat but then remembers my instructions and releases his grip. The faster I go, the higher I climb, the more Box Boy screams for joy. The ground below becomes a blur, but in a few minutes I can tell by the terrain that we're out of Missouri.

I think of Curt Swan, sitting at his desk in front of a blank piece of paper. Did he know he had the ability to make a boy believe it was possible to fly? And, if the artist had found out that one of his readers could really fly, could swoop and soar once the reader reached the age of eighteen, would he be disappointed if that reader

didn't use his ability for good? Would he care if the lonely, lost boy grew up to be a scheming man? A man with enough money to buy the world but not enough trust to share everything with his wife?

How would this artistic man feel if he knew? Probably sadness, but I'll never know because Curt Swan is dead. I tried to find him once, went around to comic book stores until some dealer showed me a magazine article about Mr. Swan's passing. Died in a car wreck.

I wanted to thank him, this artist, and maybe let him experience flight with no strings attached, no offerings needed. I have never been able to determine how I can do what I do, but I suspect Mr. Swan played at least a small role. I've never even been able to find his gravesite.

If I had been able to take him flying, he might have been as impressed as most people are, as enlightened and inspired and ready to turn their lives around. He might have said, "That's it?" like the few who expected more from what was rumored to be such an amazing experience. As if the miracle of flight isn't impressive enough.

Or, Curt Swan might simply have smiled and used what he saw through his eyes as material to make his comic book pages that much more realistic.

We go right by the top of the Statue of Liberty's torch, the peak of the Empire State Building. We stare below at the pit of Ground Zero.

"This is New York City," I say. "This is the basis for Metropolis and Gotham and all those comic-book cities."

I extend my right arm and mimic a comic-book pose. Box Boy loses his fear and does the same, gripping my shoulder with his left arm and pointing to the stars with his right.

“Up, up, and away!” he says, so that’s what I do.

## THIS CHARMING MAN

Bell sat on the bench outside Eddie's shop for an hour, hoping not to be noticed, thumbing through but not reading a months-old copy of *Better Homes and Gardens* while pedestrians ambled in no hurry to get about their business. She squinted to try and see through the shop's dirty glass door to no avail. Only the elderly shopped in downtown Holt, the area kept firmly in the fifties and hopelessly antiquated. Bell thought the Monroe Street shops were run down back in the seventies. Now, most residents hit the highways for newer plazas and more upscale shopping districts that weren't sixty years out of date. Bell guessed her presence alone lowered the average age of the shoppers by at least a decade.

Voices echoed around the corner of Monroe and Cherry, and a few of the town's matriarchs walked into view. These wrinkled women volunteered in the schools, the churches, social clubs, anywhere to keep a watch over others. They crowded Bell on both sides of the wobbling, rotting bench. They said, "Why are you sitting out here in this heat, Isabella, honey? All dressed up and nowhere to go. What, did McAllister kick you out of the office?"

"I'm taking time off," Bell said, dropping her magazine and clutching the large, white shopping bag with both hands, pinching its mouth closed. "I have my annual review today, have to get it in this week, but I don't have to work."

One of the women, a real prune-face with hair shellacked the color of Tang, stretched her neck to try and peek inside Bell's bag but quickly gave up. The others were too involved in telling Bell about their own purchases or how much fun their

grandsons Jimmy and Timmy were having at summer camp to notice Bell looking away, or the obsessive *tap-tapping* of her red heels on the pavement.

"We haven't seen you and Warren around in so long," they said.

"I have vacation saved up," Bell said, still on the original question. She felt a slight tingling inside her body, probably the onset of cramping, but she ignored the sensation. "I'm off the rest of the week, too. Just shopping and enjoying my magazine."

As the women stood to leave, the prune-face sniffed the air and said, "Somebody out here was wearing an awful aftershave. I don't see a man around, but I can smell him. He needs to scrub harder in the shower." The group jaywalked across the street and into a pharmacy. Bell gathered her purse and her shopping bag. Both sidewalks of Monroe Street finally empty, she pushed open the door she had been staring at, her action knocking the only person inside down to the ground.

The thin man landed lightly and was up on his feet before Bell could apologize. She assumed this was the Eddie from the sign, though she had expected an older man, someone more like the old geezers she spied through the windows as a child while she and her dad walked the downtown streets. Someone who would ask rude questions or refuse her service outright. Instead, this man hunched over a small broom and pushed clumps of hair into wider piles. He licked his well-groomed mustache and showed a few streaks of gray in his reddish-brown hair. She saw a wedding ring on his hand, and he appeared to be her age. Did he have kids in the schools? Had he ever come into the district office, and did he know her

husband? *I should have done this myself*, she thought, but she knew a professional would do a more thorough, more presentable job.

"You need a trim?" Eddie said, scratching at the short-sleeves of a navy-blue shirt. He looked at Bell's hands, one clenched in a fist and the other twitching at her side. He smiled. "Hey, it's okay. We don't get many women in here, but I can trim that bob up, no problem. That's a cool older style. My mother wore her hair like that for a long time." He propped the broom against the wall. "Save you some money, that's for sure. I bet we're way cheaper than wherever you usually go."

Bell stepped forward and removed something from her purse. Eddie unfolded it – a photograph printed from a computer, slightly pixilated, presenting its subject in a bold contrast of blacks and whites.

As Eddie considered the image, he motioned Bell to sit in one of the shop's two giant chairs. She looked at the Venetian blinds covering the windows, spread enough for the slight entrance of sunlight. She hadn't seen anything through the blinds while waiting outside, and the door was smeared with so many fingerprints that Monroe Street was warped and out of focus.

"Oh," Eddie said, figuring it out. He wedged the sheet in one corner of the mirror, licked his finger, and moistened the top edges so it stuck against the glass. "Well, okay then. I guess it is summertime." He fingered the top of his own head. "I've been meaning to get rid of this mop myself."

He grabbed a roll of white gauze from a drawer and tore off a strip, wrapping it and a teal cape around her tense neck as she wriggled in the oversized

chair, the folds of her skirt pressed against her thighs, the sticky-black vinyl preventing her from shifting and getting comfortable. Before he switched on the clippers, he paused and opened his mouth. Bell thought he might say *Get out of here* or *I know why you're starting to sweat and I know what you are. You're not going to fool anyone.*

But he closed his mouth and began mowing the clippers along the left side of Bell's head, leaving behind dark stubble. She only peeked at the mirror a few times as Eddie switched to the right side of her head, then grabbed a comb and started bringing the top down. He breathed quickly as he worked, fingers flushed red while gripping his instruments, and he went so fast that Bell barely had time to tell what was happening.

"We're waiting on a shipment from our supplier, a box of our good cream," Eddie said as he applied a squirt of cold gel to the left side of Bell's head. She winced, and he patted her shoulder gently. "I got this stuff from Wal-Mart, but it'll do the job. This might feel weird, but whitewalls are on the photo." He worked the gel into lather and rubbed his fingers over the sides and back of Bell's head, spreading the lather until it was absorbed by her skin all the way to the crown.

Eddie peeled away the stubble with a straight razor, a harsh scraping that reminded Bell of a construction worker taking sandpaper to a block of wood. She closed her eyes and anticipated a barrage of nicks and cuts, but Eddie's working hands were expert and kept her skin safe. It was only when he stepped in front of

her and closed the razor that he drew blood, his own, slicing the skin just below his wedding ring. If he felt pain, Bell wasn't sure, as she heard no reaction from his lips.

As Eddie walked to the sink, an older man entered the shop and immediately opened the blinds, giving Bell a clear view of shoppers walking along the sidewalk. "Did you catch the Royals last night?" the man said, digging through a drawer of tools. "Three in a row. Must be a new record."

Eddie said, "Hey, Joe," before whispering something in the old man's ear. Joe raised his eyebrows when he saw Bell for the first time, and said, "I'll go get a cup of coffee, then." As he left, Bell saw a few passers-by gather to talk outside the clear, clean windows before Eddie swiveled her around. Other men of varying ages soon entered the shop, but Eddie told them in turn, "Joe's getting a bite, so it's only me right now. Come back in a few." Bell stared at her feet and could feel eyes all over her from inside and outside the shop. She thought she heard laughter.

Eddie wiped sweat beads off her face with a towel and said quietly, "Almost done." He resumed shaving the back of her head. Bell muttered, "Nobody we know nobody we know," loud enough for Eddie to hear, but he kept silent and focused on the swipe of his razor.

"I think we're done," he said after a minute, turning the chair to face the mirror head on. He removed the cape and carefully shook all the blonde hair to the floor, a few strands falling gently on Bell's long-sleeved blouse. He grabbed the printed photo and held it at arm's length, comparing it to the customer in his chair,

before sticking it back against the mirror. "I think that's about right. It's actually kind of neat. Is it what you wanted?"

Bell rose without looking at the finished product. "It's fine," she said, her voice cracking. She dropped a \$20 bill on the counter and walked back to the shopping bag and purse she had left on the coat rack.

"This is too much," Eddie said. "High-and-tights are only ten."

She ignored him. In a single motion, she reached inside the shopping bag and plopped a blonde wig on her head, styled in the same bob she had worn for years, the bob Bell's mom made her get before the first day of high school during what felt like a different lifetime.

A quick exit was important, and Bell was already out the door, jogging in her heels toward her car, when she heard Eddie call out, "See you later!" She frantically checked the people milling about. Nobody was familiar. She glanced at the reflection in the car window. Other than the fact that her fake blonde wig was lopsided and the shaved left side of her head was clearly visible, everything was the same as it had been twenty minutes ago.

*Started with a magazine found at her grandparents' house on a wet day in June, wanted to dig around in the dirt and get her fingers all grubby but the grandmother wouldn't let her or her siblings outside. "I'm not giving you back to your mother all swallowed in slop." Pouted and walked down the damp basement stairs, opening the round hatboxes and brown-paper grocery bags and tight jars of canned strawberry preserves. Old*

*stack of Life magazines, black and white from before the color of the 60's. One photograph caught her eye, and she knew. She knew at that moment what she was and was not. Stared for twenty minutes before carefully, very carefully tearing the page free from its binding. Not folding it, bringing it up and sticking it in a folder she kept her drawings safe in.*

"Ms. Harrison, you do know why we're here right now, don't you?"

McAllister said, placing such an emphasis on the zzz in Ms. that Bell's ears rang.

"Why I scheduled your review first?"

The cramps had come in a rush and now had her guts in a vise – she considered asking McAllister if she could grab the bottle of pills from her desk, but she didn't want to show weakness. His interrogation methods were well known. Switching air conditioning on in the winter keeping it off in the summer. Every woman he encountered was a Ms. regardless of age or marital status. He never referred to anyone in the district by a first name.

He sat behind a giant mahogany desk tucked in one corner of his carpeted office. Other furniture was positioned deliberately so the morning sun would shine into the face of whomever he summoned. Bell couldn't make out his facial expression through her squinting eyelids. She was sweating through her blouse. Many female employees wore dressy, sleeveless tops in the summer, but Bell couldn't, as her armpit hair might attract unwanted questions.

"The tardiness?"

"The tardiness, the crying, the cursing, the arguing with your coworkers." He paused, waiting for a response that didn't come. He coughed a few times, stood, and took a drink from the water cooler next to a giant wall of filing cabinets. Almost every file on every student, teacher, and district employee was always within reach or in the storage room a few feet across the hall.

Bell turned her chair and was able to see the superintendent's face, lines taut in his perpetual scowl. "Your lack of respect for the teachers in this district as of late is appalling. I don't want to receive any more calls from the principals about your attitude toward the educators you deal with in your duties."

A bead of sweat trickled down from under her wig and slid down the side of her cheek, splashing apart at the shoulder of her blouse. McAllister kept several photos of his gorgeous wife and well-postured children facing away from him on his desk. Even friendly visitors were confronted by the ideal nuclear family, a wife fifteen years younger with curly brown hair brushing her shoulders, grade-school sons a testament to his vigor.

Seven years a secretary in the district office, and she was barely worthy of McAllister's attention until recently. For years she had laughed off the male teachers who ignored the ring on her finger and flirted with her, but she was changing, unable to keep the changes from showing, and lately she cursed at anyone who looked at her the wrong way. And the female teachers were unbearable, scoffing at her skirts as too long or too short or too out of date. Every time McAllister had a staff meeting with the junior high staff, Bell would find unsigned sticky notes on her

desk, reading *You're not flattering your thighs* and *Please wear a jacket so we don't have to see your sweat stains anymore*. As if Bell gave a second's thought to what she wore to work. Since vacation began, groups of women would come in for workshops in jeans and loose shirts. When Bell heard Ms. Johnson say, "It's like she's trying to get thick, must be twenty pounds since the last day of school," Bell raised her middle finger, a gesture that was also seen by two prospective parents considering a move into the district.

Bell was sure they all knew. They could see the outline of men's briefs through her skirt, or they could smell the aftershave splashed on her cheeks that same morning after her husband left for his office. Aftershave stolen from Warren, applied while dressed in secret clothes, then scrubbed off in the shower and masked with perfume and melon-scented lotion. *They know. They know why I'm always late and now McAllister knows and the people downtown and everyone else knows too. I'm not ready for this. I needed tonight, I'm not ready.*

The cramping ripped and squished her insides. She wanted to punch McAllister, right in the eye socket, but she was in too much pain. She was ready to give in when McAllister tilted his head, leaned back against the filing cabinets, and said, "Your hair is crooked, the right side is falling down. Why is your hair crooked?"

Bell reached up and straightened the bob, the cheap wig refusing to sit straight on her scalp. The lady she bought it from promised that even though it was a floor demonstration model, "It will fit tight on that head of yours no matter how

long or short you go, if it falls out from chemo, or whatever. And you cannot beat the price I'm giving you."

"Ms. Harrison, why are you wearing a wig? Are you ill?"

"I'm fine," Bell said. "Nothing's wrong. Why, is it now against district policy to wear a wig? Do you want me to testify in front of the board?"

"You want to be a smart-ass," McAllister said, "that's fine. You'll do it on your own time. Go home and come back next week with a new attitude. Enjoy your vacation."

She looked at the largest photograph on his desk, a family portrait, his wife showing off disgusting red-pink gums with her smile, and Bell wondered if McAllister spoke to his family this way, if this was the reason their posture was always perfect and their smiles stretched a little too far.

"And see a goddamn shrink or something if you've got problems," he said. "Don't bring them into the workplace. This is the Holt City School District office, not summer-camp for screw-ups. I don't care if you've been here seven or seventy years."

Dismissed with a wave, she returned to her desk to find a sticky note waiting for her. *Is there a reason you're not waxing your lip anymore?* along with a coupon for fifty cents off Bic razors at Wal-Mart.

She dialed Warren's number, catching her husband at his desk. "The teachers are acting like students again," Bell said as she gathered up the items she wanted to

take with her into the empty shopping bag. A photo of her and Warren. A National Geographic Calendar of wolves. A stress ball.

"More nasty notes?" Warren said in a low, tired voice. He sounded distracted by something, maybe his case, or maybe a faint background voice that was barely audible to Bell through the receiver. "Seriously, Bell baby, you have a clear case for action. I know this stuff. Let's sue some people."

"You're in court today?"

"Jury selection in a few," he said. "Prosecutor's sending Ross, and you know he'll take forever. I won't see you before you hit the road. You and Joan have fun."

"When does my sister ever really have fun?" Bell said. She popped two pills in her mouth and tossed the bottle in the bag, along with a stapler, her insulated water bottle, and a few of her favorite pens. The rest of the stuff in the desk she didn't touch and knew she wouldn't miss. She didn't plan on sitting down to work there ever again. The pills dissolved on her tongue and left her mouth bitter and sticky.

"She sounds happy when she calls," Warren said.

"Can we talk when I get back?" Bell asked. "This weekend, it's important and it needs to be this weekend. I know you're busy but you promised. You've been promising. I'll be back Saturday you know."

"Saturday, we'll make time on Saturday I swear, unless this thing gets delayed and then I'll be – shit, babe I gotta," and the line clicked dead before Bell could say goodbye.

*Wadding up the photograph and tossing it in the trashcan no one ever emptied, in her bedroom that no one ever entered. The crumpled page would stick between chocolate-smearing Three Musketeers wrappers and notes passed from friends in study hall. Her mother stopped coming in during Isabella's junior year and wouldn't come in again until her daughter moved out. Glossy, crinkled, old magazine paper left in the trashcan for a week, or two, or three, before she smoothed out the wrinkles again and stared again. Committed the image to memory, eyes closed and the man was still there – the contour of the jacket on his shoulders, the wrinkles on his brow and around his black eyes. What she wanted to grow up to be. Didn't need the photograph anymore but unable to part with it either. Sometimes she became bold and left it in other rooms in the house, begging God that someone in her family would see it and figure out what it meant and why she had saved it for years. No one ever noticed. Her brother not missing his old clothing, either, swiped from the hamper and carefully washed before wearing. Only in private with the door locked, of course. Not very stylish, and maybe she needed to find a well-dressed boyfriend who was about her size.*

The greeter at Sam's Club was the first person ever to see Bell dressed. An older woman with large, oval-framed glasses, she said, "Good afternoon, sir," and barely glanced at the feminine photo on Bell's membership card as Bell nodded and grabbed a cart. *Is it this easy to pass?* Bell thought as the greeter turned her attention to a family of four. *Is this all it takes?* She felt like she was high – lightheaded and hungry for attention, her shyness gone away.

Pushing the cart through the giant warehouse, Bell tried to make eye contact with as many shoppers as possible. *This is me* was the message she needed everyone to know. Most people were too busy to notice. A few smiled back, some with puzzled looks on their faces, a few with stares of hatred. One round woman with buzzed hair and a big belt buckle said, "Nice tie," and winked at Bell. Children ran screaming through the aisles, and Bell stepped around a group of associates gathered by a giant bag of dog food, pellets rushing onto the concrete floor.

She rubbed her chest through her suit jacket. She hated her breasts but hating binding them even more; her torso ached every time she dressed, but at least she had a method down pat. A restricting sports bra followed by four or five passes of athletic tape normally used for wrapping ankles. Painful but effective, it gave the jackets a relaxed fit.

Her cart barely had enough room for what she needed to buy – a twenty-pound bag of rice, a giant tub of butter, a six-pack of different varieties of barbecue sauces. Bell went up and down each aisle slowly, scanning the shelves for everything Warren had asked her to get. There was a Sam's Club less than a mile from Joan's house, her sister and her brother-in-law living about forty-five minutes south of Holt City, but instead Bell was two hours west of Holt in a town called Victoria. A safe distance, with no chance that she'd run into anyone who might recognize her. And it had a Sam's Club, and another very important place, too. She hadn't asked her sister to cover for her; she hadn't had to ask for such a favor since

the two were in high school. Bell counted on Warren's trusting nature and knew he'd be too busy at the office to worry.

Her first time dressed in public, she just had to put on her favorite suit -- solid black with a white dress shirt, paisley tie, black socks and freshly polished shoes. She kept the rest of her clothing locked in suitcases and garment bags in the closet of her hotel room, a do-not-disturb sign hung on the doorknob. She'd packed all of her dressing clothes -- all four suits, the three solid white dress shirts, the three light blue dress shirts, the ten undershirts, the ten pairs of briefs, the dozen pairs of socks, the brown dress shoes, the casual men's shirts, the two pairs of jeans, and the boots. She had swiped a bottle of aftershave and some deodorant from Warren and brought them in her travel kit.

"Would you like to try a sample of our apple juice?" a kid in a visor said. He held out a tray with shot-glass sized cups to Bell. She took one and washed two more pills down her throat, not caring that she was now above the safe dosage.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, ma'am," the kid said without any hesitation in his voice. It was to be expected from most people, but it still bothered her. She pushed the cart down the next aisle and loaded some heavy boxes of crackers into the cart, saltines for Warren and Triscuits for herself. She tried not to get angry. *He's just a kid, let it go.*

She wanted to stock up on frozen chicken wings and maybe a roast or two, but her cart was almost out of room, boxes and bags and jars piled on top of each

other, twelve-packs of Budweiser and Mr. Pibb underneath the cart's basket. She turned and walked toward the checkout area, picking up a box of pads on the way, as she had forgotten to pack any spares.

The checkout girl was cordial until Bell handed her the membership card, examining it much closer than the greeter had.

"Do you have another form of identification?"

"You have my credit card."

"I know but this photo on the membership card," the girl said, pausing and smacking her chewing gun, "it doesn't look like you. Policy says that it has to look like you. I could get in trouble."

Bell removed her driver's license from the plastic covering in her brand-new wallet, handed it to the girl, and immediately regretted doing so. The girl flipped a switch, and the lighted number above her cash register began blinking, a manager soon appearing in response.

"This lady doesn't have a matching photograph."

"I have my social security card with me," Bell said. "I can show that to you if you'd like."

"Ma'am, that won't be necessary," the manager said, playing with a pen in his vest pocket. "We just need to confirm this."

"Don't call me ma'am," Bell said, startling herself with the anger in her voice. "Don't do that. I'm not a woman."

"Huh?" the girl said.

"Okay," the manager said.

"I mean it," Bell raised her voice even louder. A few customers turned their heads to look in her direction. "I am not a woman."

"I'm sorry," the manager said, gesturing with his right hand in the direction of a security guard. "I only have the name on the membership card and the driver's license to go by, and it says your name is Isabella, Isabella, and I'm afraid I can't pronounce your last name."

"My name is Bell. I am not a woman."

"Is there a problem?" the security guard said, positioning himself between Bell and the manager."

"I'm not a woman."

"Okay, ma'am," the guard said. "Why don't we just calm down."

Bell turned, reared back, and punched the guard as hard as she could, the first punch she had ever thrown in her entire life. The guard was at least six-three, and she ended up hitting him not where she aimed on his stomach but in his ribs. To protect himself, he reached out at her, grabbed her, but she had only enough energy for the single punch. His arms restrained her tightly at first, but became more gentle as Bell doubled over in her own pain, her insides punishing her for her violence, this period as painful and unwelcome as her very first.

"Call the police," the manager said as the guard slowly led Bell away from the checkout lanes. The girl had already started ringing up the next customer in line.

The guard's eyes met Bell's, and she wanted to hit him and kill him and apologize to him and speak to him man-to-man. Most of all, she wanted him to understand, the way Eddie had seemed to, the way the manager and her parents and Warren and everyone else never would, not even if she tried to explain herself.

At first, Bell couldn't tell if the guard really understood, but he walked back to the checkout girl and retrieved the credit card and membership card, and he delivered Bell's cart to where she was leaning against the wall, trying to regain her energy.

"I'm serious, call the police," the manager said again. "I'm going to call myself if you don't take care of this."

"Bernie," the guard said, standing as tall as he could. "Be quiet." He gestured to the cart. Bell took it and started to push it away, but she decided to apologize for the commotion she had caused. She turned around to see the guard mouthing *We don't want another lawsuit* to the manager. The manager returned Bell's gaze with the friendliness of smiles, with the whitest of teeth.

"Have a great day, sir," he said.

*Burned the Life photo one night her senior year of college, two months from a degree she would never use. Holding the photo over a cigarette lighter until the military man was halfway engulfed in flames, then tossing it in the bathtub. Cold water, and the ash made her nose cringe. All this less than an hour after a nice boy got down on one knee and held out a furry blue box, smiling and looking safe. The ash could have been a photograph or a*

*newspaper article or the Mona Lisa, no one would ever know. She had neckties and dress shoes to dispose of, but that could wait till morning. "Well," she said to the showerhead, "at least that's all over now."*

The sun down, groceries and supplies packed safely in her hotel room, Bell took the step she had been waiting years for and walked into a bar, what her mother might have termed *a homosexual establishment*, what her father would have called *a house of faggots*.

Inside the bar, she was only cruised by women. A sign on the door announced it was "Mixer Night" and groups of men and women flowed through the establishment with ease, gay men and lesbians sharing the same safe space for the evening. The women walked by Bell slowly, trying to get her attention with whatever was at their disposal – a tight ass, a low-cut shirt, long flowing hair. Bell smiled to be friendly but tried to look disinterested. She wasn't there for the women. She knew most people would assume that she was, so she needed to approach one of the groups of men and see if they'd talk to her, take her in, accept her as one of their own. She needed to, but just when she thought she had made eye contact with a nice-looking, middle-aged man, she felt something inside of her and rushed to the bathroom.

At the back of the bar, Bell was confronted by two doors – one for men and one for women. *Which gender to be?* but she knew who she really was and entered the men's room, welcoming a chance to sit in privacy. Her bleeding was much more

of an issue now than it had been a few hours before. She would need to use bleach the next time she did laundry, as blood had dripped through the pad and stained the briefs. Some of it had dried black and was already crusting off in small flakes, and some of it was fresh and wet.

She wadded several sheets of toilet paper and stuck them in the crotch of her briefs, the paper sticking against her skin, and she tossed the used pad in the toilet. She considered trashing the briefs – she was feeling bold but didn't feel comfortable undressing in a bar restroom, and she didn't want to stain her pants any more than they already were. She checked her jacket pocket but remembered that the box of pads was sitting back in her hotel, unopened, on the dresser between the giant bottle of mustard and the five-gallon jar of pickle relish.

Bell could barely walk upright, the agony inside her begging her to lie down, but she was not about to let her body stop her. She stumbled back through the bar, a few people noticing her struggle and whispering among their group, and once outside she saw a grocery store about a block away and staggered to it, not wanting to drive like this. The glass doors automatically parted at her arrival. A few customers carried baskets or pushed carts, mostly college-age kids looking for alcohol and older couples avoiding the daytime rush. She put fingers to her crotch and felt a patch of wetness through the fabric, probably spreading to a larger area by the minute. She grabbed another box of pads from the shelf.

An old lady with thick, black eyebrows manned the only open lane. She smiled at Bell and said, "What a nice boyfriend you are, buying things for your lady. I hope she appreciates you."

"Sure," Bell said, wondering what this lady really saw— a boy, a woman, a gay man, a butch dyke, a freak of nature, or something else entirely? What words would she use if she were talking about Bell to someone else? What pronouns – he or she? Him or her?

"Or maybe you're married, hmm?" the checker said, swiping the box over the scanner. "I've been trying to get my husband to do nice things for me for years. If I said, 'Charlie, run to the store and get me some lady-things,' he'd say, 'Woman, I wouldn't touch those things if you paid me a thousand dollars.'"

Bell handed a wad of bills to the woman. "I tell you, that's what I say I want, but do you know the truth? I don't know if I could handle it if I got what I wanted." The old lady laughed as she made Bell's change. "If Charlie bought me flowers and baked me cakes and became the person I want him to be, I probably wouldn't like it. I'd go 'round the house and say, 'Where's the real Charlie at? He needs to sit his fat behind on the couch and watch himself some TV.' I'd probably get mad at him no matter what he did."

She handed Bell a few coins and said, "Be safe now."

One her way out of the store, Bell passed a man in a white shirt and tie who said, "Have a good night, sir," before walking to the open lane. Bell heard the

checker tell her boss, "What a nice-looking young man he was. I see a man like that, almost gives me hope for the world."

*Her husband kept photographs of everything, family and friends, nice sunsets, weird patterns in the clouds. Whipping out 8-by-10's and explaining everything he and his wife had ever done, he was never happier. "This is the Mexican place where Bell barfed and we got everything to go." She loved it when he shortened her name, removing the overbearing femininity, the over-pronunciation that most used when phonetically saying "Izz-a-bell-a." He always shortened things to make them easier, even when running through the photos. "This is the most beautiful beach on Earth. This is a neat turtle." All so unnecessary to her – explaining a photograph was like explaining a piece of music or a smile or an orgasm. Or seeing yourself reflected in a photograph and knowing that you'll never grow up to be that Army man with the muscles and the crewcut, not ever, that your gender and your body and the world will conspire against you. How can you explain that? You either got it or you didn't. Words didn't form in her head when she looked at the photograph, now rediscovered by her computer and printed off on stark-white paper. Words didn't even come to her all those decades ago at her grandparents' house, and not even now when her husband was at work and she got out the picture while dressed and smelling of aftershave.*

*Except once, this one time, when she was drunk in college and coming back from a disastrous date, reeking of booze and disappointment. She looked at the photograph and said, "This is me, me, me me me me me," before collapsing on her bed.*

## THE NEIGHBORHOOD ARTIST

While the entire neighborhood offered to help Mrs. Schauwecker move her belongings to the retirement home, in the end she decided to hold an auction and sell off almost everything she owned.

"How much can you fit in one room, anyway?" she asked of those who offered their assistance. "How much does an old widow need?" On a humid June afternoon, with her children having taken off work and having traveled from both coasts to be home in Iowa with their mother, Mrs. Schauwecker put a *For Sale* sign in the front yard, packed a few suitcases and boxes which her kids loaded into a rented van, and let her children drive her to the place where she would spend the rest of her life.

More than a month before her move, in the early weeks of May, Mrs. Schauwecker was still organizing and choosing starting prices for items in the auction. She spent her days cleaning out drawers and shelves, dusting as she went, trying to identify anything that would be of sentimental value to her children, or monetary value to strangers looking for reasonably priced antiques. Nights she spent with her next-door neighbors, the Hoovers, who had invited Mrs. Schauwecker for every dinner every night since her husband's accident until her children came to take her away. Mrs. Schauwecker fretted openly at each meal, that she was imposing, that she was not the Hoovers' responsibility. But, one of the Hoovers knocked on her door every evening at 5 p.m. and walked her the fifty feet

between their front doors – these next-door neighbors who, for all intents and purposes, shared a front lawn.

After one Monday's meal of lasagna and garlic bread, Mrs. Schauwecker made only her second request of the Hoovers since her husband's accident. The first was, after she got the call from the hospital, "Could you please give me a ride to St. Marys so I can be with Conrad?" The second was, regarding the Hoovers' only child, "Could you ask Thomas if he's planning on coming home sometime before my auction? I need his help with something."

Each time Tom Hoover moved the mouse, the cursor on his computer screen remained in the same spot. Each time, it didn't matter if he gripped the mouse gently and rubbed it slowly over the soft pad on his desk, or if he banged it in frustration against the keyboard. He had six articles to try and fit on the page. Six articles, and he couldn't jump anything to a different page. His editors had no sense of style, of flair, of anything aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Just cram everything together as tightly as you can, and if people want to read the news, they'll find it.

Tom churned out newspaper page after newspaper page, and after a few years on the job, they all looked the same to him. Even when he got to fill in on the weekends for his boss and design the front page, he still had to conform to what was expected of him. How many photographs of ribbon-cuttings and hog shows could one community stand to see?

The cursor wasn't listening to reason, so Tom stood up and stretched his legs. He needed an opportunity to try and change things. The youngest person in a newsroom filled with journalists and newspapermen past their prime, his desk was at the far end where nobody wanted to be – right outside the publisher's office. Everyone talked about the publisher when he was traveling, or when his office door was closed. They called him Pub or Mr. Pubby, mainly because every time the publisher was out in the newsroom, looking down on his employees, he was always on his cell phone with his wife, calling her, "Honey-bubby," or "Cutie-wootie." Tom had never heard a grown man talk like that, especially someone as gruff and demanding as the publisher. The few times Tom had tried to make small talk, to at least put himself on the publisher's radar screen, the man had dismissed Tom with a look before Tom could even open his mouth.

There were so many things Tom wanted to say. *I can make this paper look so much better. I was trained in how to lay out a page in order to tell a story. When they make fun of you, I stay quiet. Give me a chance. Give me a new mouse, at least.*

The managing editor appeared in front of Tom, materializing like he had teleported in out of thin air.

"Tom, we've got another story to put on that page," the editor said. "That won't be a problem, will it?"

"No," Tom said. "I'll make it fit. No problem at all."

The last time Tom had seen Mr. Schauwecker was the previous December, early one morning when both of them were outside, bundled up and shoveling their sidewalks.

"I hope your parents are paying you well to do that," Mr. Schauwecker had called out, body trembling but hands still strong enough to push the snow out of the way. White hair peeked out from under a dark green stocking cap. "You come home for Christmas, and all they do is make you clear their walk."

Tom trudged through the snow and shook the old man's hand, amazed at the strength of a grip that hadn't changed in a decade.

"You drawing?" Mr. Schauwecker said.

"I keep meaning to," Tom said.

"Hmm."

"I get to practice layout with my job, you know. It's just hard to find the time to sit down and draw."

"You make time. You don't practice, you lose it. I can't draw for as long as I used to. Grip's fine, but my forearm gets sore, and I don't know why. What I wouldn't give to have your hands and arms."

*You make time. What I wouldn't give.* The same phrases the old man had been repeating for years. Tom didn't even know where his art supplies were, probably packed at the bottom of a box in his parents' basement. Mr. Schauwecker talked for a few minutes about what he was working on, a few Superman pin-ups for DC but mainly a special project "for an old friend. It's taking me forever, it's a giant thing,

but this is something that needs to be just right." And then the two men went back to their sidewalks, silently trying to keep the snow from piling too high, their shovels scraping violently against the concrete. Not talking in the same way they had for years.

The interior of the Schauwecker house smelled the same to Tom as it had when he was a child, always cranberries and wood varnish in the summertime. The couple had spent little money redecorating their home. Carpets were cleaned and re-cleaned, not replaced, even after thirty years had passed. The hardwood floor in the entryway was new, but it led to a kitchen with the same mustard-yellow tile floor that he remembered. He sat down while Mrs. Schauwecker made coffee.

The Schauweckers never ate their meals at the kitchen table, Tom knew, not even small lunches or quick snacks. Food was always brought to the dining room. This was partly because Mrs. Schauwecker loved the way her dining room was decorated. They always ate on fine china, an authentic set they came across during their only visit to Germany to try and investigate the Schauwecker ancestry. Mrs. Schauwecker loved the fact that her husband was born of full-blooded German immigrants, and she was much more interested in his bloodline than he had ever been.

Even so, they mostly used the dining room because Mr. Schauwecker worked at the kitchen table, spreading his drawings – "My whiteboards," he always said, even though his art was just penciled and inked on nice, stiff pieces of paper –

across the table's surface, leaving only enough room for a small napkin on which to place a can of Coca-Cola.

"Never spilled it," Mr. Schauwecker had said to Tom, years ago during one of the afternoons Tom had gathered up his special drawing pencils and knocked on the Schauweckers' front door, hoping for a lesson. "Never. You can't have the Fantastic Four fighting Dr. Doom and have a soda stain get in the way." Mrs. Schauwecker would bring a TV-tray for Tom to use and some notebook paper for him to draw on. The two artists seldom talked while working, but they always compared their results when the afternoon was finished and Tom had to leave for dinner. Tom was in constant awe of his neighbor, how the old man created real life on ordinary paper. Mr. Schauwecker would always praise one thing Tom did well and point out two things he needed to work on. Tom's drawings would usually end up on his refrigerator, while Mr. Schauwecker would pack his in a box, address the label to DC Comics or Marvel Comics, and ship the box to New York City.

"And how is the newspaper business these days," Mrs. Schauwecker asked Tom. He was amazed at how healthy she looked, how she seemed to move without any physical pain. "Are you writing many articles?"

"Actually, I don't write any articles. I design the pages, and then I put the stories on them. I also edit the stories for mistakes."

"Oh, that's right," she said, rummaging through her cabinets. "I think your mother told me that. You sure I can't get you something to eat? I've got a box of muffins here somewhere, I could whip them up real quick."

"I'm fine," Tom said. "I don't eat much breakfast anymore."

Mrs. Schauwecker placed two cups of coffee on the bare kitchen table, not bothering to put a napkin or coaster underneath the mugs. "Thank you so much for coming over. You know, I never paid that much attention to Conrad's comic-book stuff. I always made a point to look at what he was working on, but I never really understood any of it."

"Mrs. Schauwecker," Tom said, "I don't mean to be rude, but I haven't collected comic books since I was 14 or 15. I'm sure they've changed completely. After 10 years, I won't really know what I'm doing."

"That's okay. The man who had been handling Conrad's art was ripping us off, just letting it sit in his basement. I don't want to mess with shopping around for another dealer. I just want someone I can trust. Besides," she laughed and pointed a finger at his nose, "I know where you live."

She motioned at a large stack over on the counter, a bundle of something tied together with a piece of twine, and Tom carried the stack over to the table. The individual pieces of paper were separated by thin sheets of cardboard. Untying the bundle, Tom looked through the black-and-white drawings, fully penciled and inked comic-book pages, art he had never seen before but had heard Mr. Schauwecker talk about endlessly. Looking at the drawings, he could still remember the smell of Mr. Schauwecker's favorite brand of ink and the way it stained his hands when the old man wasn't being careful.

"These are from, let's see," Mrs. Schauwecker said while looking at a wrinkled piece of old notebook paper, taking the glasses from around her neck and placing them on the end of her nose. "*Fantastic Four, Action Comics, Justice League of America, Superman, Adventure Comics, and Green Lantern*. I think each one is labeled, so you'll know what's what. They're so old, I don't even remember him drawing them. It says on this paper they're 'Silver Age.' Whatever that means. All I know is that Conrad set this stack aside for some reason, but he never explained why. Maybe they were his favorite."

Tom sipped his coffee, wincing as his tongue touched the liquid. Mr. Schauwecker had always complained about his wife's coffee, that he couldn't drink anything she heated up because "it's like licking an open flame, son. Stick to cold drinks when you're over here."

"Are you positive that you want to sell these?" Tom said. "Do you want to check with your children first, see if they want them?"

"The kids already have all the art they could possibly want, believe me. They've got their father's art coming out of their ears. I'm guessing he might have kept these separate because they're so old, judging from the dates. Did you know they used to throw away everything that he drew? That he never got anything back once he sent it off?"

"I did," Tom said.

"It wasn't until the early '80s that he started getting his artwork back from New York when they were done with it. I'm sorry to have to say this, but a lot of

those people in New York are such mean-spirited people. That's one of the main reasons we moved here in the first place – all the people here in this neighborhood are so much nicer. Your parents are salt of the earth, you know? Something about being around where things grow, I think. Anyway, these drawings were saved by a friend of Conrad's. I think the man's name was Billy, Billy-something, and he worked at one of the companies. Billy saved what he could from either being destroyed by the printers or stolen by the editors, but it wasn't much."

"At least they eventually started giving it back," Tom said.

"Yes, but then we had so many of these pages around the house, it just cluttered everything up. I wonder how many pages he drew, from when he started until now. Most of it's already sold, and what the kids wanted, Conrad divided up years ago. Trust me – my children will be happy if they never have to look at another drawing of a superhero ever again."

Tom stacked the pages and re-secured the bundle with the twine. As he stood to go, with the bundle in his left hand, Mrs. Schauwecker placed a brown-paper grocery bag in his right. "Cookies for the walk home," she said. She went before him and held the front door open, but Tom knew she would probably keep talking until he closed and locked his parents' front door.

"It's like when I used to quilt, before my fingers went bad," she said. "I gave out quilts to family and friends whenever the time seemed right. I never just gave a quilt to someone *just because*. I would hold it and wait until the perfect time – a

wedding, or the birth of a child. You know I gave you yours when you left for college."

"Yes, ma'am," Tom said.

Mrs. Schauwecker pointed at the bundle. "Maybe those will find the right home, too. At least they'll finally be out of the way. I'm sure you've got so many of Conrad's drawings cluttered around your old room, you can't close your eyes without seeing one."

After Tom's sessions with Mr. Schauwecker became routine, maybe two or three afternoons a week, Tom grew tired of hearing about all the things he was doing wrong. He knew he was learning, that he needed to listen, but he was drawing his heart out – Batman swinging through Gotham City, or the Flash running on the surface of the ocean. He only heard Mr. Schauwecker say, "That head is too small for those shoulders," or, "The cape is great, but don't forget about having the light reflect off of it. You always forget that." When Mr. Schauwecker showed Tom his own finished page, from an upcoming issue of *Green Lantern*, Tom couldn't hold back any longer.

"Why isn't Green Lantern getting hurt?" he said, pointing to the hero's handsome features. "The alien keeps punching him in the face, throwing rocks at his head, but he's not bruised. He should have a black eye."

"Good," Mr. Schauwecker said. "Good eye, but you're forgetting. Not only can Green Lantern create anything in the world with his power ring, anything he

can imagine, but it automatically protects him from harm." He took his pencil from underneath the grey hairs covering his ear, and used it to point to the page. "You see that thin line I've got all the way around his body. That's the ring's *aura*, and when they print this page it will give a greenish-tinge to his body."

"Oh," Tom said. "Yeah. I forgot."

"It's okay. You're thinking, and that's what you need to do."

"What about if the alien is yellow?" Tom said. "Doesn't Green Lantern's ring not work if it's touching something yellow?"

"Then," Mr. Schauwecker said, "let us hope that whoever puts the color on this page is smart enough to know this is not a yellow alien. Now, get back to work."

When the issue was finally published, Tom was surprised to see that, in addition to fighting a brownish-green alien, Green Lantern had to rescue a young boy who had been kidnapped by the alien – Mr. Schauwecker had kept secret those pages that the boy appeared on. The boy looked to be about eight years old and was remarkably similar to the way Tom had looked and dressed when he himself was eight. The day after the issue was shipped to the grocery stores – Tom always picked up *Green Lantern* the day it was placed on the spinner racks – Mr. Schauwecker gave Tom the original black-and-white art of the last page of the issue, the last panel a drawing of Green Lantern carrying Tom through outer space in a green bubble, both of them smiling at having survived such an amazing adventure. It was the only piece of art that Mr. Schauwecker ever gave to Tom – he even tied a

ribbon around the whiteboard. Tom's mother framed it and hung it in Tom's room until the room was redecorated, and then the frame was placed in the basement.

Tom spent two weeks contacting different comic-book stores around the country, e-mailing different store owners and comic art dealers, pretending to be an interested buyer to see how much he might be asked to pay for the art he had in question. All the dealers agreed that original pages from this artist's later years were easy enough to find. Pages from early in this artist's career, especially during the so-called Silver Age of the 1960s – when characters such as Spider-Man, the X-Men, and the Fantastic Four first appeared – were more difficult to find and might sell for a premium. But not much.

"He's just not a major artist in the industry," one dealer said. "You want some Kirby pages, you pay with your left arm and maybe a foot or two. But this guy just isn't in demand."

Tom figured he'd list a single page for sale on eBay, see what the bidding rose to, and then sell the remaining nine pages as a lot. The Schauweckers were far from rich, and he knew he needed to get Mrs. Schauwecker as much as he could. He did most of this in the newsroom while he waited for stories to come in on deadline, so he could then do his job and place them on the pages he had quickly designed.

On a Wednesday night, the night he was searching online to see what kind of price he might ask for, the publisher unexpectedly came into the newsroom, cell phone nowhere to be found, and walked around, checking on his employees and

seeing how hard they were working. As he walked toward Tom's computer, Tom tried to minimize the eBay window, but the mouse wouldn't cooperate. Again and again he pushed the mouse over the pad, but the cursor refused to move. Just as the publisher was about to step right behind Tom, Tom tapped the surge protector underneath his desk with his foot. The computer and monitor switched off.

"Shit," Tom said, under his breath, hoping the publisher was listening. "Now I have to re-do everything." The publisher walked on, not even pausing at Tom's desk, and entered his office, leaving the door open for the first time since Tom had worked for the newspaper.

Tom didn't want to get caught up and finish the pages he had been designing. He didn't want to have to deal with the mouse or the screen or the news or anything. He looked around the newsroom. *This is my life. This is where I'll be in thirty years. This is the best I'll ever do.* And then he saw something on the wall of the publisher's office, a room he had never even been able to peek in before. Without thinking of the consequences, Tom walked inside the publisher's office without knocking.

Tom pointed to the shield on the wall. "Is that a Captain America shield?"

"Hmm?" the publisher said.

"On the wall. That's Captain America's shield."

The publisher looked up, his beard almost covering his entire mouth. "It's from the old movie serials of the '30s. Before even my time, really. I found it at an auction once."

Tom walked over and inspected the shield, the red-white-and-blue paint flaking off against his touch.

"You like comics?" the publisher said. "The Avengers. Batman? Superman?"

"I'm a little old for comics."

The publisher's eyes widened, and he talked almost too fast for Tom to follow. "Superman should be everyone's hero. Captain America should be every kid's hero. Jesus, too old? Maybe kids like you didn't care as much about comic books as I did when I was a child, but how can you not still love Superman and Batman and Captain America and all of them?"

"You buy comics?"

"I've kept all the comics I've ever owned, son," the publisher said. "I've got dozens of long boxes in my basement. I get every issue from Marvel and DC, and I stick 'em in bags and boards. And I pick up memorabilia from time to time. Brando's tunic from the first Superman movie. Some glasses that George Reeves used as Clark Kent on the '50s Superman show. One of Adam West's capes."

"Do you have any original art?"

"What original art?"

"The pages actually drawn by the artists."

The publisher paused, thought about it. "No, I don't. I've never bought any. Now that you mention it, I have no idea why." He leaned back in his chair and laughed. "I can certainly afford it, if I waste my money on a stupid shield."

Tom paused and stared at his boss, at the man he had worked for but barely spoken to for years. This dumb conversation was right out of a comic book, like the moment when lightning and strange chemicals struck Barry Allen at *exactly* the same time and gave him the super-speed necessary to become the Flash, or when the Fantastic Four's space shuttle flew directly into the cosmic rays, giving them their strange and wonderful powers. Tom had been sitting outside this man's office for so long and would never have talked to him if not for a dumb, decaying movie prop.

"My neighbor," Tom said, sitting down in a chair opposite the publisher's desk, "was a comic-book artist."

The publisher almost smiled. "Really. Would I have heard of him?"

"Maybe," Tom said. "He worked for Marvel and DC both. He was my next-door neighbor when I was a kid. He taught me how to draw. He did mainly Superman, that's probably what he's best known for during his career, but I really liked it when he drew Green Lantern."

"I didn't know you were an artist," the publisher said. "Where are you from?"

"Forty-five minutes from here."

"A comic-book artist lived in Iowa?" The publisher scratched his beard. "I mean, it's not like an old guy who draws comics is like a Tom Cruise or anything, but one lived next door to you? What was he like?"

Tom sighed. "Nice. Tough. I don't know – it's hard to explain."

Tom had never seen the publisher speak this much to anyone before. "Did everyone in your neighborhood know who he was?"

"They knew he was an artist and that he drew comics, but not that he was famous," Tom said. "Or, famous to some people, at least. The kids just liked the pictures he'd doodle for them sometimes, usually on Halloween. I think I was the only one who really read comics. He used a pen name. His real name was kind of a mouthful – his wife told me one time that his real name was too ethnic, too German for people to be comfortable with. The publishers basically made him change it. He first got his first work published right after World War II ended."

"Wow," the publisher said. "You know, I never get to talk about comic books with anyone. My wife thinks they're stupid, and she's right, I guess. It does seem stupid, now, now that I'm old and all. It's just that, when you're a kid, and when you're the youngest in a big family, I don't know. I still smile when I see a comic book, you know? Is your neighbor still drawing?"

"No," Tom said. "Not anymore. Listen, could I stop by your office again tomorrow? There's something I've got that I think you'd get a kick out of."

At the hospital the night of Mr. Schauwecker's accident, after the Hoovers had driven Mrs. Schauwecker to the hospital, Tom received a phone call from his mother with the news. She told him not to leave work early, that there was nothing he could do at the hospital, they were just waiting for news from the surgeon and she didn't want her son driving if he was upset. Tom told the night editor what had

happened to his neighbor and made the trip home in less than a half-hour. A few minutes after he arrived at the hospital, a nurse ushered Tom, Mrs. Schauwecker, and Tom's parents into a private room. When the nurse asked if they were all family, before Tom's mother could speak, Mrs. Schauwecker said, "Yes," and everyone left it at that. Tom's father had already called all of the Schauwecker children long-distance on both coasts, and they were either driving or flying in immediately.

A short, balding man soon walked into the room and sat down. He started explaining what Mr. Schauwecker's current condition was, and from the moment he asked, "Is there a living will?" Tom could no longer pay attention or look at the other people in the room. He thought instead of his final drawing lesson from Mr. Schauwecker, back when Tom was a senior in high school. Tom had stopped religiously reading comics when he was 15, but he kept drawing his own pages until he was 18. His art teachers pushed him to study classic artists, fine artists, but Tom could only make himself care about heroes and villains, epic battles and amazing events. Tom's after-school sessions with Mr. Schauwecker had begun well before Tom had entered junior-high, and by the time he was getting ready to graduate high school, Tom felt he had made great progress, that he had shown real talent, so much so that he had compiled a sample portfolio and planned to spend the summer meeting editors at different comic book conventions. All it took was one person to say yes, and he was in.

That day, instead of waiting until the end of a full work session, Tom showed his portfolio to Mr. Schauwecker right away, almost immediately after flying through the front door. The old man smiled as he flipped through the pages. "Your layout skills have come so far, Thomas," he said. "You can clearly see what the story is, even without any words on the page. And your poses are dynamic and still believable."

"I know," Tom said. "I know I can do this."

"Yes," Mr. Schauwecker said. "But you're still not good enough." He sat down and looked Tom in the eye. "Thomas, your mother told me about the conventions. Don't waste your time driving around the state. Spend your time working. The foundation is there, but the overall drawing is still too ordinary. Too derivative of other artists. Hell, you probably spend too much time looking at my stuff."

"But," Tom said.

"Seriously, this is fine, fine work. But it's not professional work. You'll get there. You will."

Tom stopped listening after that. He still spent the afternoon at the TV tray, and he still moved his pencil across the paper, but his mind was stuck on the portfolio, the sleep he had lost working on it, the cramps in his hand that made it difficult to grip a pen at school. When it was time to go home, Tom walked across the lawns, through his front door, and upstairs to his bedroom. He locked his bedroom door, turned on the radio, and swore to himself *I will become the greatest*

*fucking artist of all time.* He said that phrase, quietly, over and over, plotting a grand destiny and almost, but not quite, believing it would come to pass. He didn't know back then that, unlike his heroes, such desperate vows seldom came true in the real world. Especially when made by spoiled, high school seniors.

At the hospital, Tom looked up and saw that the group was being led out of the room, so Tom followed along silently. They walked through two sets of doors and down a long, stark-white hall, finally arriving in the heart of the emergency room. Off to one side was Mr. Schauwecker's area, his body barely alive and a nurse still trying to mop up the blood. On the phone, Tom's mother said that Mr. Schauwecker's car had been blind-sided by a van, a rusting, yellow Volkswagen. Tom looked at the old man's face – now a swollen, black-and-purple mess of lumps – and thought *He doesn't even look like a person.* He could see Mr. Schauwecker's fingers, mangled and useless at his side, and then he looked at Mrs. Schauwecker, her shoulders heaving up and down.

Since his boss had made the check out to Tom, before he went back to see his neighbor Tom transferred all the money from his savings account and wrote a check to Mrs. Schauwecker, padding the final sale amount by several hundred dollars – Tom figured he had received years of art lessons and critiques for free, that the Schauweckers had given him more cookies and cans of soda than Tom could ever afford to repay. He wanted to do something for Mrs. Schauwecker before she left; he planned to visit her at the home but knew that might not ever happen. He

wished he had taken a picture of the publisher's face when Tom showed him the actual pages. His boss could name some of the specific issues each page came from without even looking at the labels scribbled upside-down on the edges. The way he had talked about the characters, the emotion in the publisher's voice, Tom could barely believe. He considered that it could have been a setup, that his boss knew much more about the market for original comic-book art than he had let on, but Tom trusted his instincts. He knew the gratitude in the older man's eyes was for the art itself, not for the price. He considered trying to milk his boss for more money than the art was worth but knew that Mrs. Schauwecker, if she found out, would not approve.

She was in the basement, stacking old copies of *Reader's Digest* and saying, "Do you think anyone would buy these? They're still fine reading. I always love the jokes they have."

Tom produced the check from the sale of the artwork, but when he showed it to his neighbor, she dismissed it with a wave.

"I don't want that money," she said. "Didn't I tell you that when I gave you the bundle? Why don't you find a charity to give it to? All those people at the hospital were so nice, maybe something for them. Maybe the Salvation Army."

Tom stopped, trying to remember their earlier conversation, wondering if she was having a knee-jerk reaction to the amount of the check. "Did you want more? Do you need help paying for the retirement home?"

She smiled, reached out, and touched his arm. "You're so sweet to be concerned, Thomas. But I've got all the money coming in from this auction, and I've got my kids wanting to help pay for my move. I just wanted the art out of the way. It deserves to be displayed somewhere, not just packed away in a basement."

Mrs. Schauwecker stopped stacking the magazines. "You know, I know that everything in this house is mine, even all of Conrad's art. But, truth be told, that part of his life never belonged to me. He shared it with all those kids who read the comics. It wasn't something that we had in common." She looked at Tom. "Oh, don't think I'm complaining. I never really shared my quilting with him. It's good to have separate interests, you know. You'd do well to remember that if you ever get married. But Conrad never asked for any of the money I made from selling quilts. I don't think I should get money from his artwork, now that he's not here."

As Tom was about to tell her about his publisher, about meeting someone who recognized and respected her husband's work, about the brand-new computer and monitor and mouse that had appeared on his desk that morning, Mrs. Schauwecker pointed to something propped up against the basement wall. It was long, flat, and messily wrapped in old magazines.

"That's for you," she said. "I'm sorry Conrad isn't here to give it to you properly. He had been working on that since before he saw you over the winter, and he was waiting for you to come home so he could give it to you. You know he was working so much slower these last few years, but I don't think he ever would have given it up. Anyway, he took care of the whole thing himself, even the

painting and framing. Oh, and there's muffins on the counter for you to take before you go. I'd better stop gabbing or I'll be down here all day."

Tom carried the gift and food back to his parents' house. Once inside, he carefully unwrapped the package, making sure not to smudge the glass frame with his fingerprints. Beneath the frame was a painting, done on paper larger than he had ever seen Mr. Schauwecker work with before. The drawing was a recreation of the last panel of the Green Lantern story that Tom had been the star of, the panel where the Green Lantern and Tom himself were flying through space. With Mr. Schauwecker's artwork so big, Tom was more impressed than ever at his neighbor's skills – the dynamic poses, the realistic yet fantastic bodies, the animated faces of the characters. Even better, the drawing was in full color, the penciled-and-inked artwork having been painted over in vibrant watercolor, an artistic skill Tom didn't even know Mr. Schauwecker possessed. All the green areas of the painting – the hero's costume, and the energy emitted from the magic power ring – seemed to rise up off of the paper. The young boy was still clearly Tom from his youth, but Green Lantern himself looked older. The hero's face was still full of joy and confidence, but Tom thought he saw wrinkles on the skin and a touch of gray in the hair. It might just have been his imagination. At the bottom of the painting was a sentence, etched into the paper in white, which read *Get Back to Work*. Just underneath it was the artist's signature – not the artist's full name of Conrad Albert Schauwecker, but his shorter, simpler, less-Germanic pen name of Curt Swan. Tom had asked his neighbor, once, where the name came from, but all the old man would say was "it's

short, it sounds pretty, and it reminds people of flying." Tom knew most people would probably ignore the signature, as they'd be too focused on the faces of the hero and the young boy, looking into the distance, traveling together toward some unknown destination.